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A Survey of Historical Evidence to Ethiopia's Re-claims over Sea Trade Outlets

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the historical evidence concerning Ethiopia with the aim of reclaiming its trade outlets. It employs a qualitative writing approach, drawing on substantial sources and engaging in critical evaluation. The paper argues that Ethiopia, as the successor to the Aksumite Empire, flourished along the Red Sea from the second to the sixth century. Furthermore, it asserts that from the seventh century until the nineteenth century, Ethiopia retained control over its coastal territories bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Despite Ottoman Turkey's attempts to exert influence starting in 1557 by establishing loosely controlled satellite states, Ethiopia managed to preserve its dominance over trade routes. In the nineteenth century, European powers such as Britain, Italy, and France undermined Ethiopian sovereignty through fraudulent treaties, invasions, and the promotion of ethno-national ideologies. As a result, Ethiopia's maritime claims were significantly affected. Nevertheless, this paper asserts that Ethiopia has the historical foundations necessary to reclaim access to these vital maritime trade routes.

Keywords: *Aksumite Empire, Maritime, Red Sea, trade outlets*

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INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia, a nation that evolved from the ancient kingdom of Aksum, developed organically in the Horn of Africa. Trade, population growth, and warfare played significant roles in its early formation. The Horn, which includes Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, and Djibouti, was a strategic location between the Indian Ocean, Red Sea, and Gulf of Aden, allowing early settlers access to trade routes. Aksum flourished along the coastal regions of the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden, extending as far as Yemen until the mid-7th century. Zagwê, the successor to Aksum, primarily controlled the port of Zäila in the Gulf of Aden.

The medieval history highlights the significant influence of Ethiopia on both the northeast and southeast coastal trade outlets of the Horn of Africa. However, following the arrival of the Turks and the Portuguese, a challenging conflict emerged between

two Ethiopian factions: the "Christian" kingdom and the "Muslim" sultanates. This struggle extended over more than a century, yet the primary trade continued to flourish in the east, particularly in Zɑ̈ila, which was situated in Ethiopian territory.

Since the 19th century, the part of Turkey and Portugal in the Horn was supplanted by European superpowers: Britain, France, and Italy. The entry of such powers with the aim of colonialism ultimately disassembled the verifiable authenticity of Ethiopia.

This paper endeavors to investigate the authenticity of Ethiopia over exchange outlets in the north, northeast, and southeast of the Horn over time. Additionally, it endeavors to appear to focus occasionally on understanding the Ethiopian historical periodical division: old, medieval, and contemporary, covering the period from ancient to 1270, 1270-1855, and 1855 to the present, respectively.

Objective, Statement, and Methodology

The general objective of this paper is to analyze the historically verifiable establishments of Ethiopia's claim to exchange trade outlets.

Specific objectives

- To trace Ethiopia's historical maritime dominance, open sea access, and territorial changes that barely affect Ethiopian commerce outlets.
- To investigate Ethiopian maritime history in the context of the ancient, medieval, and contemporary eras in that order.

Statement of the Problem

On January 1, 2024, Ethiopia and Somaliland signed a Memorandum of Understanding. During the announcement, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed stated that Ethiopia is keen to regain access to ocean trade routes (Khan & Idle, 2024; Shab'an); Ethiopian News Agency, 2024, retrieved from http://www.ena.et/web/eng-3952304.Taking after this occasion, the Horn of Africa appears to be locked in unused political pressures.

The Republic of Somalia overtly condemns the Ethiopian endeavor over Somaliland, and it is connected to political collusion with Egypt (Ali, 2022); BBC NEWS Amharic, 2024, retrieved from http://www.bbc.com/amharic/articles/ced7k547qvjo). Other political commentators heighten the political atmosphere in the Horn by supporting either Ethiopia or the Republic of Somalia, but none of them examine the occasion from a verifiable historical perspective with substantial corroborations. Mohammed al-Amin bin Awdah, a political scientist from the University of Ghardala, attempts to see the strategic implications of Ethiopia's reclaimed trade outlets. He concludes that Ethiopia's efforts to access open water balance regional power, give its government domestic credibility among the populace, and make it possible to defend radicals in the Horn (bin Awdah, 2024). As a result, Awdah was unable to provide historical precedents that serve as the foundation for Ethiopian reclamation. In a paper titled "Effect of Ethiopian Landlocked Status on Its Neighbors," two more Ethiopian academics, Shimelis Wendal and Tebarek Lika, attempted to illustrate Ethiopia's landlocked situation. The economic benefits of having access to trade ports are the main focus of their work. They demonstrate that since 2000, Ethiopia has received 1.5 billion dollars annually (Dagnew & Megento, 2024). The most integrated account on the issue is introduced by Fantahun Ayele, a historian from Bahir Dar University. His work entitled "A Historical Investigation of Ethiopia's Claim Over Djibouti" deals

with the Ethio-French diplomatic relationship during Emperor Menelik II's reign. The research is reconstructed from diplomatic archives; that is why it is intriguing. It discovers a confidential agreement that obliges France to return Djibouti back when Ethiopia requires it (Ayele, 2023). Fantahun's effort, however, is limited to the situation in Djibouti. Other historical contexts that Ethiopia experienced during ancient, medieval, and contemporary periods were not addressed. Yakob Hailemaryam is another scholar who authored a book titled "Asäb Yämanat" (For Whom the Port of Asäb Belonged). The subject of Asäb is a central theme in the book. Additionally, the author attributes the loss of Asäb to the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (Yakob, 2010; retrieved from https://www.scribd.com/document/). However, Yakob's work is written in Amharic, which is not accessible to international scholars. Furthermore, it sees historical events through the lens of politics.

Ethiopia's historical legitimacy regarding its claims to access open water remains unexplored, with existing scholars failing to address the foundational historical aspects. This paper examines Ethiopia's historical authenticity regarding the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Gulf of Aden over time.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is written based on a qualitative historical research design along with critical evaluation, which is suitable for analyzing past events, treaties, and other historical developments related to the access to or loss of Ethiopia's maritime territories. It utilizes both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include manuscripts, traveler accounts, letters, governmental reports, newspapers, and treaties, which are primarily used in the analysis. Regarding secondary sources, such as books, scholarly journals, articles, dissertations, and theses, these are also consulted. As a form of historical interpretation and investigation, both types of sources are critically evaluated, interpreted, analyzed, and cross-checked. Historical interpretation involves reconstructing historical events within a chronological framework, where the causes and consequences, as well as changes and continuities, are carefully understood.

Ethiopian Ancient Trade Outlets to 1270

The ancient history of Ethiopia begins with the rise of Aksum as a kingdom and concludes with the "restoration" of the Aksumite lineage in 1270. Scholars do not agree on the precise date of Aksum's formation. Some assert that it began around 1000 BC, while others suggest the period between 150 BC and the start of AD (Hatke, 2013; Marcus, 2023). However, scholars agree on Aksum's influence over the Red Sea for about five centuries, from 200 BC to the seventh century A.D. Initially, it began as a small kingdom south of the Red Sea, centered in what is now the city of Axum in Ethiopia, but gradually it came to control both sides of the Red Sea. Therefore, geographically, the Aksumite Empire extended beyond the Red Sea (Selassie, 1972). The earliest document, entitled "Periplus of the Erythrean Sea," written by an anonymous Greek merchant in the first century A.D., has testified to Axum's territorial limit on both sides of the Red Sea. Aksum was bordered by "Moschophani," an area beyond the Red Sea in the north, and Bärbära in the east (Schoff, 1912; Tamrat, 1973). Another document from the sixth century A.D., authored by Cosmas Indicopleustes and originally written in Greek, further clarifies that Aksum's territory extended into southern Arabian regions. This document illustrates the Aksumite trade

routes in the north, northeast, and southeast, including the port of Zaila (Levine, 2014; Winstedt, 1909). The southeast territorial limit was extended as far as Zäila, near Bärbära, but became more privatized after the Arab Muslims blocked the Red Sea in the middle of the seventh century A.D. (Ibid, 77-72; Marcus, 2023)

In the second century, at about 200 AD, Aksum, under the leadership of Gadarat, led a military expedition beyond the Red Sea and controlled the land of the Himyarites as well as its capital, Zafar (Hahn; Munro-Hay, 1982). A similar military expedition is said to have been launched by Baygat, probably the son of Gadarat, towards the east as far as Bab el-Mandab. The Baygat's successors like DBH [Dabah], DTWNS [Datwanas], and ZQRNS [Zaqaranas] continued their overlordship for South Arabia one after the other (Munro-Hay, 1992). This military expedition was sustained throughout the fourth and sixth centuries into the west, east, and northeast. In the fourth century, for instance, King Ezana led another military expedition towards the west and occupied the lands of Noba, Meroe (Henze, 2000). Ezana's advance into Sudan allowed him to gain control of the port of Suakin, which was part of the ancient kingdom of Meroe.

At an early period of the sixth century, another military expedition was performed under the leadership of King Kaleb. In 520 AD, King Kalêb moved to Yemen with the intention to suppress Yesuf Asary, the Himyarite ruler who revolted against Aksumite overlordship. Yusuf Asary came to power in Himyar after an Aksumite heir and appointee died, and the Aksumites were unable to reach the Red Sea in time to choose a new monarch (Munro-Hay, 1991)The persecution of Christians under the newly converted Judaic leader, Yesuf Asay, ostensibly justified the military expedition. This claimed reason for crossing the Red Sea likely involves several additional factors, especially considering that Yusuf seemed to operate against the interests of Aksum and her Roman allies in both political and commercial spheres (Ibid).

Kalêb's move ended with Aksumite victory due to active maritime trade, including armament purchases, which was the secret engine behind her prosperity and superiority in the Mediterranean world.

However, Aksum, which was one of the leading powers in the world, started to decline between the seventh and mid-eighth centuries due to multiple factors that rose domestically and externally (Shack, 1975). Internally, the combination of natural and man-made troubles significantly impacted her fate and exposed it to external pressures. A series of rebellions by the Baja and Agaw peoples, along with the destructive actions of the legendary queen Yodit Gudit since the end of the tenth century, likely from the south, contributed to the decline of the Aksumite Empire (Finneran, 2013; Levine, 2014). In the northeast, the Beja tribes developed semi-independent kingdoms led by their rulers. From the sixteenth century onwards, these tribes received support from the Ottoman Empire, which strengthened their position and governance (Steyn, 2019); Henze, 1994)). Following these internal crises, external pressure first emerged from Persia and subsequently from Mecca in South Arabia.

By the end of the sixth century, the Persian Empire marched to Saban and Hadramawit. Both Saban and Hadramawit had been tributaries of Aksum before being invaded by Persia. So, Aksumite participation in South Arabia came to an end with the Persian invasion, although Persian hegemony was short-lived, as the

Arab Islamic conquest occurred in the following century (languages List et al., 2007; Sanusi & Governor).

After the emergence of the Islamic religion, Arab Muslims expanded their sphere of influence towards the Aksumite tributary beyond the Red Sea. The Arab Muslims gradually extended their influence towards the south and controlled Aksumite territories in Yemen, following in the footsteps of Persia. They further moved to the Red Sea, the island of Dahilak, and Adulis. Gradually, they destroyed Adulis at about 702 AD (Hatke, 2011); Tadesse, 1972)). However, towards the end of the ninth century, Aksum recaptured the coastal trade ports, including Mäṣäwa, Dahlak, and Zäila, in the east, so she was in the position of maintaining active trade involvement until the end of the tenth century ((Jones & Monroe, 1935b). Al-Masudi's account, which written in 935, as it mentioned in work of J. Spencer Trimingham, proves Ethiopian active involvement into Red Sea coastal areas trade. To him, Ethiopia [the then Aksum] concluded a treaty of friendship even with her lost territory beyond to Red Sea, Yemen centered at Zabid at early period of tenth century (Trimingham, 1952). Another document that was written by Ibn Hawqal in 977 confirms Ethiopian ownership of Zayla, Dahlak, and Natsi, with which she engaged in peaceful trade relationships with Yemen.

Between third and end of six century, Aksum exercised her hegemony beyond to Red Sea. Since end of six to sixteenth century, Aksum continued holdings over Dahlak, Mäṣäwa, Suakin, Asäb and Adulis (Negash, 2003). Additionally, Ethiopian hegemonic power was extended east as far as former French Somaliland, now Djibouti, the Gulf of Tadjura, Bab-el-Mandab, and Zäila (Mohhamed, 2008; Vallies Community Limited Djibouti governmental report, 2016). However, the Aksumite Empire's civil war, which began at the end of the eleventh century, reached a pinnacle. It was a reality that the empire was worn out by civil conflict. Red Sea commercial routes were blocked, the political center moved to interior Ethiopia, and competition over the Zäila trading route emerged as a result of fatigue.

Following Aksumite demise, succession problems also intensified in the court, which automatically resulted in a shift of power from the north to the central part of Ethiopia. The Agaw people took power in 1150 AD and moved the political center from Axsum city to Roha (Ibid, 48-50). Zagwê, the heir of Aksumite power, tried to consolidate Ethiopian territory. The north, northeast, and east coasts came to be under the supervision of Zagwê though there was expansion of Islamic influence. Here, according to J. Spencer Trimingham, between the tenth and twelfth centuries, coastal trade centers including Dahlak, Bärbära, Zäila and Mäquadäšo grew. These coastal posts had served as a trade outlet for different linguistic groups such as Afar, Somali, Arabs, and Abyssinians [probably Christian highlanders of Ethiopia] (Berhane-Selassie, 2016, Retrieved from https://ethiopanorama.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Where-or-What-is-Abyssinia-an-investigation; Stenhouse Tra., 2003; Pankhurst, 2003). In the period, though the port Dahilak was inhabited by Muslims, it continued as tributary payer for the Zagwê Dynasty for many years (Trimingham, 1952).

Here, it is better to understand that except for Arabs, all belonged to Ethiopia. There had not been sovereign Somalia, Djibouti, or Eritrea in the period under discussion. The only influential empire in the Horn of Africa was Aksum, now Ethiopia. Due to this reason,

Ethiopia was the dominant actor in the manipulation of trade activities on the coasts.

However, Mordechai Abir points to the gradual erosion of Zagwê's supremacy over the Red Sea coastal ports of Ethiopia. For him, Ethiopian provinces across the coasts of the Red Sea were under continual pressure from their neighbor Arabized Muslims, but they also became a port for political and religious (in the case of Christianity) dissenters from the Zagwê kingdom because they were isolated and outside the purview of Zagwê interest. The Zagwê monarchs lost control of the northern provinces as their influence began to erode about the middle of the thirteenth century (Abir, 2013); Abir, 1980)).

Similarly, Tekeste Negash supports Abir's point regarding the gradual losing of Zagwê to the Red Sea coastal ports. For him, Zäila had been under strict supervision throughout the Zagwê period (1150-1270). His argument focuses on the geographical shifting of the court and Arab blockage of Red Sea trade outlets. He further mentions lack of effective control of Zagwê over the northern coastal provinces (Al-Shokri, 2022); Ayferam eta,l, 2025; Negash, 2003)). However, different sources have testified that Ethiopia had trade ports in the north, northeast, and southeast of the Horn in the period under discussion. Because Zagwê still ruled the present territories of Eritrea as far as the Red Sea, it is impossible to conclude it has been out of a trade outlet in the north. Here, Yaqob Hailǎmaryam proves that coastal territories of the Red Sea were directly or indirectly vassals and tributaries for the Zagwê Dynast (Yakob, 2010).

Ethiopia therefore kept its trading outlets south of the sea, such as Dahlak and other regions that are now in Eritrea, even if it lost its possessions beyond the Red Sea. Moreover, the port of Zagwê remained at Zäila on the Gulf of Aden shore. Naturally, Ethiopia's active participation in commerce across the Red Sea appears to have decreased following Adulis' devastation, but she managed to hang onto her possessions and Red Sea-bordering provinces.

Ethiopian Trade Outlets in the Medieval Period (1270-1855)

The destructive succession problem, which occurred during the dethroning of the Aksumite Dynasty since the seventh century, had exposed Ethiopia to external pressure. It was during that time that Arab Muslims influenced Dahilak and controlled the Aksumite Empire beyond the Red Sea. Even when Persia invaded Aksumite vassals in Yemen, there were civil wars with the Beja tribe. Similarly, when Arabs marched into the Red Sea areas, there was another civil war with the Beja and Damot (probably south of Aksum, inhabited by Agew) (Levine, 2074).

The "Solomonic" dynasty was "restored" to power in 1270 with a violation, which allowed neighboring powers to expand their influence in Ethiopian coastal territories. This marked the beginning of Ethiopia's medieval history, intensifying power struggles among the royal family until King Widim Ra'ad (r. 1299-1314) established a royal prison at Amba Giŝäen, in Wello (Abir, 1980). The main argument is here that when a nation engages in civil war by any means, it exposes itself to pressure from abroad; that is what Ethiopia faced in the Aksumite, Zagwê, and early periods of the "Solomonic" Dynasty.

Following the establishment of the royal prison, peace and order were restored in the court, which created a conducive environment to strengthen Ethiopian

holdings across coastal areas. However, different semi-autonomous Muslim sultanates emerged across the east, southeast, and southwest of Ethiopia. These seem to have occurred due to the failure of the central government, the Christian highland kingdom, to supervise effectively while it was tied to power struggles and civil war. The most influential in the period were Ifat (since 1285) and Adal (since the 1520s), which flourished across the Gulf of Aden, including the ports of Zạ̈ila and Bạ̈rbạ̈ra, one after the other (Trimingham, 1952).

The territorial extent of Adal was clearly stated by Mä̈rid Wä̀ldä̈ Arä̈gay as it extended along the Gulf of Aden as far as the Gulf of Tajura (Aregay, 1971). Different Muslim territories along the Gulf of Aden were part of Adal of Harar (Ibid.). Since the fourteenth century, Zä̈ila had been fiercely competing with the highland kingdom, identified as "Christian," for control of trade routes. However, Zä̈ila was ultimately overrun by these "Christian" forces, which took control of the Muslim areas within Zä̈ila (Al-Batayneh et al., 2019; Pankhurst, 2002); Ibrahim Khadar, 2019)). In the meantime, the pragmatic theocratic leader, King Amdä Ṣiyon, rose to power in 1314. He soon launched a large military campaign against various Muslim sultanates. By around 1332, he had taken control of Ifat, using the blockage of the Zạ̈ila trade route by Haqadin I, the leader of Ifat, as justification for his actions (Marcus, 1994; (Owens & Lawson, 2008). At this point, Amdä̈ Ṣiyon held complete authority over all commercial routes and trade sources in the Ethiopian region. Since this time, Zä̈ila port has been restored to direct control by the Christian kingdom, and Ifat has been reinstated as a tributary (Liven, 1974). The Amdä̈ Ṣiyon's move towards the southeast enabled him to control Fatagar, Dawaro, Bali, Damot (an area to the southwest, between the Nile and Lake Turkana), and Hadya (Gelgelo et al., 2021; Jones & Monroe, 1935b).

The 1332 victory of Amdä̈ Ṣiyon did not bring lasting peace with Ifat and Adal, which later supplanted Ifat. The conflict persisted for nearly two centuries. The Muslim subjects of the eastern sultanates grew weary of the ongoing war; however, their Muslim rulers, despite their grievances, were unable to unite and assemble a formidable army capable of posing a significant threat to the Christian kingdom. On several occasions, they even chose not to confront the ruler of the Christian kingdom (Ababa, 2023); Abir, 1980; Tadesse, 1972). King Amdä̈ Ṣiyon (r. 1314-1344) advanced further north and northwest. This expansion allowed the Christian kingdom to gain control of regions in Mä̧ṣä̈wa by 1325 (Ibid.). After securing the northern coastal provinces adjacent to the Red Sea, he initially appointed governors, including Bilén-Saba. Later, he designated his son, Bahir Sä̈gä̈d, with the title of Maekä̀lä̈ Bahir or Bahir Nä̈gaŝ, thus appointing them as the governors of the Red Sea coastal provinces of Ethiopia (Idris, 2022; Jones & Monroe, 1935a)). The two rival powers continued their struggle primarily to control lucrative trade routes along the coastal areas of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Multiple kings and emirs, representing the central government and the coastal Muslim sultanates, respectively, waged a series of wars against each other. Most of these conflicts concluded with victories for the Christian kingdom until the 1520s. During this period, King Zä̈rä̈ Yaqob (r. 1434-1468) successfully secured Ethiopian sea ports in both the north and southeast (Liven, 1974; Tadesse, 1972).

In the sixteenth century, a new historical development occurred: the emergence of Ottoman Turkey and Portugal as main rival powers over coastal trade routes

of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Since the first quarter of the sixteenth century, Ottoman Turkey has invaded Egypt, North Africa, Syria, and the Arabian coasts (Jones & Monroe, 1935b). Based in Egypt, Turkey invaded the port of Zăila and Bărbăra in the Gulf of Aden in 1517 and 1518, respectively. Furthermore, she moved to the Ethiopian Red Sea coast and occupied Mäṣäwa and Arkiko in 1557 but was repulsed by the Ethiopian royal army (Trimingham, 1952; Yã Ethiopia Abiyot Maekãlawi Zêna Masãraça, 1971; Jones, A. H. M., & Monroe, 1935). Now, Ottoman Turkey clearly involved in supporting of Ethiopian Muslim Sultanates.

By the 1520s, the objective of the Muslim Sultanate of Adal appeared to have shifted from monopolizing the port of Zäila to pursuing a state-building project. Consequently, Adal advanced into the highland regions of the Christian kingdom following its significant victory at the Battle of Ṡimbra Kure in 1529. Under the leadership of Imam Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim Arghazi, Adal extended its reach as far as Märäb Milaŝ along the Red Sea coast until it was ultimately defeated at the Battle of Wàyna Dàgà in 1543 ((Zewde, 2002). At this battle, Ethiopian maritime governor Bahir Nägaŝ Yishaq participated with 30 cavalrymen and 500 infantry against Adal (Castanhoso, 1972; Matiyas Gessese, 2024; (Sanusi & Governor). The Adal extended his empire from Zäila to the Red Sea coasts for a short time, probably for fifteen years (Bete et al., 2023; Taha et al., 2024). After the defeat of Adal, Bahir Nägaŝ (now Eritrea) continued to be part of Ethiopia until 1889. So, it is possible to conclude that both the Adal and Christian kingdoms had secured Ethiopian Sea trade outlets.

By 1567, Turkey had established control over the coastal strip of Sudan and extended its influence in the late sixteenth century to regions such as Mequadesho, Kiswaheli, Kilwa, and Brava. This led to a loosely held influence over some Ethiopian coastal tributaries until British intervention in 1887. Additionally, Turkey supported Muslim sultanates and governors of Bahir Nägaŝ, whose territory included the port of Suakin (Peacock, 2012). Bahir Nägaŝ Yishaq was reported to have revolted twice against King Mênas (r. 1559-1563) and King Särṣä Dingle (r. 1563-1598) after being reinforced by Turkey in Mäṣäwa, but he was ultimately defeated by the Christian kingdom (Kent, 2005). Ethiopia's territories along the Red Sea coasts were maintained on behalf of Bahir Nägaŝ during the medieval period.

The civil war from the fourteenth to the early seventeenth centuries compelled the central government to relocate to Gondar, attempting to regain control over the southern regions, including Zäila, though these efforts were largely ineffective. Nevertheless, there were notable attempts, such as Emperor Iyasu's (r.1682-1706), who brought the port of Mäṣäwa into vassalage status for Ethiopia (Ayele, 2024; Gelgelo et al., 2020); Minister of Education; 2023). On the other hand, Adal's power was highly exhausted due to pressure from the Oromo on one side and the Christian kingdom on the other. Through the passage of time it failed under coarsely influence of Turkey. However, loosely influence of Turkey did not halted Adal from Gulf of Aden maritime areas. The Adal centered in Awusa and Harär (since 1585) had hegemonic power over Gulf of Aden until the nineteenth century. In 1875 Egypt invaded Zäila including Harär for ten years (Pankhurst, 2002; Yimer, 2024).

The early seventeenth century saw a religious conflict within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church due to Jesuit

influence promoting Catholicism. Jesuits successfully converted Ethiopian kings, starting with Zä Dingle (r. 1604-1604) and subsequently Susenyos (r. 1607-1632), who accepted Catholicism in 1612 and later declared it the state religion in 1622 (Cohen, 2009; Shabot, 2005). His declarations incited a civil war that lasted until 1632, when King Fasilädäs ascended to power (1632-1667). Emperor Fasil sought to restore peace by implementing a "closed door" policy, which ceased Ethiopia's interactions with Europe, while also establishing negotiating agreements with Mäṣäwa and Suakin (Isaac, 2025). It tells us the two ports were somehow autonomous. Their semi-independency seems to be realized from both Ethiopia and Ottoman Turkey because of civil war and loosely administrative nature respectively. According to Francisco Alvarize, who visited Mäṣäwa in the sixteenth century, Mäṣäwa's independency was confirmed. Alvariz further visited the port of Arkiko and reported that Arkiko had been under full Ethiopian control (Pankhurst, 1975).

Turkey's loose control over Mäṣäwa since 1557 might not have strictly hindered Ethiopia from using the port. The new arrival of Turks was strange for the area, and their loosely administrative approach might have enabled Ethiopian trade agents to be dominant. Ethiopian traders, even if they paid trade tax for Turkey, continued their dominance until the first half of the 19th century. Here, one of the French missionaries, L. Lefebvre, who was dispatched to Ethiopia in 1840-1841, confirmed the domination of Ethiopian traders over Mäṣäwa (Hotten, 1868; Schaefer, 1990).

After Emperor Fasilädäs's death in 1668, Ethiopia's legitimate claim over Red Sea territories diminished for about sixty-five years due to civil war. However, from 1721, with Emperor Bakafa's rise to power until 1769, Ethiopia regained influence over the Red Sea coastal trade routes (Yakob, 2010).

One point that we should understand here is the origin of the Muslim sultanates, which flourished across coastal areas. The Muslim sultanates, which engaged in a stiff struggle against the Christian kingdom, are of Ethiopian origins. Therefore, it is possible to say that in one way or another, Ethiopia had controlled coastal trade ports.

In the north, the dominant actors in the port of Mäṣäwa as far as Dahlak were the Beja linguistic group, who originated from the Ethiopian Aksumite Empire (Henze, 1994; Henry A., 1865, (Shehim, 1982). In the southeast, the Sultanates of Šäwa, Ifat, and Adal, which dominated the Gulf of Aden, one after the other, are originally from Ethiopia. The Argoba from the Ethio-Semitic linguistic group was primarily responsible for the formation of the Makhzumite and Walasma dynasties. Therefore, all Muslim sultanates were Ethiopian; that is why Ethiopia is entitled to reclaim sea trade outlets.

Ethiopia experienced a period of disunity from the late 18th to the mid-19th century, characterized by the absence of effective central governance. This era saw a decline in Ethiopian influence over coastal ports. Therefore, civil wars once again negatively affected the historical legitimacy of Ethiopian control over these trade areas.

The Ethiopian Sea trade outlets in Modern Era

Ethiopian Trade outlets in nineteenth century

Emperor Tewodros marked the end of the era of princes amidst wars against provincial lords, coinciding with the colonial era and the rise of

European superpowers. The Industrial Revolution significantly affected the Ottoman Empire's international trade dominance, as it struggled to compete with European advancements, resulting in a gradual decline from the late 18th to early 19th century. The gradual decline of Ottoman Turkey resulted in the total collapse of its influence over the coastal territories of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. By the beginning of the 19th century, Turkey was nonexistent in the port of Mäṣäwa and other coastal areas. Following this, Mäṣäwa and Arkiko maintained peaceful coexistence with Ethiopia (Zewde, 2002). Here, it seems the two ports were under the influence of Ethiopia since there was no other influential power that was able to dominate them until 1865. Egypt later invaded Mäṣäwa in 1865. Portugal, once a main rival for the Ottomans, also declined because she was not actively involved in industry. Therefore, the role of the Ottoman Empire and Portugal was replaced by the new desperate powers: Great Britain, France, and Italy in the Horn and Red Sea areas (Yakob, 2010).

Britain and France initially supported the declining Turkish influence in Egypt, countering Russian ambitions along the Red Sea. This alliance strengthened after the Suez Canal opened in 1869, leading to Egypt's rulers acquiring loans for expansion, such as Khedive Ismail's 1875 attempt to invade Ethiopia, financed by selling a 44 percent stake in the Suez Canal Company to Britain for £4,000,000 (Lapiso G. Dilebo, 1996), (Nour-Elsayed, 2020; Wright, 1953). European support, particularly under Khedive Ismael during the 1870s, significantly bolstered Egypt's military incursions into Sudan and Ethiopia. The Egyptian forces captured Mäṣäwa in 1865 and launched three fronts, Eritrea, Zäila, and Tajura, against Ethiopia. However, only the Zäila front succeeded, while the northern front faced defeats by the emperor's troops, and the Afar patriots were overwhelmed at Tajura (Bahru, 2002).

The 1875 and 1876 Egyptian defeats angered Britain, which had a secret plan to control the Blue Nile source for future agricultural plantations in Egypt and Sudan. In the meantime, Sudanese religious leader Muhammed Ahmed (1848-1885) launched a military offensive against Egyptian-Turkish domination. Through the process of the war, some Egyptian troops were encircled between the Sudan and Ethiopian border in Kässäla, Amädib, and Sanhit (Jonas, 2011). General Gordon was soon dispatched by Britain to persuade Ethiopia, but he was unsuccessful because Gordon asked Emperor Yohannis IV to abandon the ports of Mäṣäwa and Kärän for Egypt (Keefer, 1974); Teramed Magazine, 1971). The emperor did not accept it. Later, Sir William Hewott, another diplomat, traveled to Ethiopia to negotiate on behalf of Egypt and Britain. Britain concluded a pact at Adwa in 1884 after being persuaded by her representative, Hewott (Jonas, 2011).

The first and third of the five articles of the Adwa (Hewott) Treaty are crucial to explore here. Article I says:

> From the date of the signing of this Treaty there shall be free transit through Mäṣäwa, to and from Abyssinia, for all goods, including arms, and ammunition, under British protection.

Article III also states as follows:

> His Majesty Nigusä Nägäst engages to facilitate the withdrawal of the troops of His Highness, the Khedive, from Kässäla, Amedib and Sanhit through Ethiopia to Mäṣäwa (G. Delebo, 1996).

Both parties' free transit and British ownership of Mäṣäwa are acknowledged in Article I of the treaty.

The safe evacuation of Egyptian forces from Kässala, Amedib, and Sanhit through Ethiopia to Měäwa is guaranteed by Article III. Ethiopia assisted the besieged Egyptian troops in evacuating over her territory in accordance with the agreement. General Alula Engida, the commander of Yohannis IV, made war against Mahdists at Sahati, which led to the safe evacuation of sandwiched troops. On the contrary, Britain secretly transferred Mäṣäwa to Italy in 1885 (Bahru, 2002; Meskerm Metsihet [Magazine], 1973). Therefore, the Adwa Treaty failed to be implemented because of Britain's political conspiracy. However, the treaty seems to be the first to legalize the loosening of the port of Mäṣäwa because it recognized Britain's protectorate status over Mäṣäwa.

France, another colonial power, hardly affected Ethiopian sea trade outlets. French Somaliland (Djibouti) was part of the Aksumite kingdom from the first to the tenth century (Haile et al.; Haile et al.; Terrefe, 2025). Throughout the 13th to 16th centuries, other Muslim sultanates arose as a result of the Arab Muslim inflow and joined Ifat and Adal. Ottoman Turkey had a minor impact on the region from the 16th century to the 19th century (González-Ruibal, 2020), but still the area was under protectorate of Ethiopia. The French controlled the area since the 19th century, but she recognized that the area had originally belonged to Ethiopia. Even after the French occupied the area, the tribal chiefs of Afar were in the position of paying annual tribute to Emperor Menelik II (Ayele, 2023). France obtained her base at port of Tadjoura and Obock through purchases and treaties from chiefs of Afar and Issa in 1862 (Rawson, 1885). France strengthened her holdings in the area and established Djibouti as the seat of French Somaliland in 1891. Regarding Djibouti, Fantahun Ayele discovered a secret treaty signed in 1896 between *Ras* Mäkonän Wäldämikaêl, general governor of Harär, and Leonce Lagarde, the then governor of French Somaliland. According to the treaty, France was obliged to return back Djibouti for Ethiopia when required (Ayele, 2023). Though Fantahun failed to indicate for how long Ethiopia leased Djibouti to France, he has discovered new historical investigations based on diplomatic archives.

According to Harod G. Marcus, another two treaties were signed on 29 and 30 January 1897 between *Ras* Mäkonän Wäldämikaêl and Leonce Lagarde. By these treaties, France recognized Djibouti as an official outlet of Ethiopia and the importation of Ethiopian armaments with no taxes, respectively (Marcus, 1966). On 20 March 1897 another important treaty was signed between Emperor Menelik II and Lagarde. This treaty ceded a large tract of land from Djibouti to Ethiopia, and in return Ethiopia agreed to help France in securing the White Nile areas against British interests (Marcus, 1966; Sanderson, 1964), retrieved from https://library.au.int/foreign-policy-emperor-menelik-1896-1898-regjoinder-3). Britain was alarmed by Menilik's closeness to France (Francioni, 2002). Soon after, Britain dispatched a delegation led by Rellen Rodd to Ethiopia to negotiate a treaty with the Emperor on May 14, 1897, in which Menelik promised not to work with Sudan and France against Britain (Marcus, 1966, (Sanderson, 1964; Shinn & Ofcansky, 2013)). In response, Britain consented to free and tax-free transit of Ethiopian products through the port of Zäila. Furthermore, *Ras* Mąkonąn and Rodd signed another pact the following day in Harar, whereby Britain gave Ethiopia 13,500 square miles that crossed the Gadabursi, Zaila and Jildessa trade routes to Bärbära (Marcus, 1966).

In defiance of the Hewott Treaty (Adwa), Italy acquired Mäṣäwa in 1885. Additionally, on behalf of the Italian Private Ship Company, she bought the port of Assạb from the Sultan of Danakil in 1869 for six thousand Maria Theresa thalers (Castiglioni). Thus, with Britain's help, Italy consolidated her power both at Mäṣäwa and Assäb. In 1882, Italy nationalized Assäb. The gradual advancement of Italy resulted in the Battle of Adwa in 1869. Of course, the Battle of Adwa did not guarantee Ethiopian historical legitimacy over the Red Sea coastal ports. This remarkable victory laid the foundation for other nations struggling for their freedom across the world but failed to return Ethiopians to Red Sea ports. Therefore, Italy flourished in her colony at Eritrea until 1952, at which point Eritrea federated with Ethiopia following United Nations Resolution No. 390 (Adejumobi, 2006; Tiruneh, 1980), UN General Assembly Resolution 390 A(V) of 2 December 1950).

Ethiopian interests along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden coasts were significantly affected by internal power struggles among the three Ethiopian emperors, Tewodros II (1855–1868), Yohannes IV (1872–1889), and Menelik II (1889–1913). Despite creating modern Ethiopia as a nation, the three kings engaged in a number of plots against one another. In 1868, Yohannis VI participated in the British military assault against Emperor Tewodeos II (Adjemian, 2024). On the other hand, he simultaneously sought British military technicians to help expel Egyptian forces from the Red Sea region, as evidenced by his letters to Queen Victoria (Yakob, 2010; (Zazzaro, 2011). Similarly, during Emperor Yohannis IV's struggle against Egyptian expansion toward the Red Sea coasts, Menelik declared himself king of kings until the issue was resolved by the Treaty of Leçê on March 20, 1878 (Orlowska, 2006). Of course, all of them made efforts to restore Ethiopia's rightful access to ports. Before his reign, King Menelik of Šäwa requested King Umberto of Italy to collaborate on the recapture of Zäila, but he did not receive a response (Yakob, 2010; (Isaac, 2025).

The three internal rivals wrote official letters, one after the other, urging the restoration of Ethiopian historical trade outlets for Queen Victoria of Britain, but they received no response. They also engaged in significant wars against the Anglo-Egyptians and other imperial powers during their respective reigns. Here, it is better to remember the battles of Meqdela, Gundet & Gura, and Adwa, 1868, 1875 & 1876, and 1896, respectively. Emperor Tewodros II and Yohannis IV secured northern territories bordered by the Red Sea. However, Menelik II failed to do so at the battle of Adwa.

Ethiopian Trade outlets in the Twentieth century

The 20th century was a period of intensified colonialism against African nations. However, Ethiopia retained its independence. But it does not mean that Ethiopia was free from the influence of colonial powers. The first challenge came to be realized because of a fake treaty signed between Emperor Menelik II and Italian delegate Antonelli in May 1889 at Wuçalê, in Wạllo province (Masiola & Tomei, 2015; Zollmann, 2021b). The treaty consists of XX articles, with articles III and XVII presenting controversial issues: Italian colonial supremacy over “Märäb Milaŝ” and an Ethiopian protectorate under Italian control, respectively. Article XVII was intentionally corrupted in its Italian version. Regardless, the treaty was abrogated in 1893 and was never ratified by Ethiopia, which ultimately led to the Battle of Adwa (Zollmann, 2021a).

Seven years after the Battle of Adwa, Emperor Menelik II suffered a stroke in 1906. During this time, the three colonial powers—Italy, Britain, and France—that surrounded Ethiopia concluded the "Tripartite Treaty" on December 13, 1906, in London. Italy had established her colony in the north in 1885, as well as in the southeast, known as "Italian Somaliland." Britain occupied Sudan in the west and "British Somaliland" in the southeast. Meanwhile, France occupied Djibouti in the east. The treaty consists of eleven articles, with Article Four containing sub-articles "A," "B," and "C," which guaranteed the colonial interests of Britain (acting as a guardian of Egypt), Italy, and France at the expense of Ethiopian sovereignty (Halldin Norberg, 1977; Záhořík); the Agreement between the United Kingdom, France and Italy, 1906). Here are the article four full versions:

> Art. 4. In the event of the statuesque laid down in Article 1 being disturbed, France, Great Britain, and Italy shall make every effort to preserve the integrity of Ethiopia. In any case, they shall concert together, on the basis of the Agreements enumerated in the above-mentioned Article, in order to safeguard:
>
> A. The interests of Great Britain and Egypt in the Nile Basin, more especially as regards the regulation of the waters of that river and its tributaries (due consideration being paid to local interests), without prejudice to Italian interests mentioned in paragraph b;
>
> B. The interests of Italy in Ethiopia as regards Eritrea and Somaliland (including the Benadir), more especially with reference to the hinterland of her possessions and the territorial connection between them to the west of Addis Ababa;
>
> C. The interests of France in Ethiopia as regards the French Protectorate on the Somali Coast, the hinterland of this Protectorate and the zone necessary for the construction and working of the railway from Djibouti to Addis Ababa (Agreement between the United Kingdom, France and Italy, 1906).

Based on the agreement, Britain claimed rights to occupy the source of the Blue Nile up to Lake Tana. Italy also sought control over the western part of Addis Ababa, intending to connect her territory in "Italian Somaliland" with Eritrea to the north. Similarly, France asserted claims to eastern Ethiopia as a route to her colony of Djibouti. However, their ambitions for partition were thwarted because Emperor Menelik II appointed Lij Eyasu as heir, with Ras Tässäma Nadäw serving as regent, in the same year (Záhořík, 2013).

The second challenge stemmed from the ideological divisions in world politics. After the Second World War, the USSR emerged as a defender of socialism, while the USA took on the role of a defender of capitalism, both becoming the world's superpowers at the expense of Britain and France. These superpowers intervened in the internal affairs of various sovereign nations globally. In this context, Ethiopia faced challenges from the capitalist USA while the socialist regime, the Därg, was in power (Harbeson, 1977).

The third was related to the emergence of the secessionist and ethno nationalist movement as a legacy of colonial powers. They emerged during the period of Emperor Haile Selassie I (1930-1974) and

reached their zenith stage during the Dərg regime (1974-1991). The Jovah (Eritrean Liberation Front), later replaced by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the north, and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in the south, struggled for liberating "their people" from their country, Ethiopia (Jima, 2023). The ethno nationalists were supported by multiple countries, including the USA, because of ideological antagonism with that of Dərg. Finally, they took state power in 1991 (Alamineh et al., 2021).

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ADNM), the Southern Ethiopia Peoples Democratic Movement (SEPDM), and the Oromo People's Democratic Movement (OPDO), which was founded and joined in 1990, formed the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) prior to its two-year rise to power. After gaining control of the state in 1991, the joint force of the EPRDF and EPLF organized the "Ethiopian Transitional Conference" on July 1–5, together with other ethnic-based political groups. The conference had two grand objectives: to legitimize Eritrean independence and the formation of a transitional government. Both succeeded; the transitional government was established, and Eritrea became an independent nation in 1993. When Eritrea became an independent state, the port of Assəb remained an open access for Ethiopia (Alebachew, 2011). Furthermore, Isayas Afeworki, voiceless observer of the conference, promised free utilization of Ethiopia on the ports of Assạb and Mặṣặwa (Gebru, 2006). However, gradually Eritrea monopolized the port of Assəb with no legal ground. The silence of the EPRDF further legalized Eritrea's claim over the port.

Other criticisms of the EPRDF emerged regarding the issue of Assəb following the signing of the "Treaty of Algiers" between President Isayas Afeworqi of Eritrea and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia on June 18, 2000. The Algiers treaty recognized the resolution AHG/Res. 16 (1), adopted by the OAU Summit in Cairo in 1964. This resolution acknowledged the formation of nations along with colonial boundaries (AFRICA, 2019). The attempt to legalize the port of Assəb for Eritrea appears to stem from its history of Italian colonization. This effort is linked to an agreement aimed at resolving the hostilities that occurred between 1998 and 1999 over state boundaries.The United Nations (UN) and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) played active roles in this matter, facilitating an agreement between the two nations, Ethiopia and Eritrea, in Algeria (Immigration and Refugee Board of UN, December 2000).

Article IV, sub article I, of the Algiers Treaty has forced Ethiopia to accept resolution AHG/Res.16 (1) adopted by the OAU Summit in Cairo in 1964. This declaration allows colonized nations to be independent along with their existing colonial boundaries. Here is the article below:

> Article IV
>
> I. Consistent with the provisions of the Framework Agreement and the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities, the parties reaffirm the principle of respect for the borders existing at independence as stated in resolution AHG/Res. 16(1) adopted by the OAU Summit in Cairo in 1964, and, in this regard, that they shall be determined on the basis of pertinent colonial treaties and applicable international law (United

Nations General Assembly Security Council, 2000; (Kahsay, 2007)).

Thus, once again Ethiopia lost her historical legitimacy of Assɑ̈b port.

Conclusion

The territorial limit of Ethiopia during the period of Aksum was extended as far as Southern Yemen to the northeast and Bab-el-Mandeb to the east. Almost the entire coastal territory of the Red Sea and Gulf was under direct control of Aksum. Since the mid-8th century, Arabized Muslims influenced the coastal areas, and gradually Ethiopian Muslim sultanates evolved. Through the passage of time, competition over lucrative trade routes occurred between Ethiopian Muslim sultanates and Christian highlanders. Whatever the competition and civil war there, the Ethiopians had monopolized the coastal Horn trade ports until the 16th century.

By the 16th century, Ottoman Turkey and Portugal engaged in stiff economic and political rivalry over the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Thus, Ottoman Turkey loosely controlled some coastal territories of Ethiopia. However, Ethiopia did not totally lose her seaports because of the loose administrative nature of the Ottomans, which allowed Ethiopia to manipulate her former tributaries. The nominal form of Ottoman Turkey's influence continued into the 19th century, in which European superpowers Britain, France, and Italy came to the Horn with the intention of colonialism.

The arrival of the three powers significantly altered Ethiopia's historical claim over the trade outlets of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Initially, they established their presence by purchasing land from local chiefs and negotiating complex treaties, sometimes with imperial kings, as seen in the Hiwot and Wchale treaties. Finally, they realized forceful invasions and subjugation.

Colonial powers were expelled from the Horn of Africa in the second half of the 20th century, but they left lasting scars on Ethiopia. The country suffered significantly from colonial-oriented regulations and ideologies. Among these regulations is resolution AHG/Res.16 (1), adopted by the OAU in Cairo in 1964, which has contributed to the loss of Assab. Furthermore, colonial-oriented thoughts resulted in multiple ethno-national movements that harmfully affected Ethiopian sea trade outlets. Following evacuation of such powers from the coastal area of the Horn, ethno-nationalists established their own nation-states at the cost of Ethiopia's historical right to access trade outlets to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

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