

STATE BUILDING, RURAL DEVELOPMENT, AND THE MAKING OF A FRONTIER REGIME IN NORTHEASTERN ETHIOPIA, c. 1944–75*

Luca Puddu

University of Cagliari

Abstract

Combining a set of grey literature and primary sources, this article analyses the rise and fall of the sultanate of Awsa, northeastern Ethiopia, between 1944 and 1975. Ali Mirah exploited the typical repertoires of a frontier regime to consolidate a semi-independent Muslim chiefdom at the fringes of the Christian empire of Ethiopia. Foreign investors in commercial agriculture provided the sultanate and its counterparts within the Ethiopian state with tangible and intangible resources that shaped the quest for statecraft in the Lower Awash Valley.

Key Words

Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, land, territory, development, politics.

The sultanate of Awsa lay in the Lower Awash Valley, in northeastern Ethiopia. It flourished during the seventeenth century, emerging out of the semi-sedentary Afar society that inhabited the Awash river delta. Until the late nineteenth century, Awsa was a major commercial centre on the route between Shewa and the Red Sea, as trade and shifting agriculture along the banks of the Awash river supported the creation of a semi-centralized polity in the middle of the fragmented Afar pastoralist landscape. The existing trading patterns were disrupted at the end of the nineteenth century, following construction of the Djibouti to Addis Ababa railway line, and the sultanate ceased to be independent soon thereafter. In 1895, Emperor Menelik marched into the lowlands and imposed a tributary relationship, although Awsa retained a considerable degree of autonomy. As a foreign observer travelling in the Awash Valley noted in 1934, ‘the country has never been effectively conquered by the Abyssinians, who are highlanders, unsuited by nature to operations in these hot and feverish lowlands’.¹ Emperor Haile Selassie marched against Awsa again in 1944. The purpose of this expedition was to punish the incumbent Sultan

* The Master & Back Programme of Regione Autonoma della Sardegna and Fondazione Banco di Sardegna funded research for this article. I would like to thank Gian Paolo Calchi Novati, Bianca Maria Carcangiu, Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, Anders Sjogren, and three anonymous reviewers for their useful comments to earlier drafts of this article. I am also grateful to Haile Muluken for his assistance in research and translation of Ethiopian documents. All errors are my own responsibility. Author’s email: luca.puddu@unica.it; luca_puddu@msn.com

1 W. Thesiger, ‘The Awash river and the Aussa sultanate’, *The Geographical Journal*, 85:1 (1935), 1–19.

Mohamed Yayo, who had collaborated with the invading Italian forces in 1936. Mohamed Yayo was replaced by the young Ali Mirah Hanfare, who was granted the aristocratic title of *dejazmach*. Yayyo Hammadu, an Afar warlord who had assisted Ali Mirah in his struggle against Mohamed Yayo, was appointed to be the link between the central government and the sultanate with the rank of *fitawrari*.² Ali Mirah led the sultanate of Awsa from its capital Ayssa'ya until 1975. He experienced fluctuating fortunes, but did succeed in building a semi-independent enclave along the eastern border of the United States' main ally in Cold War Africa.

Scholars have undertaken extensive analyses of the remapping of the Ethiopian state in the twentieth century. Although early historians who embraced the Great Tradition theory tended to play down the role of non-highland, non-Christian, and non-cultivating components in the process of state formation, new historical narratives along subnational lines have expanded this centripetal perspective. The state of the art on the incorporation of the northeastern lowlands within the Ethiopian state after the Second World War is mostly informed by the ethnographic perspective of anthropologists and political scientists who have looked at how state intervention has shaped the social and economic landscape.³ Recent historiography has shed light on the trajectory of the sultanate of Awsa, but this is largely based on secondary sources or oral interviews with members of the Afar ruling class.⁴ There are two shortfalls to the dominant centre periphery paradigm: first, the notion of centre is usually meant in the sense of being synonymous with government or state, with scant attention being paid to the ramifications within the highland's ruling élite;⁵ and second, the tendency to place the periphery at the centre of the analysis affects historical knowledge, 'for the simple reason that each frontier has always two histories being narrated or written which spectacularly correspond to its two sides'.⁶ This article seeks to fill this gap. Methodologically, it is built on primary sources collected in the archives of Ethiopia, the UK, the Italian bank Banco di Roma, the Ford Presidential Library at Ann Arbor, and the Library of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). A cross analysis of these documents has helped with an understanding of the perspectives of the Ethiopian government, foreign diplomats, aid consultants, and the Awsa ruling class. My purpose is

2 M. Gamaledin, 'The decline of Afar pastoralism', in J. Markakis (ed.), *Conflict and the Decline of Pastoralism in the Horn of Africa* (London, 1993), 45–62.

3 See, for example, J. Harbeson, 'Territorial and development politics in the Horn of Africa: the Afar of the Awash Valley', *African Affairs*, 77:309 (1978), 479–98; A. Gebre-Mariam, 'The alienation of land rights among the Afar in Ethiopia', *Nomadic Peoples*, 34 (1994), 137–46; B. Hundie, *Property Rights Among Afar Pastoralists of Northeastern Ethiopia: Forms, Changes, and Conflict*, (<http://www.saga.cornell.edu/saga/ilrio6o6/35hundie.pdf>), 2006; and S. Rettberg, 'Contested narratives of pastoral vulnerability and risk in Ethiopia's Afar region', *Pastoralism*, 1:2 (2010), 248–73.

4 J. Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers* (Oxford, 2011); A. H. Soulé, *Deux Vies dans l'Histoire de la Corne de l'Afrique: les Sultans Afar Mahammad Hanfaré et Ali-Mirah Hanfaré* (Addis Ababa, 2011); A. H. Soulé, *Les Afar, la Révolution Éthiopienne et le Régime du Derg* (Addis Ababa, 2013).

5 J. N. Bach, 'New trends, old views: the ambivalent centre-periphery paradigm of Ethiopian studies', in E. Fiquet and A. Hassen (eds.), *Movements in Ethiopia, Ethiopia in Movement: Proceedings of the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Volume I* (Addis Ababa, forthcoming), 265–78.

6 A. Triulzi, 'Ethiopia: the making of a frontier society', in P. Kaarsholm and J. Hultin (eds.), *Inventions and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Roskilde, 1994), 240.

to move beyond a strictly centre periphery paradigm, and to look at the ‘multiple power poles that exist within, at the interface, and outside of the bureaucratic apparatus’.⁷ Archival evidence shows us that the political economy of the Ethiopian empire did not develop as a result of a linear process, but rather out of the changing interaction among the various layers of government within the Ethiopian polity, private investors, and the foreign aid network. The correspondence between the Afar ruling class and its Ethiopian counterpart provides a clear illustration of the importance of local agency in the process of negotiating statehood.⁸ The sultanate was not governed by a dependent local élite that bargained for autonomy in return for enforcement of the *pax aethiopica*; on the contrary, it protected its position by exploiting the multiple resources offered by the geopolitics of national borders and the political economy of foreign investments in land.

FRONTIERS AND EXTRAVERSION IN ETHIOPIAN HISTORY

Territorial expansion in the southern highlands and the lowlands at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries allowed Ethiopian emperors to consolidate their power by accumulating cheap agricultural labour and raw commodities to be exchanged on international markets. The variety of environmental conditions and political settings the empire encountered along this path paved the way for the emergence of a multiplicity of institutional arrangements between rulers and subjects.⁹ The notion of frontier is therefore a useful heuristic device to understand the reproduction of political order in these areas.¹⁰ The tone of ideological superiority that was embedded in the expansion oriented Christian society of the highlands tended to delegitimize local cultures and political organizations, and to turn the surrounding territories into a *terra nullius* that was open to lawful intrusion and settlement.¹¹ Turner’s tidal wave frontier thesis captures the trajectory of imperial expansion into the southern highlands, which were well suited to sedentary agriculture. These areas were transformed into a settled frontier by northern soldiers (*neftegna*) and overlords (*gultegna*), who acted as a state vanguard on behalf of the Crown, performing military and administrative services in return for appropriation of the surplus produced by local peasants (*gebbar*).¹² Gradually, these territories were turned into *k’elad* regions: imperial power was consolidated through a process of land survey, measurement, and redistribution that sanctioned the interdependence between the central government and local élites for the maintenance of political and economic prerogatives.¹³ Igor Kopytoff’s

7 T. Hagmann and D. Peclard, ‘Negotiating statehood: dynamics of power and domination in Africa’, *Development and Change*, 41:4 (2010), 542.

8 M. Dornboos, ‘Researching African statehood dynamics: negotiation and its limits’, *Development and Change*, 41:4 (2010), 747–69.

9 A. Triulzi, ‘Battling with the past: new frameworks for Ethiopian historiography’, in W. James, D. Donham, E. Kurimoto, and A. Triulzi (eds.), *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism and After* (Addis Ababa, 2002).

10 R. Reid, *Frontiers of Violence in North-East Africa: Genealogies of Conflict since c. 1800* (Oxford, 2011).

11 Triulzi, ‘Ethiopia’, 237.

12 D. Donham, ‘Old Abyssinia and the new Ethiopian empire: themes in social history’, in D. Donham and W. James (eds.), *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia* (Cambridge, 2002), 3–50.

13 J. Mantel-Niecko, ‘The division of Ethiopia into regions according to the native land typology in use at the turn of the XIXth and XXth century’, in J. Tubiana (ed.), *Modern Ethiopia from the Accession of Menilek*

concept of the interstitial frontier in precolonial Africa as ‘a politically open areas nestling between organized societies but internal to the larger regions in which they are found’ is a more appropriate description of the eastern and western lowlands, which were located along international borders that had been drawn up by the colonial powers at the beginning of the century.¹⁴ Along the lines of Kopytoff’s model, the Ethiopian lowland frontier was an ideal environment for the emergence of new political organizations that struggled to become centres of their own.

A harsh climate and low population density made the reproduction of the *gebbar gultegna* hierarchy impossible. The empire did not exercise territorial control, but claimed sovereignty through international agreements and arrangements with local chiefs as well. Ruling practices were flexible, and reflected the objective of extracting as much profit as possible without having to meet the high cost of building an effective administration. Although Weberian statecraft prescribed the imposition of the monopoly of force over a clearly defined territory inhabited by a single set of citizens, the Ethiopian empire recognized different hierarchies of subjects and adapted itself to local political organizations. In conquered areas with greater economic potential, pre-existing ruling élites that had submitted voluntarily or new political organizations arising out of recent migratory patterns were able to preserve a significant degree of autonomy in return for the payment of tributes to the Crown – it is for this reason that they were classified as *k’urt gibr* regions – thereby creating a direct relationship that bypassed intermediaries at the provincial level.¹⁵ These frontiersmen were not exclusive agents of the Ethiopian empire: they were able to participate in the reproduction of state sovereignty while also entertaining covert links with powerful neighbours on the other side of the border.¹⁶ The accumulation of political and economic resources from crossborder activities was critical to the manipulation of the extent of their subordination and the reproduction of overlapping processes of state formation at a local level.¹⁷ The western and eastern escarpments of the early twentieth century are rich in examples of semi-independent frontier regimes that consolidated their power by shifting the tribute burden to adjacent areas, thus reproducing new frontier processes on their fringes.¹⁸ Peripheral areas such as Gubba, Nuqara, Jigjiga, or Nekemte

II to the Present (Rotterdam, 1980), 469–78; D. Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia* (Urbana, IL, 2000).

- 14 J. Kopytoff, ‘The internal African frontier: the making of African political culture’, in I. Kopytoff (ed.), *The African Frontier: the Reproduction of Traditional African Societies* (Indianapolis, IN, 1987), 9–11.
- 15 A. Triulzi, ‘Nekemte and Addis Ababa: dilemmas of provincial rule’, in J. Donham (ed.), *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia*, 57; Mantel-Niecko, ‘The division’, 475.
- 16 P. Garretson, ‘Frontier feudalism in northwest Ethiopia: Shaykh Al Imam’Abd Allah of Nuqara, 1901–1923’, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 15:2 (1982), 261–82; D. Feyissa and M. Hoehne, ‘State borders and borderlands as resources: an analytical framework’, in M. Hoehne and Dereje Feyissa (eds.), *Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa* (Suffolk, 2010), 1–25; D. Feyissa, *Playing Different Games: the Paradox of Anywaa and Nuer Identification Strategies in the Gambella Region, Ethiopia* (London, 2011).
- 17 B. Korf et al., ‘Geographies of violence and sovereignty: the African frontier revisited’, in B. Korf and T. Raeymaekers (eds.), *Violence on the Margins: States, Conflict and Borderlands* (London, 2013), 40.
- 18 A. Triulzi, ‘Prelude to the history of a no man’s land, Bela Shangul, Wallaga, Ethiopia’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Northwestern University, 1979); P. Garretson, ‘Manjil Hamdan Abu Shok (1898–1938) and the administration of Gubba’, in J. Tubiana (ed.), *Modern Ethiopia, 197–210*; J. McCann, ‘A dura revolution and frontier agriculture in northwest Ethiopia, 1898–1920’, *The Journal of African History*, 31:1 (1990),

emerged as powerful centres in their own right, and exploited the economic opportunities that arose out of their location on the fringes of the Ethiopian empire and neighbouring colonial powers. Their fortunes were invariably linked to special arrangements with the Crown or a powerful *Ras*. Accordingly, a drastic regime change in Addis Ababa would often bring about their sudden fall. In this respect, the Lower Awash Valley is a meaningful case study for highlighting the continuity of specific patterns of state formation across historical periods and consolidating our understanding of the Ethiopian state as a process spanning precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial times. The administrative reforms undertaken by Haile Selassie in the 1940s, which had the purpose of creating a salaried government structure in place of the aristocracy, are usually considered to represent a watershed in the transition from a feudal monarchy to a centralized bureaucratic empire and the absorption of the *k'urt gibr* regions within the administrative hierarchy of the state. Nevertheless, the trajectory of the sultanate of Awsa after 1944 fits neatly within the paradigm of the Ethiopian lowland frontier regime at the beginning of the century.

What makes this case study different from earlier examples of Ethiopian frontier regimes is the economic and political setting that underpinned the insertion of Awsa into the imperial power structure. In 1960, a major British company introduced commercial agriculture into the river delta with the backing of the FAO mission in Ethiopia. The inflow of new technologies, ideas, and organizational practices by the development network and the transformation of Ayssa'yta into a global frontier for the accumulation of capital offered state and non-state actors alike the opportunity to engage in the practice of extraversion.¹⁹ The concept of extraversion was developed by Bayart when he argued that local rulers in sub-Saharan Africa have tended 'to compensate for their difficulties in the autonomization of their power and in intensifying the exploitation of their dependants by ... mobilizing resources derived from their (possibly unequal) relationship with the external environment'.²⁰ The underlying argument was that the appropriation of tangible and intangible resources under the umbrella of development assistance, financial loans, foreign direct investments, and diplomatic recognition allowed the African state to reproduce itself without being obliged to face the political costs associated with levying direct taxes from its population. In this regard, Ethiopia is often treated as an exception to the rule in sub-Saharan Africa. A well entrenched system of surplus extraction in the sedentary highlands supported the creation of a centralized polity and a large army that was able to resist foreign aggression and expand the reach of the empire; however, the Lower Awash Valley case study highlights the critical role played by foreign investments and development aid in shaping the state building process in the lowlands as well as the conduct of subaltern actors who resisted the statecraft project.

121–34; A. Ahmad, 'Trading in slaves in Bela-Shangul and Gumuz, Ethiopia: border enclaves in history, 1897–1938', *The Journal of African History*, 40:3 (1999), 433–46; C. Barnes, 'Provinces and princely power and the eastern Ethiopian periphery', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 34:2 (2001), 95–120.

19 P. Le Meur, 'State making and the politics of the frontier in central Benin', *Development and Change*, 37:4 (2006), 874.

20 J. F. Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (London, 1993), 21–4; J. F. Bayart, 'Africa in the world: a history of extraversion', trans. Stephen Ellis *African Affairs*, 99:395 (2000), 218.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FRONTIER GOVERNANCE

From the perspective of the Ethiopian empire after the Second World War, Awsa represented the archetype of an unruly frontier where a hostile environment inhibited the reproduction of imperial rule. The superior military power of the Ethiopian state was wasted in the harsh terrain. Military operations on the ground were not feasible between July and October because of the periodic flooding of the Awash River. The lack of a local agricultural surplus made permanent military occupation extremely difficult, and in case of need, food and water supplies for the army had to be transported across the distant supply lines of the highlands.²¹ Finally, life was not easy for highland officers deployed to the lowlands. Soldiers had great difficulty carrying out their duties because of malaria and other tropical diseases.²² Civilian officials were reluctant to accept assignments there, perceiving them as a sort of exile from the life of luxury the capital was able to offer.²³

From 1944, Awsa was characterized by two overlapping levels of power. The Ministry of the Interior was responsible for security and the management of government land, performing these duties in collaboration with the governor general of Wollo (the province), who in turn was assisted by the *awrajia* (subprovince) and *woreda* (district) governors according to their territorial jurisdiction. The prerogatives of the provincial and subprovincial administration partially overlapped with those of the Awash Valley Authority (AVA), a parastate agency created in 1960 to manage the allocation of land and water resources and the collection of land taxes in the Awash Valley. Alongside this official hierarchy was the royal house, in this case represented by the ubiquitous Special Office of the Crown Prince in Addis Ababa, Dessie, and Ayssa'ya. The heir to the throne, Asfa Wossen, also retained extensive powers in his capacity as overlord of Wollo. He granted government land to members of the aristocracy and the army, and authorized the appointment and supervision of the activities of the governor general (*enderassie*) and *awrajia* governors.²⁴ Asfa Wossen had the last word on the most important issues affecting the internal affairs of the province until the late 1960s, when the decision making process gradually shifted towards the office of the Ministry of the Interior and the Wollo governor general.²⁵

Awsa was extremely important for imperial Ethiopia in security terms. First of all, it was located at the extreme northeastern corner of a province that had a long history of

21 National Archives and Library of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa (NALE), Folder 029.18, Meeting between Yayyo Hamadam, Fitawrari Mamo Seyum, Habte Wolde Selassie, 20 Täq. 1960 Ethiopian Calendar (EC).

22 NALE 134.45, Telegram from Awsa Awrajia governor Felleke Dagne to Dejazmach Dereje Makonnen, General Governor of Wollo, 3 Mas. 1949 EC.

23 NALE 2.2.73.04, Letter from Amene Shewan (in place of Assafa Aden) to Asfa Wossen, 10 Ham. 1939 EC.

24 NALE 2.2.73.04, Order from the Special Office of the Heir to the Throne Asfa Wossen to the General Governor of Wollo, 17 Miz. 1939 EC; 2.2.73.25, Letter to Enderassie of Wollo, Mangesha Wolde Giorgis from Afambo woreda governor, 18 Ham. 1950 EC.

25 This shift became definitive in 1971, when *Dejazmach* Solomon Abraham took over from Mamo Seyoum at the head of the Wollo Province, and the deputy minister of the interior, Legesse Bizu, was appointed as special envoy of the central government in the Lower Awash. NALE 17.2.81.06, Letter from Colonel Sumie Wodajo, Governor of Awsa Awrajia, to Ato Legesse Bizu, Deputy Minister of the Interior, 23 Tär. 1964 EC; Letter from Ethiopian Embassy in French Somaliland to Legesse Bizu, 29 Yak. 1965 EC; NA, FO 1043/96, Report on a visit to Bati, Tendaho and Assaita, 20–4 Aug. 1971.

resistance to Haile Selassie's rule.²⁶ Secondly, it was crossed by a section of the 468 kilometre-long highway that had been built by the Italians to connect Bati to the Eritrean harbour of Assab, relieving the country's external trade from dependence on the Djibouti to Addis Ababa railway. Third, Awsa bordered the French Territory of the Afar and the Issa, in which the port of Djibouti was located. Frontier governance was affected by the need to maintain unhindered access to the sea, but the *pax aethiopica* was threatened by interethnic conflicts over natural resources, arms smuggling, and, since the early 1960s, the growing activity of Eritrean rebels, which were labelled by Ethiopian government officials as *shifita* to stress their nature of common bandits.²⁷

When Ali Mirah came to power in 1944, Ethiopian sovereignty over the Lower Awash Valley would barely have qualified as such according to Weberian notions of statehood. Awsa was an isolated frontier outpost with no functioning surplus extraction system. Its commercial links with the highlands were limited to the occasional exchange of goats, maize, and butter at the Bati market in return for manufactured goods from Tigray and Shoa. The state was not able to claim people's labour through taxation or conscription. Political units were classified according to local *balabbats*, internal boundaries were not comprehensible for state officials, and the regulations on crossborder movements of people and goods to and from French Somaliland were not enforced.²⁸ Asfa Wossen's military advisors in the lowlands soon concluded that this state of affairs threatened the integrity of the empire. They were particularly worried about the territorial dispute with France over the frontier district of Afambo, where the French administration was seeking to impose its jurisdiction by extending colonial citizenship to local clans in return for gifts and medicines.²⁹ Another concern was the escalation of violence between the Afar and Issa, who were rapidly expanding into the surroundings of Awsa in search of new pastures.³⁰ The Issa had accumulated modern firearms during the Italian invasion and maintained privileged access to weapons through the Dire Dawa black market.³¹ Their aggrandisement alarmed the Ethiopian army, the fear being that the defenceless Afar subjects would forget their allegiance to the Crown and facilitate the manoeuvres of neighbouring powers. For the military, the solution lay in the enforcement of territorial

26 Wollo had been the stronghold of Ras Tafari's rival to the throne, Lij Yiasu, whose father Ras Mikael had been defeated in the conclusive battle of Segele in 1916. Resistance to imperial rule resurfaced during the five-year Italian occupation, and again after 1941. See H. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley, CA, 1995), 117; W. Smidt, 'The coronation of Nagus Mikael in Desse in May 1914: photograph from the Nachlass Jensen and its historical background', *Annales d'Ethiopie*, 17 (2001), 361–74; M. Maki, 'The Gaz raids and reconstruction of the Ethiopian empire: the final Gaz in Tigray and northern Wollo', *Nilo-Ethiopian Studies*, 14 (2010), 39–50.

27 The term *shifita* was historically used in the Horn of Africa region to describe both political rebels and ordinary outlaws that operated on the fringes of the established states. During the twentieth century, this term has lost most of its noble connotations to become a reference for common criminal activity. H. A. Whittaker, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Kenya: a Social History of the Shifita Conflict* (Leiden, 2015), 50.

28 NALE 2.2.73.04, Letter from Amene Shewan (in place of Assafa Aden) to Asfa Wossen, 10 Ham. 1939 EC.

29 NALE 134.45, Letter to Awsa Police from Hamsalaga Ejigu Ayele, 2 Mas. 1949 EC.

30 Y. M. Yasin, 'Trans-border political alliance in the Horn of Africa: the case of the Afar-Issa conflict', in H. Feyissa and M. V. Hoehne (eds.), *Borders and Borderlands*, 85–96.

31 NALE 134.45, Telegram from Felleke Dagne to Dejazmach Dereje Makonnen, 3 Mas. 1949 EC; Y. M. Yasin, 'Regional dynamics of interethnic conflicts in the Horn of Africa' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Hamburg, 2010), 252.

control over the lowlands and the establishment of additional garrisons along the border with French Somaliland.³² Army officers considered the new Afar rulers to be part of the problem, not the solution. Ali Mirah and Yayyo Hammadu were accused of a lack of commitment to the border commission that had been established to resolve the dispute over Afambo. They reportedly held secret meetings with French spies and were blamed for the appropriation of public funds the government had allocated to clan chiefs along the border to secure their support. In addition, the *dejazmach* and the *fitawrari* were accused of undermining the authority of the Ethiopian empire in the Lower Awash. The two chiefs were taking land indiscriminately from followers of the late Sultan Mohamed Yayo, provoking resentment among local clans. Most importantly, they seemed not to recognize their subordinate status within the empire: they behaved as if they were 'kings in their own right'.³³

In 1946, Asfa Wossen gave his blessing to his military advisor's proposal to revisit state governance in the river delta. Awsa was included within a larger *awraja* with Bati as its capital, a *woreda* being then established in Ayssa'yta under the guidance of an army officer, *Neggadaras* Sahle.³⁴ The establishment of the highland administration did not change the situation significantly, however: the Ethiopian state presence across the whole river delta amounted to 13 untrained soldiers and one *woreda* office that lacked sufficient staff to run the day-to-day administration.³⁵ The Christian governors did not speak Afarigna and were forced to rely on local chiefs. In contrast, the limited success of Ethiopian rule was counterbalanced by the growing influence of the sultan, who had fled into exile along the border with French Somaliland after the appointment of *Neggadaras* Sahle. Ali Mirah renewed contacts with his ethnic fellows in French Somaliland and Eritrea, thereby increasing his stance as peace mediator and religious leader. He then established new links with Ethiopia's neighbours, exploiting Arab resentment over the treatment of Muslim citizens in Ethiopia to present his case before the monarchies in the Arabian Peninsula.³⁶

In 1953, Ali Mirah received an imperial pardon from Haile Selassie and was reinstated to his chieftdom.³⁷ In turn, Yayyo Hammadu was appointed as *woreda* governor in Ayssa'yta in place of *Neggadaras* Sahle, the highlands administration being confined to Bati. The reason for the restoration of the sultanate is not clearly stated in government documents, but it seemed to have been related to the growing insecurity around Ayssa'yta, since many Afar notables who collaborated with *Neggadaras* Sahle had been killed in unclear circumstances.³⁸ Another reason was the changing political configuration of the northeastern frontier. In the north, Eritrea had been incorporated as a federated

32 NALE 2.2.73.04, Letter from Amene Shewan (in place of Assafa Aden) to Asfa Wossen, 10 Ham. 1939 EC.

33 *Ibid.*

34 NALE 2.2.73.04, Letter from Fitawrari Kefle Dadi to Asfa Wossen, 25 Tär. 1939 E. C.; Order from the Special Office of the Crown Prince to the General Governor of Wollo, 17 Miy. 1939 EC.

35 NALE 2.02.73.04, Letter from Amene Shewan to Asfa Wossen, 10 Ham. 1939 EC.

36 Soulé, *Les Afar*, 12.

37 NALE 17.2.81.06, Copy of a letter sent by Ali Mirah to Haile Selassie, then sent by Gebre Wolde to Ras Abebe, 08 Sän. 1945 EC.

38 Soulé, *Les Afar*, 13.

entity under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown in 1952, but the Federation met with opposition from large segments of the Muslim lowlands, who saw Ali Mirah as a potential ally.³⁹ In addition, the border dispute with France³⁹ had been resolved in 1954 by a bilateral convention that placed Afambo under Ethiopian sovereignty. While we have no direct evidence, the Afar ruling house had probably regained the trust of the emperor on the border issue, since Yayyo Hammadu would later claim the governorship of Afambo in return for his role in handing over the district.⁴⁰

The institutional configuration that was the outcome of the 1953 agreement reproduced the typical political economy of the Ethiopian empire in the lowland frontier before the Second World War, the main features of which were flexibility and the maximization of profit. According to the *awrajjia* governor in Bati, state control could be only enforced if the subprovincial security apparatus received modern military hardware and 500 soldiers, but the Crown found it more convenient to delegate law enforcement and border intelligence to Ali Mirah and Yayyo Hammadu in return for a few salary concessions.⁴¹ In 1956, the military strength of the Awsa *awrajjia* consisted of fifty foot soldiers with no motor vehicles or radio communications stationed in three strategic garrisons at Oranso, Millè, and Sardo with the duty to protect the all weather road from Bati to Assab.⁴² Beyond the highway was a no man's land inhabited by outlaws, smugglers, and nomads who travelled across internal and international borders with impunity.⁴³

The arrangement between the Crown and Ali Mirah was an exception to the administrative order adopted after liberation from Italian rule, since it restored a vacuum in the territorial jurisdiction of the provincial administration. The sultanate was placed in a direct relationship with the Crown that bypassed the office of the Awsa *awrajjia* and the governor general of Wollo. Ali Mirah had direct access to both Haile Selassie and Asfa Wossen, while Yayyo Hammadu was the *de facto* liaison officer between the sultanate and the governor general of Wollo. The *ultra legem* nature of the relationship between Ali Mirah and the Crown emerged clearly from official correspondence: the sultan ended every document with his own signature, instead of the official stamp employed by ordinary state officials, such as Yayyo Hammadu himself.⁴⁴ Another important aspect of this relationship was the imposition of a lump sum tribute in place of direct taxation: Ali Mirah levied tribute on cattle, trade, and seasonal crops in Ayssa'ya, Dubti, and Dit Bahari in his capacity as overlord and major landowner, and then delivered an annual tribute to the Special Office of the Crown Prince. Nonetheless, it should be noted that although Ali Mirah retained surplus extraction prerogatives and controlled vast tracts of land in the form of *arkaytoḥ ardi* – the land of the throne, according to the Afar customary law – Awsa did not fit narrowly within the *k'urt gibr* paradigm, because the territorial extension of the sultanate's land domain varied according to norms and regulations enacted by the highland ruling élite. The 1955 imperial constitution sanctioned the principle of public ownership over unsettled

39 T. Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience* (Uppsala, 1997).

40 NALE 067.07, Letter from Yayyo Hammadu to Haile Selassie, 20 Nāh. 1948 EC.

41 NALE 134.45, Letter from Hamsalaga Ejigu Ayele to Awsa Awrajjia Police, 10 Mas. 1949 EC.

42 NALE 134.45, Telegram from Felleke Dagne to Dejazmach Dereje Makonnen, 3 Mas. 1949 EC.

43 *Ibid.*

44 NALE 029.19, Letter from Dejazmach Ali Mirah to Asfa Wossen, n.d.

land devoted to pasture or shifting cultivation, a definition that potentially encompassed the whole Awash Valley, and in 1960 the Ethiopian government leased 24,000 hectares of land to the British company Mitchell Cotts Ltd, which then established the Tendaho Plantation Share Company (TPSC) joint venture with the objective of developing four cotton plantations at Dubti and Dit Bahari.⁴⁵ Another 1,000 hectares estate managed and subsidized by the TPSC was then transferred to the personal ownership of Asfa Wossen, thereby introducing a fiscal enclave of the Crown into the river delta, while additional expropriations were at times performed by the AVA to create pilot settlement schemes.⁴⁶ The correspondence between the sultan and Asfa Wossen also highlights the fact that the heir to the throne periodically recognized Ali Mirah's claims to land in the form of *rist*, an inheritable property right historically used in the highland society.⁴⁷

The most powerful opposition to the 1953 agreement came from the Awsa *awrajia* and the AVA. The reason for this was the fact that the tributary relationship between the sultanate and the Crown deprived the state administration of tax revenues and sovereign prerogatives. The approach to frontier governance advocated by the *awrajia* in 1956 was anything but flexible. Governor Felleke Dagne insisted that the Ethiopian empire had to impose its monopoly of power in order not to lose the allegiance of its subjects and blamed the move of the highlands administration out of Ayssa'yta, since it had led to the emigration of the Christian population and a deterioration of the cultural ties between the highlands and the lowlands. Above all, Felleke Dagne lamented the inability to check crossborder movements with French Somaliland.⁴⁸ The governor justified his position by the need to contain smuggling, but he was also implicitly denouncing the free hand of the sultan in developing autonomous relations with the French authorities without authorization from Dessie and Bati.⁴⁹ The various governors who succeeded at the head of the Awsa *awrajia* almost invariably sought to promote covert operations in the Lower Awash with the purpose of delegitimizing the Afar rulers and asserting their authority in the area. For instance, in 1964 the subprovincial administration released the heir of the late sultan, Habib Mohamed Yayo, from prison, and he relentlessly spread hostile propaganda against Ali Mirah, while in an exchange of letters with the Wollo governor general dated 1967, Yayyo Hammadu accused the general secretary of the Awsa *awrajia* of intentionally sabotaging his attempts to mediate in the dispute between Oromo tenants and Afar pastoralists.⁵⁰ The various managers who succeeded at the head of the AVA also opposed

45 National Archives of Great Britain, London (NA) FO 371/165325 VA 1331/6, Letter of agreement between Imperial Ethiopian government and Mitchell Cotts Group, Addis Ababa, 29 Nov. 1962.

46 Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa (IES), Joint Venture between the Direction of the Domain of H.I.M. The Crown Prince of Ethiopia and TPSC, Audit of the accounts for the year ended 30th June 1970; Soulé, *Les Afar*, 23.

47 NALE 060.11, Letter from Asfa Wossen to Wollo Bete Rist Office, 28 Tär. 1958 EC. In relation to the rist system, see D. Crumme, 'Abyssinian feudalism', *Past and Present*, 89 (1980), 115–38.

48 NALE 134.45, Telegram from Felleke Dagne to Dejazmach Dereje Makonnen, 3 Mas. 1949 EC.

49 NALE 067.07, Secret Telegram from Wollo Police Department to Wollo Governor General, 22 Näh. 1955 EC.

50 NALE 2.2.84.04, Letter from Deputy-Governor of Awsa Awrajia to Enderassie of Wollo, Dejazmach Mamo Seyoum, 20 Ham. 1962 EC; 067.07, Letter from Yayyo Hammadu to Asfa Wossen, Heir to the Throne of the King of Kings, 16 Ham. 1956 EC; 17.2.81.06, Letter from Hanfare Ali Mirah to Colonel Belachew, Minister of the Interior, 14 Täq. 1967 EC.

the sultanate, because its special relationship with the Crown *de facto* prevented the enforcement of the principle of state ownership on land and hampered the extension into the Lower Awash of the prerogatives the agency exercised in the Middle Awash Valley. Hostility materialized in repeated attempts to condemn Ali Mirah for the appropriation of government land and a strenuous lobbying activity beside the central government to thwart the sultan's petitions for state subsidies on commercial lending and agricultural inputs.⁵¹

The highland ruling élite's approach to commercial agriculture is a useful lens through which to appreciate the different political economies of frontier governance envisaged by the Crown and the subprovincial administration. According to a dispatch from the Awsa *awrajia* governor in 1956, foreign investments in land were aimed at obtaining the necessary technological and managerial know how to regulate population movements, enforce administrative control, and introduce direct taxation into the Lower Awash, thereby promoting the transition of Awsa from *k'urt' gibr* status into a *k'elad* area.⁵² Furthermore, both the *awrajia* administration and the army relied on Mitchell Cotts to bypass the opposition of the Crown to budget allocations in favour of the security apparatus. Ethiopian soldiers stationed in Wollo took advantage of the infrastructures built by the European multinational to turn the small village of Dubti into a strategic outpost of the imperial army: Mitchell Cotts built a new airstrip that was periodically monitored by the Ethiopian Air Force and a hospital specializing in the treatment of malaria.⁵³ After 1965, the TPSC began to plant sorghum as a rotational crop, providing highland soldiers with a local food supply in case of long-term deployment.⁵⁴ For the Crown, foreign investments in land were a useful device for centralizing surplus extraction without having to meet the high costs associated with administrative and infrastructural development. According to the 1962 agreement signed with Mitchell Cotts, the Ethiopian government was expected to set up dams, government controlled agricultural schemes, police outposts, and *woreda* offices in Dubti and Ayssa'yta, but the emperor never completed the provision of the necessary budget allocations, in spite of repeated pressure from the British multinational, FAO advisors, and the British Embassy in Addis Ababa, leaving the financial burden resting entirely on the shoulders of the TPSC and the network of associated donors.⁵⁵

NEGOTIATING RESOURCES AT THE NATIONAL FRONTIER

In spite of the hostile posture of the subprovincial state administration, the deterioration of security conditions on the northeastern flank of the Ethiopian empire in the 1960s provided the sultanate with the opportunity to exploit the typical repertoires of a frontier

51 Gamaledin, 'The decline', 55.

52 NALE 134.45, Telegram from Felleke Dagne to Dejazmach Dereje Makonnen, 3 Mas. 1949 EC.

53 IES, TPSC managing agents annual report 1966/7.

54 NA FCO 31/795, Aide Memoire from Dick to Sir Denis Greenhill, 4 June 1971.

55 NA FCO 39/63, From British Embassy (Swann) to Lamarque (ODM), 14 Feb. 1967; FCO 39/63, from J. Congdon and A. Patterson (TPSC): Crop damage by Danakil stock at Dubti, 13 Feb. 1967; Food and Agricultural Organization Library (FAOL), D.A. Caponera, *Report to Imperial Government of Ethiopia on Water Resource Policy, Administration and Legislation* (Roma, 1969), 12.

regime, and to engage in an image management strategy aimed at bolstering its status as the Crown's key ally.⁵⁶ Ali Mirah and Yayyo Hammadu carried out undercover diplomatic operations on behalf of the imperial family in the French Territory of the Afar and the Issa, where Ethiopian interests were threatened by Somali territorial claims over the strategic port of Djibouti. The two Afar chiefs were first enrolled as informal diplomatic agents of the emperor and the crown prince in September 1958, when they were sent to the French colony to win the Afar people's support for the constitutional referendum on acceptance of the French Union. On the occasion of the 1963 local elections, they received funds from the central government to mobilize the Afar electorate in favour of the then Prime Minister Ali Aref and the Minister for Foreign Affairs Mohammed Kabil.⁵⁷ The Crown praised Ali Mirah again four years later for his role in addressing the March 1967 referendum that rejected independence for the French colony.⁵⁸

A second opportunity for resource extraction arose out of the dispute with Somalia over the Ogadeen province. Tensions between the two countries erupted into open warfare in 1964, transforming the Awsa *awrajia* into a strategic outpost adjacent to the Somali inhabited territories. The Ethiopian archives contain several examples of how the Afar ruling house sought to align the resource conflict between Issa and Afar to the interstate war between Ethiopia and Somalia in order to improve access to firearms. In 1966, for instance, Yayyo Hammadu reported an ongoing programme sponsored by Mogadishu to train hundreds of Issa guerrilla fighters hostile to the Crown. These irregular troops were intended to be the vanguard of a larger Somali army, which would invade the country soon thereafter. Yayyo Hammadu claimed that the duty to repel the Somali aggression lay in the hands of 'the heroic Afar warriors', who were ready to fight for the empire if only the central government would provide rifles, bullets and machine guns.⁵⁹

Another threat to the integrity of the empire was presented by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), an armed movement largely composed of Muslim lowlanders who were contesting the end of the federation with Eritrea. Rebels entered the Lower Awash Valley in small groups from their rear bases in Assab, carrying out hit and run attacks against transportation infrastructures and administrative outposts.⁶⁰ Ali Mirah and Yayyo Hammadu played on the difficulties faced by the Ethiopian army in the harsh environment of the lowlands to put the sultanate at the forefront of the counterinsurgency campaign.⁶¹ The two chiefs transmitted intelligence information on rebel movements, collected food supplies from Afar clans when highlands soldiers were deployed on the ground, and, when requested to do so, mobilized hundreds of Afar irregular soldiers for the protection of

56 For the concept of image management strategy see J. Fisher, 'Managing donor perceptions: contextualizing Uganda's 2007 intervention in Somalia', *African Affairs*, 111:444 (2012), 411.

57 NALE 067.07, Letter from Fitawrari Yayyo Hammadu to Haile Selassie, 28 Häd. 1956 EC.

58 NA FCO 33/64, Confidential, Telegram from British Embassy in Addis Ababa to Foreign Office, 18 Nov. 1967; NALE 067.07, Letter from the Ministry of the Pen to the Ministry of the Interior, 23 Tär. 1960 EC.

59 NALE 067.07, Letter from Yayyo Hammadu to Crown Prince Asfa Wossen, 9 Täh. 1959 EC.

60 NALE 029.18, Telegram from Ashatu Taferra to Wollo Governorate Police Commissioner, 15 Täq. 1960 EC; Letter from Ali Mirah to Asfa Wossen, no date; Letter from Ashatu Teferra to Wollo Police Deputy Chief, 28 Täq. 1960 EC.

61 NALE 029.18, Telegram from Ashatu Taferra to Wollo Police Commissioner, 15 Täq. 1960 EC.

bridges and roads that were beyond the power of the army.⁶² The correspondence with the Crown also highlights how the two Afar chiefs appropriated the political terminology of the highland ruling élite, referring to Eritrean rebels as *shifita* who committed acts of banditry against Afar pastoralists.⁶³

Image management was critical in order to obtain tangible resources that were not immediately available in Awsa. Ali Mirah and Yayyo Hammadu were first awarded a monthly salary from the Crown in 1958, after the successful mission in the French colony.⁶⁴ In return for their role in influencing the 1963 elections, their salary was more than doubled, and the sultanate was allowed to take control of the imperial prisons in Ayssa'yta.⁶⁵ Following the 1967 mission, Ali Mirah was invested by the emperor with the aristocratic title of *bitwoded* – the highest title ever granted to a Muslim during Haile Selassie's rule – a further salary increase, and the authority to represent all the Afar clans in the Awsa *awrajia* and the Middle Awash Valley.⁶⁶ Yayyo Hammadu in turn was promoted to the rank of *dejazmach* and deputy governor of the Awsa *awrajia*.⁶⁷ The Ethiopian government's interest in the political situation in French Somaliland was also manipulated in an attempt to achieve the ambitious project of unifying all the Afar peoples in the Horn of Africa under the flag of the sultanate, as evident from a number of telegrams to Haile Selassie, in which Yayyo Hammadu repeatedly stressed the attachment of the Afar people in the French colony to their Ethiopian motherland and his commitment to accomplish 'Your Majesty's vision for the unity of all Adals'.⁶⁸ The security discourse used in relation to the Somali conflict and the ELF insurgency was useful for obtaining modern weaponry. In the late 1950s, the sultanate's arsenal consisted of a few dozen old rifles imported from Yemen, but by 1967 it had increased to hundreds of modern rifles and some machine guns from the arsenal of the imperial army, which put the sultan in the position of being able to promote a successful counteroffensive against the Somali Issa.⁶⁹ All these assets were critical to the consolidation of the internal position of the sultanate in the eyes of its subjects. A telegram from the Awsa *awrajia* confirms that in 1966 Ali Mirah had overcome his past difficulties, and had been accepted by the local Afar society as the legitimate ruler of Awsa.⁷⁰

62 NALE 029.18, Meeting between Yayyo Hammadu, and Fitawrari Mamo Seyum, Habte Wolde Selassie, 20 Täq. 1960 EC.

63 NALE 029.18, Letter from Ali Mirah to Asfa Wossen, n.d.

64 The original salary amounted to 250 Birr. NALE 17.2.81.06, Anonymous Letter to Emperor Haile Selassie, 19 Ham. 1959 EC; Letter from Office of the Budget, Ministry of Finance, to Governor General of Wollo, 24 Gän. 1958 EC.

65 A sultan's fellow, *Qegnazmach* Yayo Aliwan, was appointed by the emperor to run the imperial court. NALE 067.07, Letter from Fitawrari Yayyo Hammadu to Crown Prince, 29 Tär. 1956 EC.

66 FAOL, N. J. Cossins, *Green Heart of a Dying Land: a Study of the New Cotton Wealth of the Old Sultanate of Awsa* (unpublished, Addis Ababa, 1973), 38; NALE 17.2.81.06, Letter from the Ministry of Finance to the Ministry of the Interior, 29 Tär. 1960 EC.

67 NA FO 1043/96, Report from J. S. Wall: The Sultan of Aussa, Ali Mirrah Hanfri, 2 Sept. 1971.

68 NALE 067.07, Letter from Yayyo Hammadu to Haile Selassie, 16 Ham. 1956 EC.

69 NALE 134.45, Telegram from Hamsaleqa Ejigu Ayele to Awsa Awrajia Police Office, 10 Mas. 1949 EC; 17.02.81.06, Letter from Ali Mirah to Haile Selassie, 3 Gän. 1958 EC.

70 NALE 17.02.81.06, Letter from Fitawrari Azdegay, Awsa Awrajia Governor, to Dejazmach Kefle Argatu, Ministry of the Interior, 25 Näh. 1959 EC.

The conduct of the sultanate towards the ELF and the French authorities is nonetheless symbolic of the ambivalence with which Ali Mirah carefully balanced his allegiance among powerful state and nonstate neighbours. Although the sultan professed his undying commitment to the Ethiopian empire, he had independent contacts with the French government, with which he collaborated on both border matters and internal affairs, and often crossed the border to rally support among his ethnic fellows in French Somaliland without informing higher authorities in the highlands.⁷¹ Ali Mirah was also careful not to alienate the sympathy of Eritrean armed factions, whose military strength overshadowed his personal army. The sultan had provided undercover assistance to the Eritrean Liberation Movement since its foundation in 1958, and he continued this policy with the ELF.⁷² Support took the form of money and weapons, but the archival documents also suggest that he allowed the rebels to retreat safely to Assab while his militia was in charge of military operations.⁷³

NEGOTIATING SOVEREIGNTY AT THE CAPITALIST FRONTIER

The introduction of cash crop agriculture in the river delta in 1961 represented something of a watershed for Ali Mirah, even if the political economy of cotton agriculture originally developed by British investors and the FAO mission was a blatant attack on the sultanate's prerogatives. The UN agency demonstrated distaste for the pastoralist economy of the Awash Valley, which contrasted with the ideal order of the sedentary highlands inhabited by 'highly civilized peoples with a social organization fairly well developed around the parish church and the local administration'.⁷⁴ As much as the Awsa *awrajia* governors and the AVA managers, the FAO experts believed that the Ethiopian government should survey the area, turn Afar pastoralists into sedentary farmers, and replace customary authorities in the management of natural resources and the collection of land taxes.⁷⁵ The British company shared the same perspective: not only did Mitchell Cotts's management impose a precondition for investment during the initial rounds of negotiations that the AVA should be vested with land allocation prerogatives in the river delta, but it also exploited its connections with the Foreign Office to obtain signature of a bilateral concession loan from the UK government in 1964 with the objective of financing the establishment of a system of agricultural schemes and compulsory marketing cooperatives managed by the AVA at Dubti and Ayssa'yta.⁷⁶ The reason for this was that the TPSC was aiming to obtain access to

71 NALE 067.07, Secret Telegram from Wollo Police Department to Wollo Governor General, 22 Näh. 1955 EC; 17.2.81.06, Secret, Letter from Brigadier General Lemma Gebre-Mariam to Getahun Tesemma, 6 Mäg. 1965 EC; Letter from Major Teferi Wolde-Tetsai to Wollo Governor General, 28 Ham. 1966 EC.

72 Soulé, *Deux Vies*, 182.

73 NALE 029.18, Letter from Enderassie of Wollo, Mamo Seyum, to Ali Mirah, 16 Täq. 1960 EC.

74 FAOL, 'Imperial Ethiopian Government', *Report on Survey of the Awash River Basin: General Report* (Addis Ababa, 1965), 31.

75 FAOL, G. E. Nicholson, *Report no. 728 to the Government of Ethiopia on Cotton Production* (Roma, 1957), 23; S. D. Clark, *Legal Matters Affecting the Awash Valley Authority and Proposed National Water Legislation* (Roma, 1972), 5.

76 E. Fantini and L. Puddu, 'Ethiopia and international aid: development between high modernism and exceptional measures', in T. Hagmann and F. Reyntjens (eds.), *Aid and Authoritarianism in Africa: Development without Democracy* (London, 2016), 91–118.

the fertile plains around Ayssa'yta, where water was abundant and the land was deemed as more fertile.⁷⁷ British experts also considered state managed agricultural schemes to be essential to coordination of the immigration of smallholders from the highlands and an increase in the supply of raw material for the TPSC cotton gin at Dubti.⁷⁸

Notwithstanding difficult relations with the *farenji*, Ali Mirah turned the new economic setting to his own advantage. The impressive demographic growth experienced in the Wollo highlands in the previous decade offered to the sultan the opportunity to bypass the labour bottleneck that had historically affected the lowlands and to inaugurate his own outgrower scheme in Ayssa'yta in 1962. Gradually, Ali Mirah built up a complex administrative structure to manage land allocation and surplus extraction, inviting highland farmers to grow cotton under his overlordship and entitling local Afar clans to sharecropping according to their customary land possession.⁷⁹ Ali Mirah's expansion was tacitly supported by the crown prince in return for payment of an increasing tribute, but Mitchell Cotts looked with favour on the sultan's initiative, too: in 1967, his farms accounted for 28 per cent of the raw materials processed by TPSC's gin, compared with the negligible 3 per cent provided by the AVA.⁸⁰ The main problem for Ali Mirah was that the agricultural scheme in Ayssa'yta depended on erratic rainfall and labour intensive techniques. Good harvest years might be followed by less successful ones, but investments in irrigation canals, tractors, and fertilizers were thwarted by the hostile posture of the AVA. The chance to overcome the credit crunch materialized when the British management decided that instead of spending the UK loan being negotiated for the proposed AVA agricultural scheme at Dubti, it was better to rely on the sultan's outgrower scheme and concentrate bilateral aid on expansion of a second TPSC plantation at Dit Bahari.⁸¹ The shift in Mitchell Cotts's business strategy was a turning point in the sultanate's trajectory: the British management in London convinced the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) to abandon the former project proposal, thereby depriving the AVA of external financial support to enforce its claims to the natural resources of the river delta, and then exploited its international connections to provide Ali Mirah with economic subsidies which were not available internally.⁸² The broker of this financial alliance was the Addis Ababa Bank, an Anglo Ethiopian bank of which Grindley's Bank was a 49 per cent shareholder and the *de facto* controller through a management agreement.⁸³ The Addis Ababa Bank opened a new branch in Ayssa'yta in 1968, and eventually provided the sultanate with the capital

77 NA FO 371/138085 VA 1331/6, Telegram from Ashe to British Embassy (1331/62), 19 Dec. 1962; FO 371/165325 1331/62, Confidential, Telegram from Loy to Foreign Office, 21 Feb. 1962.

78 NA FO 371/165325 JA 1331/5, Telegram from British Embassy in Addis to Boothby, 12 Nov. 1960; FO 371/138085 VA 1331/6, Telegram from Ashe to British Embassy (1331/62), 19 Dec. 1962.

79 FAOL, J. Hogg, *Agricultural Extension, Development of the Awash Valley Phase II* (Roma, 1972), 17.

80 IES, TPSC managing agents annual report 1966/67, Cotton Production and Output, Schedule II; NA FO 1043/96, Report by Dorman.

81 NA FCO 39/63, Visit to Ethiopia and Tendaho Plantation by Bridger and Evans, Ministry of Overseas Development, Nov. 1967; FAOL, Hogg, *Agricultural Extension*, 45; NA FCO 39/63, Telegram from Swann to Jefferson (ODM), 14 May 1968.

82 IES, TPSC Managing Agents Annual Report 1966/67, Lint Cotton Sales 1966–7, Schedule IV; NA FCO 39/63, Telegram from Swann to ODM, 30 Aug. 1968.

83 Banco di Roma Archives, Roma, XL.4.1.4 – 1 – 1 (2), National and Grindleys Bank Limited, London, Colloquio con il Signor Shearer, Assistant General Manager, 28 Oct. 1964, Roma.

necessary to purchase modern inputs, expand production, and obtain a significant source of income independently from the Crown.⁸⁴

The aforementioned partnership with the sultan did not prevent the TPSC from attempting to comply with the terms of the 1962 agreement authorizing the construction of two additional plantations, but realization of the business plan depended on the release of an ODA loan for the construction of a dam at Tendaho in order to redirect the Awash River water flow from the sultanate's farms in the river delta to the envisaged plantation site.⁸⁵ For the project to be successful, however, the TPSC had first to deal with the insecurity on the ground, whereas displaced Afar pastoralists were increasingly crossing the plantation's fences to feed their cattle and clashing with immigrant farmers in the surrounding of Dubti.⁸⁶ The security issue became dominant in June 1971 when the Awsa *awraja* governor, in an attempt to reassert the authority of his office in the lowland, fuelled a major armed confrontation between the local Afar and Oromo farmers that only ended after the intervention by the Ethiopian Special Forces.⁸⁷ The subprovincial governor sought to exploit the incident to obtain financial support from Mitchell Cotts for the deployment of a permanent police division in the river delta, but he did not succeed.⁸⁸ On the contrary, the investigation led by the UK diplomats in the lowlands in the months that followed offered Ali Mirah the opportunity to bypass the central authorities in Addis Ababa and directly engage with the network of foreign donors. The tone of the conversations he held with Western officials in 1971 is an illustration of his attempt to frame his relationship with foreign investors, diplomats, and consultants according to their own priorities. If the *fa'renji* wanted state authority, he would show that the sultanate had the requisites to reproduce it. During a meeting with the FAO extension officer, Ali Mirah represented the sultanate as a modern bureaucratic entity, introducing his closest collaborators as ministers in order to show that he was not merely a backward traditional leader, while his meeting with the envoys from the Foreign Office offered an occasion to express his opposition to the Tendaho dam, while at the same time giving assurances of his commitment to protect the TPSC and provide every assistance to the ODA consultants who would arrive in Ayssa'yta a few months later for a feasibility study of the area.⁸⁹ The British diplomats were impressed by the sultan, and came to the conclusion that the TPSC should agree

84 Loans from the Addis Ababa bank to the sultanate expanded from 500,000 Birr in 1968 to 3,800,000 Birr in 1971. By 1971, total cotton output had increased to 120,000 tons, which gave Ali Mirah a gross income of Eth\$ 6,000,000. NA FO 1043/96, Report on a visit to Bati; L. Bondestam, 'People and capitalism in the north-eastern lowlands of Ethiopia', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 12:3 (1974), 437.

85 NA FO 1043/96, Letter from Dick to Ylma Deressa, 2 Feb. 1971; Letter From Dick to Alan Campbell, 4 Feb. 1971.

86 NA OD 26/284, Report on Visit and Discussions held with S. Ferguson, 25 June 1970.

87 The riots followed an attack against the TPSC plantation by Afar gunmen, who looted the grain store, and the murder of a British worker in the streets of Dubti. See NA FO 1043/96, Report on a visit to Bati. After the riots had been quelled, Ali Mirah was summoned to Dessie into the presence of the new Governor General Solomon Abraham and the crown prince, but the ensuing decision to create a *woreda* office and a police outpost in Ayssa'yta were never properly enforced. Soulé, *Les Afar*, 17.

88 NA FO 1043/96, Report on a visit to Bati; Observation made during a visit to TPSC by the Defence Attaché, 10–12 June 1971; FCO 31/795, Tel. 217 from Campbell, Confidential.

89 NA FO 1043/96, Report on a visit to Bati.

on terms with him.⁹⁰ Mitchell Cotts's management and the UK government behaved accordingly: the ODA expert suggested postponing construction of the Tendaho dam, as requested by Ali Mirah, and the TPSC *de facto* gave up its residual claims to natural resources in the river delta, shifting its core business from primary production to processing, and agreed to provide irrigation and technical assistance to the sultanate for the creation of another outgrower scheme at the northeastern end of the Dubti plantation, in the same area claimed by the AVA since 1964.⁹¹ The expansion at the expense of the AVA allowed Ali Mirah to impose *de facto* his monopoly of the supply of raw cotton on the TPSC's gin at Dubti and shift the tribute burden to the British investors, since he could set a higher price than the one that had been applied up to 1971.⁹²

APOTHEOSIS AND FALL

The partnership with the TPSC and the economic wealth he accumulated from cotton farming allowed Ali Mirah to strengthen his sovereign claims to the Lower Awash. The sultan first turned to the network of bilateral and multilateral donors that supported the TPSC project to secure international recognition for himself. The meeting with British diplomats in 1971 presented an occasion to demonstrate the Sultanate's pro-Western position in the realm of foreign policy: Ali Mirah remarked on his opposition to communism, his long-standing friendship with Saudi Arabia, and his backing for the UK government.⁹³ One year later, he travelled to Great Britain and then on to the United States at the invitation of the State Department, arranging contracts with foreign export companies without the intermediation of the Ministry of Commerce or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁹⁴ His diplomacy bore fruit: the ODA and FAO consultants sent to Ayssa'yta in 1972 and 1973 no longer called on the Ethiopian government to support the AVA, but openly stressed the need to include the Sultanate in the management of land and water resources in the river delta.⁹⁵ Similarly, the World Bank advisor working on the AVA settlement schemes recognized the sultanate 'as a permanent institution to find an accommodation with'.⁹⁶ On the internal front, Ali Mirah was no longer influenced by the pro-Ethiopian Yayyo Hammadu, with whom relations had worsened dramatically since the Ayssa'yta riots, and had another powerful ally in the new Wollo governor general, with whom he had

90 *Ibid.*; NA FO 1043/96, Observation made during a visit to TPSC.

91 NA OD 26/241, Report of the ODA aid mission, June 1972; Cossins, *Green Heart*, 159; H. Emanuel, *Land Tenure, Land Use and Development in the Awash Valley of Ethiopia* (Madison, 1975), 18.

92 FAOL, S. L. Galpin, *Marketing potential for projected agricultural production in the Awash Valley*, technical report no. 18 (Roma, 1973).

93 NA FO 1043/96, Report on a visit to Bati.

94 NALE 17.2.81.06, Telegram from the Ethiopian Embassy in London to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Addis Ababa, 17 Tär. 1966 EC.

95 FAOL, Cossins, *Green Heart*; H. E. Voelkner, *The Social Feasibility of Settling Semi-Nomadic Afar on Irrigated Agriculture in the Awash Valley, Ethiopia*, Report no. 23 (Roma, 1974).

96 World Bank Archives, Washington DC, Amibara Irrigation (Revised) Project – C (1–12) – 10444B – Ethiopia-418/707 ET Bol. III – Awash Valley Authority Settlement Program: Comment on Evaluation Report May 1974, from J. Goring to K. G. W. Krishna.

recently reached an accommodation for the establishment of a tax office in Ayssa'yta.⁹⁷ The arrangement with the Wollo governor general protected the sultan from the AVA general manager's attempt to imprison him for appropriating government land: Ali Mirah could now afford to expand the farming area under his overlordship and challenge the jurisdiction of the AVA well beyond the historical core of the sultanate, establishing new cotton schemes in the Middle Awash in return for payment of compensation to local Afar clans.⁹⁸ What is more, he was no longer dependent on Addis Ababa for military supplies, because he was in a position to reinvest the considerable proceeds from cotton in the creation of a powerful army. Modern weapons were purchased from Eritrea and French Somaliland without any intermediation on the part of the Ministry of Defence, while displaced Afar pastoralists from Wollo, Shoa, Harar, and French Somaliland offered a sizeable source of military manpower. When the Ethiopian revolution began in 1974, the sultan controlled a 2,000-strong militia trained by Eritrean advisors and equipped with thousands of modern rifles and machineguns, whose potential overshadowed the military power of the ill trained Wollo provincial army.⁹⁹

The civil and military unrest that followed the outbreak of the Ethiopian revolution in February 1974 gave to Ali Mirah the opportunity to bargain his support for the parties involved in the power struggle at the centre in return for formalization of his territorial claims to the Afar lowlands. In April, the recently created association of Afar landlords, elders, and students in Addis Ababa despatched a letter of protest to the new Ethiopian government asking for recognition of customary Afar rights to the Awash Basin's natural resources and the imprisonment of the AVA general manager, who had backed enforcement of state ownership of land.¹⁰⁰ A few days later, Ali Mirah's son sent a similar allegation letter to the Ministry of the Interior in which he blamed the AVA manager, while the sultan wrote to the emperor stressing the support of the Afar people to his majesty.¹⁰¹ Unfortunately for Ali Mirah, Haile Selassie was deposed in September by the Provisional Military Administrative Council, a military junta commonly known by its Amharic name 'Derg'. A few months later, the Solomonic empire was replaced by a

97 In 1972, Ali Mirah paid 160,000 birr in taxes to the Wollo province. Cossin, 55; NA FCO 31/795, from Alan Campbell, British Embassy in Addis Ababa, to Le Tocq, East African Department, 28 June 1971. The relationship between Ali Mirah and Yayyo Hammadu began to deteriorate in 1971, when Yayyo called for the intervention of the Ethiopian Special Forces to quell riots in Ayssa'yta. Subsequently, and until Yayyo's death in 1973, relations between the two Afar notables remained tense, and were marked by frequent schisms. See Soulé, *Les Afar*, 16; NALE 17.2.81.06, Letter from Colonel Sumie Wodajo, Governor of Awsa Awrajja, to Ato Legesse Bizu, Deputy Minister of the Interior, 21 Mäg. 1964 EC.

98 NALE 17.2.81.06, Letter from Hararghe police to Harar administration, 2 Täq. 1967 EC.

99 According to the police, the Afar were trained in modern military tactics by several Agame advisors from Eritrea. The police officer recommended the deployment of Special Forces from Addis Ababa. See NALE 17.2.81.06, Letter to Awsa Awrajja Police from Ayssa'yta Woreda, 28 Mas. 1967 EC; Letter from Harar Police to Harar Province, 4 Täq. 1967 EC.

100 NALE 17.2.81.06, Letter from the Afar Association of Landlords, Elders, and Students, to Ministry of the Interior, 10 Myz. 1966 EC. For the origins of the association see Y.M. Yasin, 'Political history of the Afar in Ethiopia and Eritrea', *Afrika Spektrum*, 43 (2008), 46–7.

101 NALE 17.2.81.06, Letter from Hanfare Ali Mirah to Ministry of the Interior; Letter from Ali Mirah to Haile Selassie, 10 Mäg. 1966 EC.

socialist republic under the nationalistic motto ‘Ethiopia first’, and, in February 1975, the Derg proclaimed the nationalization of foreign assets and land.

Awsa became the catalyst for Afar resistance to the Derg in August 1974, when a group of Afar notables, coordinated by Ali Mirah’s son, founded the Afar Liberation Front (ALF). Security agents in Harar and Shoa reported of Afar individuals from the Ethiopian police joining the sultan’s militia in Ayssa’yta with their weapons.¹⁰² The Afar army worried the *awrajia* administration to such a degree that the *awrajia* governor called on the new governor general of Wollo to remove Ali Mirah.¹⁰³ The sultan reacted to these accusations with the same strategy he had successfully used with the Crown up to that time: he contacted the governor general in Dessie, stressing his undying commitment to the integrity of the Ethiopian state and his adherence to the Derg’s programme. Once again, Ali Mirah gave proof of his diplomatic skills by appropriating the political terminology of the new Ethiopian rulers: instead of using the seal that was usually employed in correspondence with the emperor, he concluded the letter with the revolutionary slogan ‘Ethiopia first’.¹⁰⁴ In the meantime, Ali Mirah’s son instigated correspondence with the minister of the interior in which he blamed Habib Mohamed Yayo for the accusations made against his father: in his view, Habib was responsible for both the creation of an anti-Derg militia trained by Eritrean rebels and spreading anti-Ethiopian propaganda among the Afar in French Somaliland.¹⁰⁵ Deceit was a useful device for obtaining the temporary trust of the provincial administration and gaining more time before direct confrontation.¹⁰⁶ A month later, Ali Mirah was knocking at the door of the American Embassy for military assistance, but Cold War constraints were working against the sultanate: the US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger did not wish to place additional strain on his country’s relationship with the new Ethiopian government, and recommended that the American Embassy cut off all contact with the sultan.¹⁰⁷

On 2 June, Ali Mirah was invited to a meeting with Derg officials in Addis Ababa, but he did not attend; instead, he fled in secret to Djibouti with the collaboration of the French authorities and then moved to Saudi Arabia, where he remained in exile until 1991.¹⁰⁸ When the Afar army in the Lower Awash rose up, the Derg sent a military expedition to disband the insurgents, and appointed Habib Mohammed Yayo as head of a counter-insurgency militia made up of loyal Afar followers. Military resistance in the Lower Awash would last for several months, and when the Derg did succeed in bringing peace

102 NALE 17.2.81.06, Letter from Harar Police to Harar Province, 2 Täq. 1967 EC.

103 NALE 17.2.81.06, Letter from Tamrut Kebret to Awsa Awrajia Police, 24 Ham. 1966 EC.

104 NALE 17.2.81.06, Letter from Ali Mirah to Teferi Wolde-Tesfay, Acting General Governor of Wollo, 23 Mas. 1967 EC.

105 NALE 17.2.81.06, Letter from Hanfare Ali Mirah to Colonel Belachew, 14 Täq. 1967 EC.

106 NALE 17.2.81.06, Letter from Teferi Wolde-Tesfay to Fitawrari Mahamen Menda, Acting Deputy Minister of the Interior, 22 Täq. 1967 EC; Letter from Fitawrari Maharen Menda to Brigadier General Brahan Tafari, 1 Tah. 1967 EC.

107 Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor NSA Presidential Country Files for Africa, Ethiopia Secret, Telegram from StateDep to AmEmbassy Addis Ababa, Jan. 1975.

108 Wikileaks, Secret Telegram from Hummel, Embassy in Addis Ababa, 3 June 1974. (http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1975ADDISO6554_b.html), last accessed 28 Oct. 2013.

to Awsa, new police divisions were permanently deployed in the lowlands to guard the recently created state-owned farms and government-controlled settlement schemes.

CONCLUSION

The case of the sultanate of Awsa highlights the historicity of the process of state formation in the Ethiopian lowlands across different historical periods. Ali Mirah built up a powerful Muslim polity on the eastern fringes of the Christian empire of Ethiopia and escaped domination from the provincial and subprovincial administration by exploiting the typical repertoires of the frontier regime: he played stronger state and nonstate neighbours against each other and manipulated local events in order to represent them as conforming to the fears and expectations of the empire, with the purpose of obtaining protection from the Crown against the intermediate levels of government. Ali Mirah was also able to draw from different sources of political legitimacy: he preserved autonomy by adapting to the political rituals and regulations of the highlands, but then used his resulting economic wealth to consolidate the traditional Afar structure by both supporting the recognition of customary Afar right on land and enrolling local clan militias into his own army. The sultan was as effective as Hamdan of Gubba in asserting a semi-independent chiefdom on the edges of the empire, and far more successful than Al Imam of Nuqara or Abdullah Tahir of Jigjiga were. What is more striking is that Ali Mirah succeeded in his quest at a time when former semi-independent enclaves in other parts of the country had been absorbed within the administrative hierarchy of the Ethiopian state.

Achievement of sovereign prerogatives would not have been possible without the complicity of the Crown, which reactivated the typical tributary arrangements that had been used at the beginning of the twentieth century to centralize surplus extraction. For Haile Selassie and Asfa Wossen, the economic initiatives of the sultan could be tolerated as long as they were instrumental in increasing trade revenues, since cotton was being processed in Dubti by foreign investors who could be easily controlled and with whom the imperial family maintained close links. Nevertheless, archival documents reveal that the various power poles within the highland ruling élite had different visions of how relations with the sultanate should be managed. While the political economy of the Crown was flexible and profit oriented, civil and military servants in the AVA and the Awsa *awraja* almost invariably saw themselves as the vanguard of the *pax aethiopica* in the unruly lowlands, and looked on the Lower Awash as a wild area that needed to be civilized at all costs by imposition of the political order of the highlands. This dichotomy reinforces the hypothesis that the more frontier governance on the eastern escarpment was delegated to the lower levels of government within the highland ruling class, and the more these levels of government were effectively empowered to impose their own agenda, the more the encounter between the Ethiopian administration and local societies reproduced the tidal frontier trajectory experienced elsewhere.¹⁰⁹

109 Donham, 'Old Abyssinia', 47; T. Hagmann and B. Korf, 'Agamben in the Ogaden: violence and sovereignty in the Ethiopian-Somali frontier', *Political Geography*, 31:4 (2012), 205–14.

The trajectory of the sultanate of Awsa cannot be considered in isolation from the political economy of foreign investors and international donors. By defining the Lower Awash as an institutional vacuum open to legitimate intrusion on the part of state agencies, the public private development network contributed towards reinforcing the narrative of the unruly frontier, and provided the subprovincial levels of government with the administrative and technological skills to expand the exercise of bureaucratic state power and make agricultural development synonymous with state building, in the sense of ‘a conscious effort at creating an apparatus of control.’¹¹⁰ Extraversion also worked the other way round, however: once Ali Mirah proved to be more effective than the Ethiopian bureaucracy at enforcing security and supervising cotton production, he was rewarded with tangible and intangible resources that transformed the sultanate into a *de facto* state entity with independent access to international capital and foreign assistance. It was by acting as a broker in the process of integration between local agricultural production and global commodity markets that Ali Mirah succeeded in expanding the territorial extension and internal revenues of the sultanate, and eventually became the vanguard of an Afar national project that challenged colonial and postcolonial boundaries. Although it is not the intention of this article to enter into an analysis of the present day, one might go further and argue that the current wave of foreign investments in land might pave the way for the emergence of new frontier regimes along the edges of the contemporary Ethiopian state, thereby reproducing a trajectory that can be traced over several centuries.

110 B. Berman and J. Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa* (London, 1992), 5.