

Of Sufis, fascists and bananas

Hagiography and the perception of Italian occupants in Ethiopia

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Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1936-41) has been described mainly from the point of view of Italian documentary sources and of the Amharic local sources. The point of view of local Muslim Oromo communities has remained largely ignored. This paper proposed a close reading of the hagiography of Aḥmad b. ‘Umar (d. 1953), especially of the passages narrating the latter’s interactions with Fascist occupants. The aim of this study is first to present a fresh perspective on the years of Italian presence in Ethiopia, namely the one of Muslims. It also aims at proposing the use of Ethiopian hagiographies in Arabic as a source for local history.

Keywords: Ethiopia; fascism; Italian occupation; Arabic; Sufism; hagiography.

1. Introduction

Italian occupation of Ethiopia and the local resistance movements is an episode that has attracted the attention of historians in the last decades.¹ This phenomenon has been particularly relevant, as it has limited the portion of territories occupied, leading to the claim that Ethiopia is the only African country that has never been subject to colonization. These studies have in common two traits that on one side make them of extreme importance for the reconstruction of events, but on the other side provide a partial picture of the modalities of occupation and, most important, of the resistance to it.

The first trait is that almost all these sources are focused on the Amhara opposition and the role played by Ethiopian central state nobility.² From a strictly historical point of view this choice is largely understandable: Italians’ main enemy was Haile Selassie (d. 1975), who fought to repel the invaders

¹ The seminal work for this thread of studies is certainly the one of Angelo Del Boca (1979, 1981). Sbacchi (1985) is an unavoidable update of Del Boca Studies; for the perspective of an Ethiopian scholar see Zewde (2002: 150–78). More recent developments, focused on local resistance in Ethiopia can be found in (Aregawi Berhe (2003), Seyoum (2003), Gnamo (2014), Srivastava 2018); Gnamo significantly skips the period of Italian occupation but provides the context for its advent.

² A partial exception is represented by Omer (1995, 2000).

with all the means he could grasp from his exile in Britain. A large portion of the occupied territories, however, was in Oromo areas, one of the largest ethnic groups of Ethiopia, historically opposed to the Amhara. Also, a large part of them were Muslim, while the Ethiopian Empire identified itself as Christian.

The second trait is more nuanced. Most of the works about Italian occupation of Ethiopia are made by professional historians, who focused mainly on archival sources, both local and European (Italy and Britain). This allowed them to base their studies on objective data, providing the reader with a reconstruction of social and political events. What remains out of the picture are Ethiopian non-archival texts, such as biographical accounts, political pamphlets, and even hagiographies produced by Ethiopians, that provide information about local perception of the occupants and about the strategies of resistance to the Italian presence in their territories.

This article aims at moving a first step in the direction of exploring these non-archival Ethiopian sources, namely a Sufi hagiography written in Arabic shortly after the end of the occupation by an Oromo author. This can hopefully offer a new perspective on Italian occupation, seen from within a specific ethnic and religious group who experienced the events.

Using hagiographic texts as a source for historiography demands some preliminary clarification. As Neale puts it: “The stories of God’s friends are hagiographical and literary narratives that at times accord with the historical record but are not themselves historical accounts. Nevertheless, hagiography can shed light on historical circumstances, especially when combined with careful analysis of other historical evidence that corroborates or suggests the historicity of an anecdote or story” (Neale 2022: 8).³

The attempt made here cannot be considered historiographical in the proper sense of the term, even if we limit the scope to Muslim historiography (Rosenthal 1968: 8–11). The devotional dimension of the biography of a saint, dead or alive, offers partial data, mediated by a specific perspective: describing and praising the deeds of a venerated figure in specific social, political and historical contexts. It is this very perspective that is deemed interesting here, as it presents an internal point of view on the events of Italian occupation of Ethiopia. Such a point of view is not objective, as it is the one of a Muslim, a Sufi, and of a close disciple of the subject of the hagiography, who presents the events to his peers. In this sense this study is not looking for the “authentic” facts.⁴ In a perspective

³ This work is also a fundamental reference for the study of the biographies of medieval and modern Muslim saints who engaged in forms of war or resistance.

⁴ For a discussion of this perspective see Eric Brook (2010: 1–27). See also the considerations in Bang (2003: 8–9).

contiguous to the one established by Steven Kaplan in his study of Ethiopia Christian hagiography (Kaplan 1981), what this study aims at reconstructing is the conceptualization of the Italian occupation and of the resistance to it by an Oromo Sufi who lived during the same period. Unlike Kaplan (who worked extensively on Ethiopian Christian hagiography), we do not have at our disposal several hagiographic sources for Muslim Ethiopia.⁵ So a large scale comparison is, for the time being, impossible. The one presented here is a first case study on the historiographic entanglements of Muslim hagiography in 20th century Ethiopia.

2. The context

Gianpaolo Calchi Novati, in one of his essays on the history of Ethiopia, reflecting on the complex relation of denial that affects both Italy and Ethiopia regarding the colonial past says:

The peoples of the Horn fight one another for survival and regional hegemony first and outsiders only second (Calchi Novati 2008: 42).

This somewhat apodictic statement describes in extreme synthesis the political situation of Ethiopia before Italians decided, in 1935, to expand their colonial domains westward. The main actor of this play was Haile Selassie, who, at the time, was attempting at taking control of the country, primarily by dismissing all the agreements that his predecessors had established with local rulers (Gebissa 2002: 75). Italian occupation of Ethiopia, though limited in time (1936-1942), is still object of historiographical discussion, as new documents emerge from the archives suggesting new perspectives of research.⁶ This is especially true for regions that were not at the center of political and colonial activities, like the former governorate of Galla and Sidama, that included areas of South-Western Ethiopia.

This area, starting from the last quarter of 19th century, became a center of Muslim renaissance, under the patronage of Abba Jifar II (d. 1932).⁷ The latter skillfully obtained from Menelik II (d. 1913) the possibility of keeping the reign and its capital, Jimma, as a semi-autonomous government, in

⁵ For a first recognition see Petrone (2016, 2018).

⁶ Bibliography is enormous and still expanding. It is noteworthy that studies in Italian are now sided by works in English. Paolo Borruso's recent books complete the picture for the military a political side. Calchi Novati's reflections on Italian (lack of) elaboration of its colonialist past in Ethiopia is still fundamental to set the framework for future inquiries on the field. See in addition to the bibliography provided in fn. 1: Borruso and Borruso (1997), Borruso and Pankhurst (2002), Bottoni (2008), Haile Larebo (2005) and Dominioni and Del Boca (2019).

⁷ For a complete account of this phenomenon see Lewis (2001). For the history of South Western Ethiopia see Hassen (1994) and Abir (1965).

exchange of annual taxes. This event represented a milestone in the ethnic and political relations in Ethiopia. Jimma was the center of a vast complex of Oromo state entities that were established starting from the early 19th century, after a period of evolution of traditional institutions (Mohammed Hassen 2015: 138 f.).⁸ Before this process—and even after it—Oromo population have been marginalized from political and social life of Ethiopia.

The reasons behind this situation cannot be analyzed here, as they are not relevant for the topic of this study. What is important here is that, even before the jihād declared by Aḥmad Grañ (d. 1543),⁹ pastoralist Oromo expanded the areas under their control to Eastern and South Western Ethiopia and they have been, since then, considered a threat by the Christian kingdom.¹⁰ Separation, diversity and even hostility have been deepened by the progressive adhesion to Islam of the Oromo populations, that was often only formal and knew a revival in late 18th century (Mohammed Hassen 1990; Trimmingham 1952: 187–208). State building and re-islamization went hand in hand,¹¹ creating an environment that attracted clerics from other regions, like Wällo where Muslim Oromo settled.¹²

Italian occupation of this area arrived in a moment when the tension between local power in Jimma and central authorities in Addis Ababa had resurfaced and reached a new peak, as Haile Selassie seized the power from Abba Jifar II's grand-son, Abba Jobir Abba Dula (d. 1988, in Mecca), who was crowned around 1930 (Henze 2000, 208). The conflict was not, or not essentially, religious. Haile Selassie's politics were aimed at reconstituting the unity of reign, regardless of the Oromo of Jimma being Muslim or Christian.¹³ Loss of independence was deeply felt in Jimma (Gebissa 2002: 75–76)¹⁴ and Italians easily took advantage of this situation. The area was barely involved in the battles leading to the occupation and was soon established as capital governorate of Galla-Sidama. The marginality of this area in the conflict is reflected in the scarcity of studies on Jimma during the occupation, as, apparently, no patriotic movement or active resistance was based there. On the other hand, the city (at the time revolving around the palace of Abba Jifar II in the Jiren suburb) was object of an attentive

⁸ The traditional Oromo political and social organization (called *gadaa*) is based on ages classes. See Tesema Ta'a (2016) and Gnamo (2014: 34–51).

⁹ On this figure and his *jihād* see Muth (2003, 2014).

¹⁰ For a re-conceptualization of this opposition see Zahorik (2014).

¹¹ Abir (1968) reconstructed the emergence of the principalities of South-Western Ethiopia. See also Lewis (2001).

¹² The most complete account of the diffusion of Islam in Wällo, including the network building activities of local *shaykhs*, can be found in Ahmed (2001). See also Abbink (2007).

¹³ For a detailed discussion of Haile Selassie's ascent to power see Zewde (2002: 133–41).

¹⁴ This article also expresses contemporary concern of the Oromo for their own independence.

urban planning, creating what is still called the “Piccola Roma,” a series of buildings (town hall, cinema, café) that were aimed at making Jimma an example of Italian efforts in developing its colonies (Rifkind 2015: 155-156; Trimingham 1952: 205; González-Ruibal 2010).

From the point of view of institutions, Jimma was a laboratory for the implementation of new solutions for a modern and integrated Islam. In October 1937 Italians established an Islamic school to train local *qādis*. The course lasted three years and employed local teachers, which made it very welcomed by Jimma population (*Annali dell’Africa italiana* 1938-1943, III: 689). The most sensitive point was the administration of justice. For minor cases the parts could refer to traditional authorities, following established customs. For mixed cases (Muslim vs non-Muslim) Italians applied the model used in Somalia, where the court was involved only under request of one of the parts. This model worked for civil justice, but not for the criminal one, as local judges had no knowledge of Italian law. All those cases were referred to the “Residente,” the supreme Italian authority of the area (*Annali dell’Africa italiana* 1938-1943, III: 750-753).

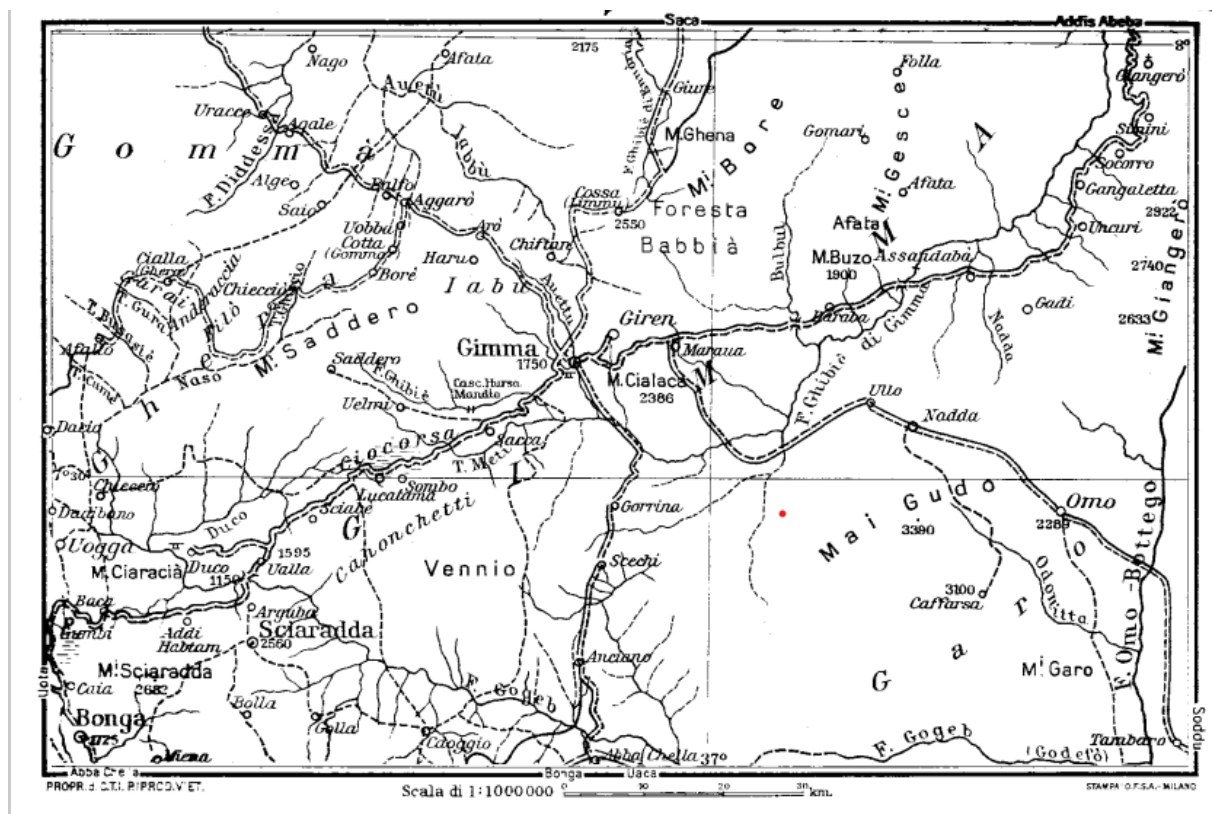


Figure 1. Map of Jimma area (C.T.I. 1938: 529).

This generosity was not bestowed for free. Abba Jobir was first imprisoned in Addis Ababa. Only later he submitted to Graziani and contributed to the conquest of Jimma (Sbacchi 1985: 133). His loyalty gained him a certain credit among fascists, and he was brought to Italy in 1938 as an official representative of Ethiopia and, most important, as a Muslim subject of the empire.¹⁵ The aim of this trip was not only to show the progress of Fascist society as a perspective for the Ethiopian one. Abba Jobir was invited to actively participate to the propaganda, being portrayed with Mussolini and delivering a speech at Radio Bari.¹⁶ The discourse in Arabic was broadcast to most Muslim countries of the Mediterranean and dealt with a presentation of the history of Islam in Ethiopia,¹⁷ mentioning the first *Hiġra* to Abyssinia and the wars of Aḥmad Grañ (d. 1543).

More interesting is the status quo of Islam in the Horn of Africa he draws in his discourse. He estimates 3,5 to 4 million Muslims in the area, and he lists the regions they are living in, from Somalia to Beni-Shangul. Abba Jobir also gives account of the doctrinal tendencies of local communities (affiliation to *Šāfi'i* juridical school and to *Aš'arī* theology), also acknowledging the presence of diverse Sufi orders: Qādiriyya, Tiġāniyya, Sammāniyya and Šādiliyya (Abbā Ġūbir 1938: 6). One can't help but consider this passage as at least inspired by, if not directly translated from, Italian sources, maybe colonial reports.

The same can be said for the rest of the text, where Abba Jobir describes how Italian administration (defined as *ḥukūmatunā*, “our government”) contributed to Muslim life in Ethiopia with the construction of mosques and schools:

After Italian conquest—praise be to God—Muslims began to breathe the fresh air of freedom in every aspect of their lives. The number of mosques is increasing astonishingly every day, built according to innovative and modern architecture style, while few others are constructed as huts. Islamic schools roar as students repeat altogether the essential notions of sciences, arts

¹⁵ Abba Jobir was not the only Muslim leader employed by Fascists in the conquest of Ethiopia. See Sbacchi (1985: 163) and Henze (2000: 225).

¹⁶ For the history of this broadcasting service prior to its development as a basis for the resistance forces, see Marzano (2015, 2020).

¹⁷ I would take the occasion to thank Prof. Arturo Marzano for sharing with me the transcriptions published in Abbā Ġūbir (1938: 5-7). The whole episode is discussed in Marzano (2015: 97-106). Some mistakes in the transcription of names (e.g. *Ḍayla'* instead of *Zayla'*) may imply that the publication was based on a handwritten source or on the recording, where some mispronunciations could have occurred. For the influence of this speech on Muslim intellectuals see Lauzière (2016: 16f.).

and crafts, receiving water, food and clothes (Abbā Ğūbir 1938: 7).

Abba Jobir underlined the fact that Italians were promoting the teaching of Arabic, that, in his view, could encompass the divisions among Muslims of Ethiopia, who speak “more than 200 languages.”¹⁸ This even excessively positive evaluation is certainly dictated by the personal situation of Abba Jobir, whose life was subject to the will of the fascist occupants. It is curious to note that he listed what Italians did for the area of Harar, not for his own territory (Abbā Ğūbir 1938: 7). He was probably referring to the most famous Muslim city of Ethiopia for propagandistic reasons, despite the fact that he could claim no power outside Jimma (and even there his role of Sultan was nothing more than nominal). This attitude responds to the call for unity Italians were issuing to all Muslims, in and outside Ethiopia, under the patronage of Mussolini (Abbā Ğūbir 1938: 7; see also Wright 2005 and Salvatore 1991).

This, at least in Ethiopia, was challenged by linguistic and ethnic divisions, that Italians tried to use at their own advantage. Such an enthusiastic adhesion of Jimma Oromo (or at least of some of their leaders) to Fascist occupation was only partially due to the politics in favor of Islam. The simple fact of restoring a (formally) autonomous government, independent from the monarchy of Haile Selassie, was enough to be thankful. Italians also recognized the role of local customs and tribunals, which gave local the impression of a newfound freedom.¹⁹ Collaboration, however, was not without hindrances.

3. The Tiğāniyya of Jimma and al-Faqīh Aḥmad b. ‘Umar (d. 1953)

Sufism represented an essential factor for the diffusion of Islam among Oromo populations in the 19th and 20th centuries. This was combined with the constant, often under the radar, opposition to the rising political power of Menelik II and, successively, of Haile Selassie.

Jimma was home for the Sammāniyya, but the Tiğāniyya gained a prominent role in the city since the formal recognition received by Abba Jifar II.²⁰ The reconstruction of the process of affirmation of the Tiğāniyya in South Western Ethiopia is still debated, as it was present already in late 19th century, but knew a wide diffusion after the advent of al-Faqīh Aḥmad b. ‘Umar al-Burnawī (b. 1892/d. 1953),

¹⁸ The number is clearly overestimated and hinders the hypothesis of a colonial source for the data presented by Abba Jobir.

¹⁹ For the specific politics of Italians towards Oromo see Alvisini (2000).

²⁰ For a presentation of Tiğāniyya in Ethiopia see Ishihara (2017) and Petrone (2016). For the relation between Abba Jifar II and Tiğāniyya see Trimmingham (1952: 246). Trimmingham affirms that it was Abba Dula, father of Abba Jobir, the first member of the reigning family, whilst Cerulli (1928-1933, I: 129) stated that lands for the *ḥaḍras* of the Tiğāniyya were bestowed by Abba Jifar II himself, only in the area of the city of Jimma.

known simply as Alfaki.²¹ As his *nisba* tells, this figure was from Bornu, an area falling mainly in Northern Nigeria, but including also Southern regions of Chad and Niger. The accounts of his life²² narrate his education in Central Africa and then his moving to Mecca (early 20th century). It is not clear whether he was already initiated to the Tiḡāniyya in Ḥiḡāz or, as Ishihara (1997) reports, when he later entered Ethiopia, after a stay in Khartoum. His coming to Ethiopia, according to hagiographic sources, was due to a series of dreams in which the Prophet himself urged him to go to Abyssinia to enter the function of Supreme Pole for the country (Ḥāḡḡ ‘Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 22v).²³ Despite this investiture, his position went not unchallenged, as local figures like Shekota Tijje had already established their spiritual authority on the territory (Ḥāḡḡ ‘Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 25r).

Despite this opposition, the presence of the Tiḡāniyya in the region became predominant, with the foundations of diverse centers, and the establishing of a significant local scholarly tradition (Petrone 2016). The *ḥaḍras*²⁴ of Jimma, Aggaro, and Dedo were part of a network that included also other brotherhoods, beyond the boundaries of spiritual affiliation to a specific master. The strict Tiḡānī norms on this latter point, compelling disciples to adhere only to their *ṭariqa*, favored a certain exclusivity that, however, involved only those formally attached to it. As for the rest of the population, both Muslim and non-Muslim, saintly figures were venerated and sought after for help (medical, magical and material) and guidance (Ḥāḡḡ ‘Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 27v).²⁵

Information about this process of diffusion and establishing of the Tiḡāniyya in Western Ethiopia has been collected by Minako Ishihara in a series of ethnographic studies. In her 2010 study on the topic (Ḥāḡḡ ‘Alī Abbā Ganda, 83) she mentions the *Bāb al-wuṣūl*, an unpublished biography of Aḥmad b. ‘Umar that, in the manuscript she photocopied from Šayḥ Aḥmad Zayn, was dated 1943. It is not clear how much the Japanese scholar made use of this text in her later works on the Ethiopian Tiḡāniyya, as she, coherently with her anthropological approach, favors oral sources over written ones, whose

²¹ For previous studies about his biography see Ishihara (1997: 2017). It is noteworthy that Ishihara highlights a presence of the Tiḡāniyya before the coming of Aḥmad b. ‘Umar, presumably in the early 1930’s.

²² The following data are taken from the *Bāb al-wuṣūl*, on which see below and from the *Nuzhat al-absār* and the *Ġilā’ al-fikr*, both by Maḥmūd b. Sulaymān Abba Mecha (d. 1975). On him see O’Fahey and Ahmed (2003: 48–53), Muḥammad Walī b. al-Ḥāḡḡ Aḥmad b. ‘Umar (2004: 102).

²³ Here dated 1934.

²⁴ A term often used instead of the more common *ḥaḍra* to indicate places where Ethiopia Sufis gather for their ceremonies and for teaching.

²⁵ Šayḥ Adam of Gomma, a prominent Qādirī Sufi, is reported to have asked Aḥmad b. ‘Umar’s help for some political matters. Tiḡānī texts have been found also outside collections of manuscripts preserved by Tiḡānī Sufis, for instance in the *ḥaḍra* of Warukko, few kilometers from the one of Abba Gulli, where they follow the Sammānī path.

information often differs from that reported in the texts. This is not the only biography of Alfaki. At least two other texts, the *Ġilā' al-fikr*²⁶ and the *Nuzhat al-abṣār*,²⁷ both by Maḥmūd b. Sulaymān Abba Mecha (d. 1975) offer details on the spiritual qualities of the Ethiopian Tiġḡānī master. The *Bāb al-wuṣūl*, however, is the only one presenting some exquisitely biographical data, that go beyond the exaltation of piety and spiritual knowledge.

The complete title of this work, as reported in the manuscript AGL00001²⁸ is *Bāb al-wuṣūl ilā nāyl ḡamī' al-maqāṣid wa al-ma'mūl fī tarġamat al-ġawṭ Abī Luġāb 'ayn al-manā wa al-su'l* (The door bringing to the obtainment of all goals and the contemplation of the life of the Succor Abū Luġāb, source of desire and hope), authored by Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abba Ganda (d. 1974?; Petrone 2017). He was a close disciple of Aḥmad b. 'Umar, as it is clear from the text itself, that was written when the master was still alive.²⁹

The text is preserved, as far as we know, in a couple of manuscripts and it is still unpublished. The present study is based on a single manuscript³⁰ of the *Bāb al-wuṣūl* digitized during the fieldwork for the Islam in the Horn of Africa project in February 2015, in the *zāwiya* of Abba Gulli, a Tiġḡānī master whose grave is located few kilometers outside Aggaro, in the Jimma district.³¹ The text is preceded by a short commentary of *al-Wasā'il al-mutaqabbala*, a poem in praise of the Prophet by al-Fazāzī (d. 1230) quite widespread in West Africa, and followed by a magic square about Islamic calendar and pious invocations (Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abbā Ganda, ff. 3r-7v).³² The date reported at the end of the main text is 1383/1962-3 (Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 67v),³³ only ten years after the death of Aḥmad b. 'Umar and when

²⁶ Published in Cairo by Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, n.d.

²⁷ I obtained a copy of the manuscript of this text from the disciples of Shaykh Abdusalam in Addis Abba, whom I thank for their kind help.

²⁸ This manuscript was digitized in the framework of the Islam in the Horn of Africa ERC project. For more information see www.islhornfr.eu (last checked 20/11/2021).

²⁹ Ishihara proposes 1943 as the date of composition (Ishihara 2010: 83). A marginal note in AGL00001, f. 8r, reports 1362/1943 as the date for the beginning of the composition, and 1363/1944 as the date for its end. The note also informs that, after the completion of the work, Abba Ganda submitted it to Aḥmad b. 'Umar, who, after nine months, gave his permission to circulate it. This information, although part of a marginal note, reassures the reader (and the scholar) that the image presented in the *Bāb al-wuṣūl* corresponds to the one Aḥmad b. 'Umar wanted to give of himself.

³⁰ The other manuscript, JTMK00073, ff. 37v-62r is a later copy, written in blue ink with a ballpoint pen, of the *Bāb al-wuṣūl* dependant on the Abba Gulli one. In this article I will refer only to the Abba Gulli copy.

³¹ The other manuscript is mentioned by Ishihara (2010: 83) as being in the hands of the late Shaykh Aḥmad Zayn in the 1990's. I have met several times between 2014 and 2017 the direct successor of Aḥmad Zayn, who seems not to possess a copy of this text.

³² The square is in fact a way to calculate the first day of the month according to Islamic way of computing the calendar. This kind of text is quite diffused in Ethiopia.

³³ The manuscript reports the correspondent date according to the Julian calendar used in Ethiopia, 1955.

Abba Ganda was still alive. This can be considered the date of the copy of this specific witness of the text.



Figure 2. Frontispiece of the *Bāb al-wuṣūl* (AGL0001, f. 8r). The dates are reported in the lower part of the title-triangle and in the bottom left corner, in ballpoint ink (photo by Michele Petrone and Sara Fani, *Islam in the Horn of Africa Project*).

The *Bāb al-wuṣūl*, written in good Arabic,³⁴ is organized according to the scheme of Islamic hagiographies: a biographical sketch (including the ones of his kin), his acts of piety and miracles.³⁵ Thomas Heffernan, in his work on sacred biography in Medieval Christian literature, considers biography “exquisitely sensitive to the demands of verisimilitude” (Heffernan 1992: 43). The *Bāb al-wuṣūl* is not an exception, as it presents a series of events that were witnessed by Abba Ganda or reported directly by Aḥmad b. ‘Umar himself. The demand for adherence to facts, in this specific context, however, should be weighed against the necessity for collecting memorable tracts and acts of a saintly figure. Only the first section about his life follows a roughly chronological succession, interrupted by facts about the lives of Aḥmad’s parents and brothers. As for the rest, the *Bāb al-wuṣūl* is a series of episodes that span from pure hagiography to what we can consider biography: in some narrations the miraculous aspect of Alfaki’s deeds is predominant, while in others is just a lens through which we can see how he acted in specific circumstances. Abba Ganda invites the reader to consider the wondrous nature of some episodes, explaining how they are a miracle or the result of Alfaki’s piety. If in most cases this is just a rhetoric device, in those involving Italian occupants the intervention of supernatural forces or exceptional moral qualities.

Seen from this point of view, the *Bāb al-wuṣūl* is but a typical form of Islamic hagiography and biographical literature,³⁶ following the models of medieval texts. Dates and names are seldom provided, and the context is often omitted, possibly because most of the readers were also witnesses of the events. Abba Ganda reports that Aḥmad b. ‘Umar himself read and approved the work in 1943 (Ḥāḡḡ ‘Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 27v).³⁷

Abba Ganda does not provide details about his sources, which should have been mostly, if not totally, oral. The title page reports the expression *ḡama‘ahu* “have been collected,” alluding to the

³⁴ This paper is not the right place to discuss in detail the readership of texts in Arabic in a context like South Western Ethiopia where, despite the efforts of Fascist occupants, Arabic was never a vehicular language. John Hunwick (Hunwick and Davidson 2006: 53–62) discussed the comparison between the functions of Arabic and Latin respectively in West Africa and Medieval Christendom. In Ethiopia Arabic was certainly the language of Muslim learned men and was also used for private written communication between them. Devotional poetry is still recited also in Arabic, but the understanding of the texts is very limited, if any. It is possible that the work of Abba Ganda, as others of the same genre (Petroni 2018) were written for a public limited to a few members of the intellectual and spiritual Muslim elite. The fact that only two copies of the *Bāb* survive seems to confirm this hypothesis.

³⁵ The organization of the text is made clear at f. 12v, where Abba Ganda confirms the date of composition (1362) and the date in which he met Aḥmad b. ‘Umar and had his approval (1363).

³⁶ For a general introduction to Islamic hagiography see Renard (2009).

³⁷ Here Abba Ganda also reports that Alfaki prevented him from reporting certain episodes of his life that involved his relations with (Ethiopian?) politicians.

process of composition of the text (Ḥāḡḡ ‘Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 8r). The informants, at the moment of the publication of the text, were from the same environment of the author and of Aḥmad b. ‘Umar and could (at least partially) coincide with the readers of the *Bāb al-wuṣūl*.

In this perspective the process of verification of the text by Alfaki can imply the author’s will to exclude from his work anything that was not true. This, however, does not imply full historical reliability of the text, as Aḥmad b. ‘Umar’s approval sanctions the adherence of the *Bāb al-wuṣūl* to the image the Sufi master wanted to give of himself to his disciples and the plausibility of what is narrated from a hagiographical point of view. Nonetheless, the combination of these two forms of control on the text (by readers/informants and by the biographed subject) provides us with a representation of the events that is fully internal to the social group of the biographed figure, although mediated by the literary filter of sacred biography. Aḥmad b. ‘Umar, Abba Ganda and the readers belonged to the same community who experienced Italian occupation. Abba Ganda is narrating the episodes of Alfaki’s life to a public that already knows them, as he frequently tells that he’s omitting some details because the story is already well-known, and he does not want to spend too many words for it.

This mechanism of self-representation should be taken into account when analyzing historical events like Italian occupation. Abba Ganda presents them in a way that is acceptable (or accepted) by the community of the Tiḡānīs of Western Ethiopia. The centrality of the figure of Aḥmad b. ‘Umar is not incidental. Filtered through the lens of Abba Ganda’s devotion towards his master, the *Bāb al-wuṣūl* offers an unusual point of view on colonial power: that of the subject that reacts to the occupation in the attempt to preserve the social and religious integrity of his community.

4. Fascists, Sufis and bananas

The *Bāb al-wuṣūl* presents most of the events involving Alfaki and the occupants as examples of the former’s piety and attitude towards the latter. It is interesting that the first section of the text describes how Aḥmad b. ‘Umar dealt with occupants is not about Italians, but about an unnamed Ethiopian Christian ruler (possibly identifiable with Haile Selassie). This is probably a passage censored by Aḥmad b. ‘Umar during his review of the text with Alfaki (Ḥāḡḡ ‘Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 27v). The text reads *...al-ḥākīm al-naṣrānī wa sammāhu lī ya’ nī al-ḥabašī*, “...the Christian ruler, [Alfaki] told me his name, indicating that he was the Abyssinian [ruler]” (Ḥāḡḡ ‘Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 29v). It is noteworthy that Abba Ganda is not calling him king, but simply ruler, an indirect and discreet way to say that he was not recognizing

his power. The *ḥākim* mentioned in the text, considering the dates,³⁸ could be identified with Haile Selassie himself, who asked for Alfaki's help for some issues³⁹ and had him brought to Addis Ababa. Alfaki reluctantly went to the capital and, as a reward for his success the emperor gave him a fief in Western Ethiopia (where he built his house) and a ring (*ḥatm*; Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 21v).⁴⁰

This cautious availability is typical of Sufis, who often refuse to comply to the requests of secular power and even to accept their money, as it could be not completely licit.⁴¹ It seems that this preoccupation was at the core of Alfaki's attitude towards the Italians.

We are informed by Abba Ganda that the *ṣayḥ* prevented his followers from being involved in any way with Fascists' activities, putting himself as the main mediator between the population and the rulers. He built, next to his household, a hut reserved to the Italians where he fed them and let them relax (Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 29v). His mediation worked in diverse directions. He paid directly those (Muslim or not) whom were trying to get money from the Italians. He also paid a bribe of 80.000 *riyāl* to the Italians, possibly to prevent violence on the population.⁴² Abba Ganda says that "he put himself at the service of the Italian rulers (*mulūk*), both personally and with his wealth (*māl*) for the whole period of their permanence in Abyssinia" (Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 29v) and that he considered his possession as a booty in the hands of Italians, so he was unwilling to ask something in exchange for his prodigality. His aim, Alfaki declared, was to help the government (*'awn al-ḥukūma*) (Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 30r). Abba Ganda invited the reader to interpret this as a sign Aḥmad b. 'Umar's generosity, according to the custom (*sunna*) of the Prophet.⁴³ He did not allow any Ethiopian, Muslim or not, to take a single *fals* (coin) from the rulers to protect them from their influence and to prevent them from participating in any way to their rule. He even went so far as to banish all those among his servants who had had anything to do with the Italians or took money from them (Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 30v).

³⁸ The episode is dated 1367/1948 (Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 21v).

³⁹ It is not clear which kind of issues. *Ṣayḥ* Abdusalam, present *ḥalīfa* of the Tiḡāniyya in Ethiopia, told me in a meeting in April 2017 that Aḥmad b. 'Umar solved some health problems of a member of the royal family, possibly a consequence of a *ḡinn* possession. The text reads *yūqirruhu 'alā mulkihi alladī fi yadihi fi zaman Īṭāliyā*, that could be read as Haile Selassie offering Alfaki the possibility to rule over Jimma, taking the place of Abba Jobir, that at the time was exiled in Saudi Arabia (Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 21v).

⁴⁰ It is not clear if this ring was a seal that he used for his letters and documents. The episode has been confirmed to me in a conversation with *ṣayḥ* Abusalam in Addis Ababa, April 2017.

⁴¹ See the exemplar case of al-Suyūṭī in Mauder (2017).

⁴² He did the same with the Abyssinian ruler, paying "only" 7000 *riyāl* (Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 29v).

⁴³ The section to which these passages belong is called *fi siratihi al-sunniyya*, "about his life according to the *sunna* [of the Prophet Muḥammad]" (Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 27v). It is not clear, however, to which episode of Muḥammad's life he is referring to.

The text, a few lines before, discusses the accusation, moved to Alfaki by unnamed enemies, of having accepted illicit money from an unbelieving ruler on his first stay in Abyssinia. Of course, Abba Ganda rejects these accusations and emphasizes his master's absolute adherence to Islamic Law. Presenting the two episodes one after another, however, can be read as an indication that they should be read together and, thus, that the preoccupation of Aḥmad b. 'Umar was more religious than political, also towards Italians.

The hagiographic filter here is probably at work, as it is clear that Abba Ganda is suggesting a reading of these episodes that is not immediate also for the devotee. Seclusion and separation from secular world and power are part of Sufi manners. Proposing the parallel between misbelievers and Italians is then more than a suggestion of how Abba Ganda and his master considered the Fascists.

Pleasing the Italians (in order to protect the population, Muslim and non-Muslim) and, at the same time, not taking advantage of their presence in any way, are attitudes of a Sufi master who wants to keep himself pure by isolating himself from the world. On the other hand, Alfaki is fulfilling his duty to guide the community, first of all protecting it from sin and from breaking the Law. This is the case regardless of whether the occupant is foreign or local, unbeliever, Christian or Muslim.

Avoidance of the enemy was integrated with some activities that involved some forms of interaction between Alfaki, his disciples and the occupants. The Sufi master dedicated one of his fields to the cultivation of bananas for the Italians, employing his servants and others. This activity was so successful that he was able to gift an entire bunch of bananas to all the Italians leaving his house and even to send a cargo by air to Italy (Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 30v), creating an economy alternative to the one of the occupants, and using them to expand the market for his bananas.⁴⁴ Abba Ganda goes so far as to venture towards an interpretation of Alfaki's strategy. "He behaved with the (*mulūk*) Italian kings hoping to exhaust them of their own rule" by preventing any kind of relationship between the population and the occupants. He did not accept "even an iron coin (*fals ḥadīd*)" from them, with the only exception of the cases when Italians were acting officially and compelled him to take their money (Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 44v). Aḥmad b. 'Umar, however, did not accept to "wear the clothes" gifted by the colonial employees and to formally submit himself to the Fascists.

This case shares some similarities with the one of Amadu Bamba (d. 1927) who aimed at creating a safe space for Muslims by involving French occupants in the cultivation of cash crop peanuts

⁴⁴ Analysis of available archival sources has not shown any explicit presence of bananas from Alfaki's fields. Nonetheless, banana was a lucrative crop, to the point that in 1935 it was founded the *Regia Azienda Monopolio Banane (RAMB)* ("Royal Monopoly of Bananas"). For a complete reconstruction of this story see Salvi (2017).

(Robinson 1994). The main difference stands in the extension of the cultivated fields, that in Ethiopia seems not to have surpassed the land owned by Alfaki, while in Senegal involved several owners. As a consequence, the initiative of Amadu Bamba was more structured and endured since the end to 20th century. In Ethiopia, however, the production of bananas always remained limited to local markets. Despite this quantitative difference, both Alfaki and Bamba aimed at overcoming the dichotomy occupation/resistance by involving the colonizers in the cash crop business.⁴⁵

Italian occupants used Alfaki's influence in diverse occasions. They requested him to affix his seal on some documents, *de facto* attributing him a political function that he tried to dodge (Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abbā Ganda, ff. 44v-45r).⁴⁶ The Italians also took Alfaki with them on their travels to the most unfamiliar and dangerous areas, perhaps those on the border with Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, which were not far from his home area and which he had crossed when he came to Ethiopia a few years earlier. Having him with them meant they had not only a guide, but an authority that would protect them from bandits and possible rebellions by local leaders. This function of local chief, never made official, is flanked by another much more complex one, that is the mediation between Italian and English forces in border disputes (Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 45r). The region of Asosa was precisely the one from which British attacks could come and reach Addis Ababa through Gembi (Rovighi 2021, I: 359). It is not strange to imagine Alfaki as an authoritative mediator between the two sides in his homeland, assuming the role of local leader, although without any formal recognition. This continued also after the end of the Italian occupation, as Aḥmad b. 'Umar is said to have acted as an escort for the British, continuing to exercise his informal authority (Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 52v).⁴⁷

His favorable attitude towards the Italians, and possibly his successful mediations, gained him some friends among the occupants. Abba Ganda names the local *kūmīsāryā* (transliteration of the Italian "commissario") of Asosa⁴⁸, in the Bela Shangul region, as a person deeply attached to Alfaki, to the point that the latter gifted him his own *sibḥa* (prayer beads), possibly a compensation for a favor or, more probably, a material recognition of a spiritual bond. Abba Ganda does not mention the

⁴⁵ I would like thank Andrea Brigaglia (University of Naples "L'Orientale") for suggesting this parallel.

⁴⁶ It is curious to note that Italians asked him to affix two seals, one of gold and one of silver. Possibly they asked to affix his own seal and the one donated by Haile Selassie. The dating of the donation of the seal by Haile Selassie is still uncertain. There is also the possibility that the seal was donated by Haile Selassie after the end of Italian occupation, possibly recognizing Alfaki's resistance.

⁴⁷ The passage is not clear and, with no chronological indications, it could be referred also to Italians.

⁴⁸ This person could be identified with Colonel Iacobuzzi, who was commander of military units in the Bela Shangul region (Sbacchi 1985: 196).

circumstances of this gift. If it partially contradicts the practice of avoiding contacts with the Italians (as does the Alfaki's joining the Italians in their encounters with the British), it falls into the boundaries of not accepting anything from the occupants. Abba Ganda underlines the generosity of his master and his ability to establish good relations with the Fascists without compromising his independence. In another passage (Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 56r) the *Bāb al-wuṣūl* informs us that even mentioning Alfaki's name at a military checkpoint could guarantee an immediate and safe passage.

What above would lead one to think that the Italians held the figure of Aḥmad b. 'Umar in high esteem and that they respected his role and functions. Or, at least, that they used him to their advantage in the operations of extension and consolidation of colonial rule. Abba Ganda, however, reports a series of episodes, seen by him as miraculous, that show how the master of Asosa was more feared than appreciated.

The *Bāb al-wuṣūl* reports at least three episodes in which Alfaki's life was put in danger and was prodigiously saved. The most curious episode concerns what seems to be a death sentence.⁴⁹ Aḥmad b. 'Umar was conducted in the presence of an Italian officer to have his life sentence carried out. But the latter, declaring himself not competent, sent him to one of his colleagues, who in a Kafkaesque way, directed him to another officer. The scene repeated itself once more, until Aḥmad b. 'Umar was set free (Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 30r.; f. 52v). Abba Ganda presents this episode as a prodigious protection granted by Allah to the saint. Only a divine intervention could have made a man condemned to death slip away from the clutches of his jailers. But the way in which the facts are narrated in the *Bāb al-wuṣūl* are too sketchy to be considered completely reliable, as the cancellation of a death sentence should have involved the "Residente" in Jimma. A mischievous eye might see here at work only the inefficiency of Italian bureaucracy. Perhaps, a more historically accurate interpretation could see here Italian resistance to take responsibility for Alfaki's death sentence as a reflection of his importance in the Jimma region. No one would have ascribed to himself an act that, in all likelihood, would have led to an impoverishment of relations with the local population, if not outright revolt. Unfortunately, the text provides no further details about this episode, either regarding the reasons for the sentence or its date. Considering the generally positive relations between Alfaki and the Italians, it is difficult to place this event at the beginning of the Fascist occupation, when the relation between the *shaykh* and the Italian had to be still established.

⁴⁹ Amadu Bamba's hagiographies represent him as surviving bullets and domesticating a man-eating lion in his cell (Robinson 1994: 161).

The harassment of Aḥmad b. ‘Umar was not limited, according to the *Bāb al-wuṣūl*, to this single, grotesque episode. Alfaki’s house was frequently searched. Abba Ganda suggests that these searches were instigated by the enemies of Aḥmad b. ‘Umar, who spread false rumors about him. His reaction was always one of prodigality and hospitality, so much so that the Italians could only leave his house without having concluded anything. And, often, even humiliated by such generosity (Ḥāḡḡ ‘Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 30r).

Aḥmad b. ‘Umar was certainly aware that his life was threatened from many sides and did not disdain the possession of a gun (*raṣṣāṣ*) (Ḥāḡḡ ‘Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 47r). At the same time, the *Bāb al-wuṣūl* informs us, he had received from Aḥmad Tiḡānī (in a dream) an amulet (*ḥirz*) of protection from bullets. The Italians called him and, somehow informed of this object, took it from him. This episode is curious in two respects. The possession of a weapon is certainly not strange in conflict zones. Likewise, the presence of forms of spiritual protection is not unusual. A *ḥirz* is technically an amulet with a written text, usually reporting an invocation and some formulas, sometimes accompanied by a magic square. The term is used in this sense especially in the Maghreb, while in other contexts talismans are called *tillāsm* or *ḥamlā* (Burak 2019: 344–346). The most interesting aspect is that the Italians were aware of the existence of this object and tried to take possession of it. To do so, they must have been very well informed about Alfaki and, above all, they had to have an interest in the more occult aspects of his personality and the culture of the place (or at least they would simply mark their predominance by stealing something precious from him). Possibly, they simply wanted to deprive a subject of something precious to humiliate him.

Abba Ganda informs us that, when the Italian occupation was coming to an end, the Italians attempted to set fire to the house of Alfaki (Ḥāḡḡ ‘Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 30v) with bombs (*qanābīl*)⁵⁰ and heavy weapons (*qilā’*). Soldiers had announced themselves from afar and, before setting fire to his house, they had burnt two fortifications in the British-controlled area bordering the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. “They came so close to my dwelling that we could see each other” (Ḥāḡḡ ‘Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 30v), apparently said Aḥmad b. ‘Umar while reciting the *Ṣalāt tunaḡḡīnā*, a prayer for protection (Ḥāḡḡ ‘Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 52v).⁵¹

Not only the Italians were threatening his home and his life, but also the British. Abba Ganda describes how, as well as with the Italians, Alfaki accompanied them on some expeditions (Ḥāḡḡ ‘Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 52v), without making any distinction between the various foreign forces that, at that

⁵⁰ The term may also indicate mortars or, even, cavalry troops.

⁵¹ The prayer is not exclusively Tiḡānī, as it is part of most common booklets of invocations.

time, loomed over western Ethiopia. The account of the British attempts to control Alfaki follows in many points that made about the Italians. However, it has the merit of offering some more details, in a more articulated passage.

The British soldiers (*‘asākir al-inġlīz*) issued an arrest warrant throughout the territory under their control (*balad wilāyatihim*). They reached the house where he was, entered it and walked through it while he was sitting by the door, but they did not find him. Finally they went out (Ḥāḡḡ ‘Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 52v).

On another occasion they sought him out for a search of his property (*matā’*). He refused to present himself and this caused a rather violent reaction. But, miraculously, the parties were reversed: trying to move towards him, the soldiers began to walk backwards, in fact moving away from him (Ḥāḡḡ ‘Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 52v).

After these unsuccessful attempts, the British then managed to capture him. His imprisonment was, however, quite pleasant: they offered him a respectable treatment, leaving him free to “sit [comfortably] and drink coffee, without any hindrance” (Ḥāḡḡ ‘Alī Abbā Ganda, f. 52v). Even this last episode, with its far from prodigious features, is read by Abba Ganda as the result of Alfaki's particular spiritual charisma, although it is clear that the purpose of the British was to keep him under surveillance.

Del Boca reports that British presence in Wollega (Western Ethiopia) was more menacing than what Mussolini imagined. An embryonic form of local government was present in Gore since 1936. Haile Selassie, through von Rosen and Wolde Tzadek, was in contact with local authorities. What preoccupied Mussolini was the presence of Erskine, the British consul who attempted to annex the Ethiopian West to the territories of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (Del Boca 1981: 26–31). Resistance guerrilla warfare, supported by the British, developed in the western Ethiopian areas bordering Sudan after 1940 (Dominioni and Del Boca 2019: 276). Considering that Abba Ganda reports the episodes between Alfaki and the British after those involving Italians, it is possible that they occurred in the ending phases of occupation. In the same period some soldiers of the rulers of Danbi Dollo tried to capture him, possibly instigated by the British or the Belgians, who were active in the area in 1940 (Del Boca 1979: 584).

British attempts on Alfaki's life can be read, if the hypothesis on their chronological placement is correct, as the result of his refusal to take part in or support these actions of opposition to the Italian occupation. On the other front, the Italians may have had interest in killing him, in the same period, as a possible spy of the British.

5. Double crossing and the miracles of politics

The picture of Aḥmad b. ‘Umar emerging from the accounts mentioned above does not match the image of a Sufi *ṣayḥ* actively opposing colonial power. Instead of direct confrontation, he chose, as far as circumstances allowed it, isolation and avoidance. The community of Tiḡānīs and, more generally of Ethiopians, gravitating around the Bornuan saint did not secede itself from the rest of the population, as did Umar Tall in West Africa, preparing his *jihad* (Robinson 1987).⁵² Such a position of non-cooperation carries with it an inherent duplicity which, in a period of crisis such as that following the outbreak of the Second World War, could not fail to attract the attention of Italian and British secret services. Alfaki’s equanimity towards the English, Italians and Ethiopians was possibly seen as a form of double game or an attempt to take an advantageous position on more than one front, perhaps working as a spy.

Alfaki was extremely active as the sole mediator between the population and the Italian occupiers, spending his wealth and even putting his life at risk. Such a role was made possible by the de facto absence of recognized political power in the areas of western Ethiopia (Beni Shangul and Dambi Dollo). While Abba Jobir’s formal authority was recognized in Jimma, the border regions with Anglo-Egyptian Sudan escaped the capital’s direct control. In this vacuum of political power, never really filled by the occupying authorities, the figure of a Sufi master, whose spiritual charisma was recognized even by non-Muslims, had a rather large room for maneuver.

Sufis have always practiced a certain form of abstention from relations with political power. However, this is true only in principle. The cases of Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir in Algeria or ‘Umar al-Muḥtār in Libya are just two of the most famous examples of resistance to colonialism with prominent Sufi figures at the head of the movements. Ethiopian Muslims, in Jimma, but also in Harar and Awsa, participated actively to the building of the new colonial state, even moving war to other Ethiopians.⁵³ Collaboration was not uniform. In Western Ethiopia, where Muslims constituted the majority of the

⁵² ‘Umar al-Fūti Tall was a Tiḡānī master from Futa Tooro, in Senegambia region. He promoted a *ḡihād* against non-Muslim populations of the area. Preparing for war, he and his followers isolated themselves in a desert area, symbolically imitating the Hiḡra of the Prophet. It should be noted that the descendants of ‘Umar Tall participated in a practice of accommodation not so different from the one enacted by Alfaki (Robinson 2000: 194-207).

⁵³ Sbacchi reports that “As a result, Ethiopian Muslims like chiefs Abba Jobir of Jimma, Sheik Isa ben Hamzah el-Qatbari of Gurage, the Sultan of Aussa, Iman Saik Hussein, Mohammed Seid of Bale, and Iman Rahitu Nuh Dadi of Arussi co-operated closely with the colonial government” (Sbacchi 1985: 163). He also claims that the Oromo fought alongside the Italians for the conquest of some territories (Sbacchi 1985: 160). Del Boca (1979: 53) reports that Abba Jobir contributed with some 2.000 soldiers to the expansion of Italian domains.

population, mostly Oromo in language and culture, there were pockets of resistance that opposed both Italian domination and the return of feudalism to central power in Addis Ababa (Del Boca 1981: 34).

The *Bāb al-wuṣūl* bears witness of an intermediate way of approaching colonialism. Aḥmad b. ‘Umar, while not openly opposing the Italians, managed to guarantee a certain independence to his followers. The cultivation of bananas was a means of beguiling the occupiers with gifts. It worked also as a means of creating employment among the locals, increasing economic independence from foreigners. Acting in this way Aḥmad b. ‘Umar credited himself as the main interlocutor for the occupant forces. This position was extremely delicate. He was never formally recognized as a political leader by the Italians, despite him being their only referent in the area of Asosa. Alfaki also never pledged alliance to the Italians, standing in the gray area between collaboration and resistance. His name does not appear in the lists of those who organized resistance movements in Gojjam and Illubabor (Dominioni and Del Boca 2019: 272-276) nor in those who received emoluments from the Italians (Sbacchi 1985: 137).⁵⁴ Even other Ethiopians, like the soldier of Danbi Dollo considered him part of the Italian front or, more simplistically, considered his position unbearable in the phase of active opposition to the occupants.

Such a position, that can be hardly defined absolutely quietist, stands, from a strictly Sufi point of view, in between the one of other masters of the same Tiḡāniyya order, who had found themselves involved with colonial powers. In Algeria the Tiḡāniyya was perceived as loyal to the French government, even clashing with the troupes of Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir in the siege of ‘Ayn Maḏī (Depont and Coppola 1897: 271; Benaissa 1999). In Senegambia, the *ḡihād* of Umar Tall was clearly oriented to the formation of a state independent from colonial power (Robinson 1987). Alfaki did not attempt to build a new state, nor a political entity based on Tiḡāniyya or Islam. Abba Ganda repeats that his generosity was directed to all Ethiopians, disregarding their religion and ethnicity. Apparently, this indiscriminate form of protection made him even more dangerous for Italian colonial policies. It was difficult, if not impossible, to embed him in a defined set of relations aimed at establishing his submission to colonial power: Aḥmad b. ‘Umar was not a local chief, he did not show any overt opposition, and he was even open to certain forms of collaboration. This condition, and his attitude of proactive resistance allowed him a certain freedom in his relations with other forces acting in the area. It is this freedom that, more than overt political or military opposition, scared Italian occupants and British forces.

⁵⁴ Although the table reports also those who received their legitimate pay for their work as interpreters or as a compensation for the land Italians had confiscated, it gives an idea of the extension of the phenomenon.

6. Conclusions

The *Bāb al-wuṣūl* is a hagiography presenting the events of the life of Aḥmad b. ‘Umar to his disciples and fellows. The information it provides about the period of Italian occupation can be hardly considered historiographical, as it is a series of wonders that Abba Ganda lists to show the spiritual prowess of his master. Nonetheless, the text offers some details that allow the reconstruction of the personality of the *shaykh* and of his attitude towards the occupation.

The religious filter of piety and devotion, that presents acts of piety (or simple smartness) as miracles does not diminish the historical value of some of these events, although demands to the historian using these sources, the ability to go beyond this filter. From the point of view of the history of resistance to European colonialism, the attitude of Alfaki was focused on the protection of his community, which included all the Ethiopians who, for any reason, sought for his help and protection. Or at least it is how the *Bāb al-wuṣūl* presents the deeds of Aḥmad b. ‘Umar. There are at least three different layers of the textual production process that influence the representation of the events by Abba Ganda. The first is the intention of the author, who aims at writing the *tarjama* of his master. Despite the term meaning “biography,” we have seen how the *Bāb al-wuṣūl* is a sequence of prodigies, that in a secular view would fall outside the boundaries of a life account. But his public (and this is the second layer) is not secularized. The readers that Abba Ganda had in mind were Sufis who expected to read of the miracles of Alfaki. The frequent remarks in which the author addresses the reader, compelling him to interpret an episode as a sign of the exceptional character and power of their master is a precise narrative strategy. They respond to the readers’ expectation of reading about extraordinary deeds,⁵⁵ that for them are real and confirm the sanctity of Aḥmad b. ‘Umar. The latter constitutes the third layer of this text, as he is not only the subject of the *tarjama*, but he also revised it and gave his approval. This closes the circle of the biography, as the protagonist participates to the narration as reviser. But what is he exactly revising and approving? If Abba Ganda is the *ḡāmi’*, the collector, of stories circulating among Alfaki’s disciples, the latter is not simply controlling his image in a textual form but confirming (or not) his own representation by his community. Read in this way, the *Bāb al-wuṣūl* offers the “objective” point of view of the Muslim community of Aḥmad b. ‘Umar on the latter’s relation with Italian occupation. This relation is mediated by the self-identification of the whole community as religiously informed by the presence of a saint. What we have called a devotional literary

⁵⁵ The notion of open text, as further elaborated in *Lector in fabula* by Umberto Eco (1979: 50-52), is the background of these observations.

filter enables Abba Ganda to present the events (not only those related to the fascists) in a way that is intelligible for the intended readership of the text.

A last point regards the date of composition, 1944,⁵⁶ just three years after the formal end of Italian occupation. The limited amount of time between the events and their registration guarantees the reliability of the information, as Alfaki and most of the people involved in the events were still alive. But the fact that the master was still there gives to the text a diverse nuance. Abba Ganda was not celebrating a dead saint, nor he is writing his apology, as the text does not present such traits or any reference to polemics with other Sufi orders, religious leaders, or groups. For the time being (waiting for further evidence about the context and the events of the period) the only agency for this urgency to write a *tarğama* of Aḥmad b. ‘Umar is the re-elaboration and representation of the events of the occupation to the community which participated to them. This study has been focused on Alfaki’s attitude towards the occupants, but the text reports other miraculous deeds pertaining to the relations between Aḥmad b. ‘Umar and local leaders.⁵⁷ The *šāḥh* was not a political leader, but Abba Ganda presents him to his community as their main political referent, whose actions are religiously and spiritually motivated. The *Bāb al-wuṣūl* is not a historiographical work, but it is a document that offers a clear and reliable overview of the Western Ethiopian society before and under Italian occupation. A society of Muslims that was looking for political guidance and leadership in a saintly figure in a period of uncertainty and turmoil.

Another possible angle to analyze this text is reading it as an attempt by Abbā Ganda at redefining Alfaki’s action for the new political climate. Muslims were generally perceived by the new (Christian) state as collaborators of the Italians. A hagiography presenting Alfaki as a partisan of his own people, acting to protect them from the occupant, could have rightfully presented him as a supporter of the new order. Or, at least, a minor threat to Haile Selassie.⁵⁸ This hypothesis needs to be verified against the circulation of the text outside Tiğānī circles, possibly among State officials in Asosa or Jimma.

⁵⁶ AGL0002, f. 12v reports the first visit of Abba Ganda to Alfaki on 1367 H. On this date he was granted the permission to make the *Bāb al-wuṣūl*, that was probably written in the years before, when the master did not allow the author to visit him.

⁵⁷ See for instance the episode with an unidentified queen Zaynab, who tried to have him killed by a group of bandits, AGL0001, f. 52v.

⁵⁸ I thank Alessandro Gori for suggesting this hypothesis.

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