

Full Length Research Paper

Recalling the history of Sultan Mohammed Hanfare “Illalta”: Was he a democratic Sultan of Aussa in Afar, Ethiopia?

Berihun Kassa Hailu* and Jemal Abebe Jemere

Department of History and Heritage Management, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Samara University, P. O. Box 132, Samara, Ethiopia.

Received 30 March, 2017; Accepted 7 October, 2017

Recalling past history is pertinent to constructively rewrite the history of the future. Thus, recalling the history of Aussa Sultans best examines and analyzes their leadership style and development endeavors. This study aims to analyze the democratic nature of Sultan Mohammed Hanfare “Illalta”, his political lifespan vis-à-vis the leadership styles of his predecessors and successors. After a thorough review of secondary sources, detailed examination of key informants’ and in-depth interviews, it was found that Sultan Mohammed Hanfare “Illalta” was a democratic sultan of Aussa who ceded his political throne to his nephew, whom he believed could lead the Sultanate democratically, sustainably and aptly, rather than his son, thereby becoming the only Sultan to have broken the historical legacy of patrimonial power transfer in the history of Aussa Sultanate. As a clear commitment to democracy, before implementing his succession plans, he had consulted and communicated with clan leaders in an assemblage, but was advised to continue the patriarchal trend and enthrone his eldest son, Alimirah Mohammed Hanfare; an advice he did not implement. Furthermore, due to the Sultans’ democratic and relatively better leadership style, the society recognized and gave him a rewarding title “Illalta”, which literally means “Flowing River”, thus resembling his leadership quality with water and river, gifts of nature; where everybody is treated and served equally without prejudice partiality or favoritism as it is with a “Flowing River”. His merit-based political power transfer was challenged by his successors accentuating his break from the typical patrimonial power transfer.

Key words: Sultan, Illalta, Aussa, Afar, Ethiopia, democratic, flowing river.

INTRODUCTION

History of Afar

According to Getachew (2001), Kebede (1994) and Trimmingham (1952), Afar belong to the Cushitic language

family along with the Somali and Oromo. Trimmingham (1976) further purported that the Afars crossed the Bab-el Mendab and the Gulf of Aden into the peripheral areas of East Africa. Through the passage of time, despite the

*Corresponding author. E-mail: berihun2@gmail.com. Tel: +251 913 28 55 45.

controversies on the dichotomy, Asahimara (reds) and Adohimara (whites) had begun to be considered as the two main groups of Afar people. Lewis (1994) and Trimmingham (1952) are some of the most credited writers who basically wrote on this division. As far as areas occupied were concerned, Fekadu et al. (1984) as cited in Ali (2008) and Voelkner (1974) had asserted that the Upper Middle Awash Valley and Lower Awash Plain and Delta were under the influence and occupation of Adohimara and Asahimara branches respectively. Besides, despite the presence of different tribal confederacies and tribes of each main branch, Lewis (1994) acclaimed that they are not territorially distinct groups.

There are two different views on the division of Afar people into Asahimara and Adohimara dichotomies. Getachew (2001) stated the reason for the twofold nature of Afar people, the first view, is of course political developments, migration, population intermingling across different backgrounds as well as economic organizations; while the second view deals with distinct habitation. In line with this, the Asahimara were migrants from the coastal areas of the Red Sea and Gulf of Tadjoura to the land of Afar where they intermingled with the Adohimara group in the Awash Valley (Getachew, 2001).

Furthermore, Ayele (1986) indicated that the Asahimara are descendents of Sheik Haralmais, who introduced Islamic faith to the Afar people; while the Adohimara are from the Ankala Derder. As result of this, descendents of Sheik Haralmais became the Asahimara (reds) and conquerors while the rest of the Afar people become Adohimara (whites), and the conquered. On the other hand, Lewis (1994) stated that the Asahimara are people from the Ethiopian highlands who migrated and encroached to the hinterlands of Afar during the 16th century, and imposed their influence on the existing Afar tribes in Dankalia. In the meantime, due to frequent exposure as well as internal and external interaction that the Asahimara had, it was necessary that they formed their own Sultanate at Aussa (Getachew, 2001).

According to the annals of history, the Afar triangle has been taken as the most strategic due largely to its location in entertaining the long distance caravan trade. As a result of this geographic advantage, according to Getachew (2001), the region is well remembered for frequent enthronement and dethronement of Sultanates. The most traceable Sultanates, according to Dahilon (1985), were Rahyata (south of Assab), Biru (North east Tigray), Tadjoura (Ethio-Djibouti border), Gobaad (Djibouti) and Aussa (Afar).

The evolutionary roots of Sultanates mentioned earlier (except Aussa) goes back to the Sultanate of Ankala with its center at Rahayto, present day Republic of Djibouti and Southern Eritrea (Getachew, 2001). Emphasizing this information, Trimmingham (1952) and Lewis (1955) acclaimed that the Ankala tribe had played a significant role in defusing the other tribes, and were first referred to

as "Afar" during the 13th century by an Arab geographic writer, Ibn Said. Hence, Ankala should be referred to as the first home land of ancient Sultanates of the Afar except Aussa.

The emergence of Aussa sultanate

As far as the history of Aussa Sultanate is concerned, the two different views that have been repeatedly discussed by historians are that they are immigrants who moved from Yambu Yemeni to Afar land and remnants of Adal Sultanate (Kebede, 1994). According to Cossins (1983), Yemeni Arabs who migrated to the Afar land were the ones to whom both history and legend gave credit for the formation of Aussa sultanate and for the commencement of crop cultivation. Contrarily, Aramis (2009) surmised that Aussa Sultanate was the historical heiress of the Muslim kingdom of Adal.

Furthermore, Adou (1993) purported that while the Sultanate of Ifat was on the glimpse of its demise, the rival power had faced a fierce resistance. Amidst this, the fierce resistors were reported to have absconded deep to the east and protected the Sultanate of Adal with its center at Dakar. The sultanate had declared its ascendancy after defeating the Christian High Land Kingdom at the battle of Shimbra Kure (Trimingham, 1976). As a matter of history, the Christian High Land Kingdom supported by the Portuguese army headed by Christopher Dagama over consummated and over maneuvered the army of Ahmad Gagn whereby the survivors were forced to retreat to the seat of the Sultanate that would soon be challenged by the Oromo population movement (Bahiru, 2002).

Trimingham (1976) stated that the Afar themselves were responsible for the formation of the nomadic part of the Adal Sultanate; and at the same time a considerable number of Ahmed Gagn's armies had also been recruited from. Accordingly, Trimmingham (1976) surmised that soon after the death of Ahmed Gagn and the collapse of his troops including armies from Afar, remnants of the Afar were forced to go back to the Afar desert in search of a place for permanent settlement and then be credited for the formation of the Aussa Sultanate. Consistently, Getachew (2001) asserted as the Aussa Sultanate had evolved from the wars of Ahmed Gagn and fear of the Oromo aggression.

To ascertain stability and secure the Sultanate from the newly emerging threat, according to Bahiru (2002), remnants started to change the seat of the Sultanate to a place where the Oromo could not penetrate easily; and finally Aussa was chosen as the seat to rally the sultanate in the last quarter of the 16th century (Abir, 1968).

For further justification, Trimmingham (1952) surmised that the Sultanate of Aussa came into existence in 1577, when Imam Muhammed Jasa moved his capital from

Table 1. List of Sultans since the commencement of the Aydahiso dynasty.

| Name of the Sultan | Period in Power | Remark |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| Kädafo Aydahis Maskie | 1733- 1758 | - |
| Hanfare Kadafo Aydahis | 1758- 1760 | - |
| Mohammed Hanfare Kadafo | 1760- 1798 | - |
| Aydahis Mohammed Hanfare | 1798- 1831 | - |
| Mohammed Aydahis Mohammed | 1831- 1832 | - |
| Hanfare Mohammed Aydahis | 1832- 1861 | - |
| Mohammed Hanfare " <i>Illalta</i> " | 1861- 1898 | Focus of the paper |
| Mohammed Aydahis Hanfare | 1898- 1900 | Not son of the previous reign |
| Alimirah Mohammed Hanfäre | 1900- 1902 | - |
| Hanfare Mohammed Hanfare | 1902- 1911 | - |
| Yayo Mohammed Hanfare | 1912- 1927 | - |
| Mohammed Yayo Mohammed | 1927- 1944 | - |
| Alimirah Hanfare Aydahis | 1944- 1975 | - |

Source: Yasin (1985): "The rise and fall of Awsa Sultanate".

Harar to Aussa. Hence, Imam Muhammed Jasa (family of Ahmed Gagn) was the one whom history remembered to shift the seat from Harar to Aussa basically by leaving his brother as Wazir, chief assistance, of Harar. The analysis of Kebede (1994), apparently, has seriously to do with the aforementioned justification since it purports the presence of different Afar tribes who are believed to have descended from Imam Salman II by whom the rule of the Sultanate in Aussa was established. These tribes are named as *Harera* or *Derdera* which is most probably coined from their origin Harar. Hence, the second view, on the formation of Aussa Sultanate, sounds is more accurate and widely supported by different writers; and it is congruent with the traditional interpretation of history (Kebede, 1994).

The Aydahiso dynasty and political power transfer in Aussa sultanate

The Sultanate of Aussa remained the strongest Sultanates in the Horn of Africa from 1577 to 1975 though there were ups and downs. The triangular strategic location advantage that Aussa had; and fertile soil and Awash River (suitable for agricultural production) as well as livestock production gave Aussa Sultanate a momentum to be considered strong enough than other sultanates (Dahilon, 1985; Kebede, 1994; Getachew, 2001).

Once the sultanate had formed the Oasis of Aussa, the issues of leadership, administration and political chair were points of concern that has been followed by series of conflicts and frequent enthronement, and dethronement of Sultans from Yemen up to 1734. As earlier discussed, Imam Mohammed Jasa took the seat of the Sultanate at Aussa in 1577; and half a decade later, in 1583, he faced the first brutal raid and defeat by the Wara Daya

Oromo intrusion where he lost his life (Trimingham, 1952).

Though struggle between the partisans was reported to have continued, Trimingham asserted that the Sultanate of Aussa was further joined by the freed men of Harar from the Imamates of Aussa, and being an independent city-state in 1647 under the rule of Emir Ali Ibn Daud. Hence, the problem of internal political strife coupled with the independency of Harar had paralyzed the fate of Aussa Sultanate, and be under the rule of cruel Imams of Yemen: Imam Salman I, Imam Ali, Imam Omar and Imam Salman II up to 1734, when the Aydahiso dynasty came to the scene (Kassim, 1982).

Aydahiso, according to Abir (1968), is a clan name from the Mudaito tribe and the Asahimara group; who were actually pastoralists engulfing towards the fertile land of Aussa. Since the commencement of the Sultan Kadafo leadership of the Aussa sultanate to the final emasculation of the sultanate under Sultan Alimirah II, all the sultans descended from the Aydahiso genealogy; and hence the Aydahiso dynasty. As a result of this, thirteen sultans were enthroned and dethroned to lead Aussa Sultanate where political power was solely patrimonial, from father to the eldest son; with the exception of Sultan Mohammed Hanfare "*Illalta*" (1861 to 1898) and his immediate successor. Table 1 presents the Sultans of Aussa Sultanate since the time of Aydahiso dynasty up to date.

Was Sultan Mohammed Hanfare "*Illalta*" a democratic sultan of Aussa?

Sultan Mohammed Hanfare "*Illalta*", (the focus of this article) was the only one who had transferred his power not to his elder son but to his nephew on whom he had trust and believe to rule the Sultanate aptly. Due largely

to this fact, a question aroused whether the sultan was democratic or not; as well as it instigates to consider him as he was farsighted and extraordinary in such a way that his vision could be realized not by bestowing his power to his elder son rather to his nephew whom he believe could run the sultanate the way he dreamt it would be or through merit based appointment.

The period of Sultan Mohammed Hanfare "*Illalta*" (1861 to 1898), internationally, was the time where European powers were pushing vigorously into the African interior; where the Sultanate of Aussa and its vicinity was supposed to be under the French colonial rule. During this period, still, Ethiopian neighbors particularly Egypt had launched a prolonged penetration deep into the Ethiopian hinterland. It was during this period that Mohammed Ra'uf Pasha of Egypt occupied the emirate of Harar including the ports of Zeila and Berbera.

Similarly, from the Tajura side (Djibouti), Muzinger launched an advance to the direction of Shewa though he was fiercely resisted and attacked by the Sultan himself at a place called Odduma in 1875 (Al-Shami, 2000). Furthermore, the most serious challenge also came from Massawa led by Colonel Arendrup (Danish Officer) and Arakil Bay to capture Adwa (Bahiru, 2002). All these conditions highlight that countries in general and individuals in particular were greedy with resources and power, and usually tried actually to elongate their hold on power. Due to what was perceived as the norm, it was thus unusual that Sultan Mohammed Hanfare "*Illalta*" did not use his power for greedy purposes.

Furthermore, his period of reign was contemporaneous with the period of Emperor Yohannes IV who pushed for Ethiopian unification basing religion as the point of unity. Even worse than this, Menelik, king of Shewa had a number of hidden agreements with Italians basically to earn military weapons by compromising Ethiopian territorial dignity, and then attain the title of king of kings. Before and after his coronation, Menelik had intended to expand his territory to the south, south east and south west regions of the country with the intention of controlling trade routes; where controlling Harar and then Aussa Sultanate was his dream.

After a fierce resistance and prolonged war, Menelik won the war against Emir Abdullahi of Harar at the battle of Chalanqo in 1887; which helped him to control the eastern commercial center of Harar and thereby gained full mastery of the long-distance trade route including Aussa (Bahiru, 2002). The Sultanate of Aussa had long been remained free of raids by the central government until invaded by Emperor Menelik II and became a tribute payer in 1895 with the pretext that the Sultanate becomes an ally with Italians (Trimingham, 1976; Lewis, 1994). One can simply deduce that political strife and succession problems are the most remembered political history of Ethiopia where political seat had been preceded by blood. Contrary to the patriarchy historical legacy that Ethiopia has held over time, condemning the

decision of Sultan Mohammed Hanfare "*Illalta*" to transfer his political power to his nephew should be praised. This decision which stems from his democratic nature and farsighted outlook will be explored and analyzed in the course of this work.

At Sultanate level, Aussa had considerable wealth coupled with its triangular strategic location; fertile soil where agricultural production has also been practiced using Awash River (Dahilon, 1985); caravan trade, livestock and crop production (Getachew, 2001; and Kebede, 1994). The issue of power transfer was worsened in Aussa Sultanate where patriarchal lineage had been propagated to be followed till then. Breaking this historical legacy, Sultan Mohammed Hanfare "*Illalta*" had transferred his power to his nephew, Mohammed Aydahis Hanfare (1898 to 1900). There is no record of any other ruler before or after Sultan Mohammed Hanfare "*Illalta*" who broke the patriarchal power transfer. Thus, asking why he did all these while it was possible to scramble the resourceful area of Aussa and exploit the comparative geographical advantage that the Sultanate had seems rational; and better to differentiate him from his predecessors and successors. Given the above international, national and local political discussions, the authors of this paper have intended to answer whether Sultan Mohammed Hanfare "*Illalta*" was a democratic sultan or not.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, qualitative research approach with narrative research design was employed. Primary sources basically in depth and key informants' interviews were considered while narrating the nature and approaches that the sultan had. Besides, secondary sources have also been reviewed while tracing the history of the Sultanate of Aussa in general and the Sultan in particular. Unstructured interview normally in-depth interview was employed for data collection with the assumption that it incorporates elements of responding to explore and probe in more depth, certain areas of interest; and it lets informants explain their responses with the aim to provide more in-depth information.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While analyzing the data, key informants' interview and previous writings were consulted basically to compare and contrast the power, and life spans of different sultans before and after Mohammed Hanfare "*Illalta*". In due course, Dahilon (1985) surmised that sultans rules before Mohammed Hanfare "*Illalta*" were characterized by loose administration in such a way that political activities and thoughts were not strict. Kebede (1994) also appreciated Sultan Mohammed Hanfare "*Illalta*" in his typical political stand in uniting all Afar people; and the expansion of his territorial authority where he allowed the respective leaders to be autonomous and semi-autonomous as long as his authority was acknowledged.

The nickname "*Illalta*" that literally means "Flowing

River” was given to him due to his democratic nature which allowed everyone to come before the Sultan without limitation or fear. It was as a result of this that the community gave him the title “*Illalta*” (Flowing River) to describe that everybody was free of fear and limitation to get what they want from the Sultan in the same way that everybody is free to drink water from the flowing river (Kadafo, n.d). The key informants of this paper confirmed that the Sultan was impartial in his dealings. From this, one can deduce that the Sultan was trusted and admired by his people that they compared him to a river, which is a gift of nature.

At that time, as has already been discussed, power was used to siphon and exploit public resources for private use. Leaders like Sultan Mohammed Hanfare “*Illalta*” who is still remembered by his people are rare even in the present time especially among developing nations. Furthermore, the title “*Illalta*” given to him had to do with his democratic leadership style where equality among community was ensured and even recognized by the society. It can thus be concluded that Sultan Mohammed Hanfare “*Illalta*” was a democratic sultan of Aussa who made the heir of his political throne not his elder son but the one whom he believed could lead the Sultanate democratically and sustainably.

Besides, it is strongly believed that democratic and relatively better leaders are those whom the society recognizes and gives a rewarding title like “*Illalta*”. Given this, Sultan Mohammed Hanfare “*Illalta*” was one of the recognized leaders of Ethiopia in general and Aussa Sultanate in particular. Ethiopian leaders in general and Sultanates of Aussa in particular have had a negative scar on the society that the society still remembers them for their cruel acts and succession problems as this was a problem that existed before and after the reign of Sultan Mohammed Hanfare “*Illalta*”, who was the only one to break from this norm. Apart from this point already discussed above, there are no other points to prove that Sultan Mohammed Hanfare “*Illalta*” was a democratic leader but on the other hand, the point raised could be accepted as enough proof. Therefore, Sultan Mohammed Hanfare “*Illalta*” was a democratic leader of Aussa Sultanate whom the then community acknowledged by relating his system of administration as open as a common pool of resources, resources open for everybody like a “Flowing River”.

Furthermore, when he was planning to transfer his power to his heir, as a clear indication of his democratic nature, Sultan Mohammed Hanfare “*Illalta*” had consulted and communicated with clan leaders in an assemblage. He raised the question on to whom his political power should be bestowed on and clan leaders responded that the patriarchal trend had to continue; and hence he was advised to bestow the throne to his elder son, Alimirah Mohammed Hanfare. Contrary to their advice and concern, he followed a more democratic succession by choosing the right person for the right position who could

lead the Sultanate sustainably and the Sultanate be prospered. Soon after the throne was given to Mohammed Aydahis Hanfare, according to key informants, sons of Sultan Mohammed Hanfare “*Illalta*” and clan leaders revolted against him claiming he had no right to it and had him deposed.

After deposing Mohammed Aydahis Hanfare, the eldest son of Sultan Mohammed Hanfare “*Illalta*”, Alimirah Mohammed Hanfare assumed power; and hence they returned back to their patrimonial historical legacy. Thus, the sons of Sultan Mohammed Hanfare “*Illalta*” and clan leaders had threatened the democratic stand of their father and had long been in bloody civil war. Therefore, authors of this paper deduced that the democratic practices and nature of Sultan Mohammed Hanfare “*Illalta*” was truncated by his sons, clan leaders and successors in general. In a nutshell, Sultan Mohammed Hanfare “*Illalta*” was the only democratic Sultan of Aussa who broke the patrimonial political power transfer as compared with his predecessors and successors.

Conclusion

Recalling history from the past is pertinent to write the history of the future. Given this, recalling the history of Aussa Sultans was found to be of the essence where their leadership style and development endeavors could best be examined and analyzed. This paper, in this sense, analyzed the democratic nature of Sultan Mohammed Hanfare “*Illalta*” in such a way that his political life span had been analyzed vis-à-vis the leadership style that his predecessors and successors have had. On the basis of the available primary and secondary sources, it was concluded that Sultan Mohammed Hanfare “*Illalta*” was a democratic sultan of Aussa who made the heir of his political throne not his eldest son but the one whom he believe could lead the Sultanate democratically and sustainably. Besides, it has also been concluded that the Sultan was democratic and a relatively better leader who is still remembered in the society, with a rewarding title “*Illalta*”, which literally means “Flowing River” to indicate his genuine and democratic leadership quality where everybody was treated equally. He was the only Sultan who broke the historical legacy of patrimonial political power transfers though it was challenged by his predecessors and returned back to their ancestors.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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