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The First World War from Tripoli to Addis Ababa

(1911-1924) | Shiferaw Bekele, Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, Alessandro Volterra, et al.

**Claiming Islamic
Authenticity. The
Ḥatmīya Sufi order
confronting WWI**

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Abstract

The Libyan war of 1911-1912 and the Great War in general were marked by a political deployment of religion. During the conflict, not only the Ottoman Empire – who called for a global *ḡihād* against the Allied powers – but also the European powers and Muslim elites in the Mediterranean and Red Sea regions claimed legitimisation of their political positions with an appeal to the authenticity of the Islamic faith. This paper focuses on the agency of one of these actors, the *Ḥatmīya* Islamic brotherhood, and looks at its role at a transnational level. It considers the discourses that were mobilised within the framework of the rivalry among transnational Sufi orders. While the *Sanūsiya* tackled the pan-Islamic positions associated with the Ottoman Empire and led a *ḡihād* against the European colonial powers, notably in Egypt and Libya, one of its rival orders, the *Ḥatmīya*, supported the war against the “Turks,” whom they accused of being the illegitimate heirs of the caliphate and “false Muslims.”

The political position of the *Ḥatmīya* was pursued through a series of actions, including a call to Muslims to enroll in European armies and diplomatic and intermediation activities with other political and religious authorities in the Red Sea region. The involvement of both the order’s representatives and affiliated members was finally rewarded in the post-war period. Indeed, thanks in part to their military service in the European armies; its affiliated members became leading actors in the colonial economy in Eritrea and Sudan.

Termini per la ricerca

Keywords :

Islam, Sufism, *ḡihād*, religious revival

Testo integrale

Transnational Sufi Orders and the Great War in the Mediterranean and Red Sea Regions

- 1 The Great War was marked by a political deployment of religion. Ottoman Sultan-Caliph Mehmed V Reshad proclaimed a global *ḡihād* against the Allied powers in November 1914, just three months after he had concluded a secret defensive alliance with the German Empire (on 2 August 1914). His proclamation was followed by a *fatwā* – a legal opinion – that “targeted the Muslim subjects of France, Britain, and Russia in their colonies, calling upon them to resist their oppressors.”¹

- 2 During the conflict, both the Ottoman Empire and the European powers and Muslim elites in the Mediterranean and Red Sea regions claimed legitimisation of their political position by appealing to the authenticity of the Islamic faith. Following the outbreak of the war, all the religious leaders in the warring states “sacralised the war.” Despite the fact that some leading political actors rejected or ignored the Ottomans’ call for a global *ḡihād*, an intense debate began both within Islamic circles and beyond.² The colonial powers became more concerned with pursuing “rightful” Islamic policies during the war, and this apprehension mingled with flourishing Orientalist scholarships in Europe in the areas of “orthodoxy” and “heresy” in Islam.³ The political appeal to Islamic authenticity during WWI was, however, an integral part of long-term colonial dynamics.
- 3 As the 19th century religious revival was spreading across the Islamic world, the colonial powers were also expanding their interests in Northeast Africa. Following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 in particular, the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain, Italy and France turned their attention to it in the context of their sphere of influence on the Red Sea. The Ethiopian Christian Empire gradually penetrated the southern region and incorporated new territories in the Horn of Africa.⁴ From there, and from the Nile Valley to the Maghreb, Muslims were defeated and subjected to foreign domination, and the Islamic revival movements acquired a political dimension. The colonial occupation of the *Dār al-Islām* stimulated considerable debate within Islamic circles, and in certain cases, Islam was a reaction to this period of upheaval.
- 4 In the early stages of colonial occupation, certain Muslim elites, such as the leaders of the Islamic Brotherhoods, became the main spokespersons for religious renewal. Some led anti-colonial movements and developed a discourse based on Islamic principles to justify the struggle against foreign occupation, while others took on the role of intermediaries and negotiated with the colonial powers, actively participating in the ongoing “modernisation” process.⁵
- 5 Colonial policies towards Islam on the African continent were complex and varied according to the specific context and case, but it is still possible to identify some intervention strategies and political approaches to Islam. In various contexts, in fact,

the colonial powers referred to the “Islamic orthodoxy/non-orthodoxy” dichotomy not only to justify their support for certain groups but also to discourage or control Islamic and international attacks on the colonial establishment. France, for example, leaned towards the promotion of the idea of a Black Islam (*Islam noir*) in its Western African colonies,⁶ an “unorthodox” and highly localised form of Islam that would be marginalised in comparison with the pan-Islamic movements in North African and Middle Eastern countries. An early decree in 1857 authorised freedom of worship in Senegal, conferred prestige on a particular Muslim elite, ordered the use of Arabic in the government bureaucracy, and promoted the implementation of Islamic law at the expense of common law.⁷

6 While the French policy model was developed predominantly in Mauritania and Senegal, the British approach towards Islam was shaped in Nigeria.⁸ The system of indirect rule promoted by Lord Lugard had hitherto supported a strategic alliance between the traditional Islamic establishment and the colonial government. Although the colonial administration claimed that it had a policy of non-interference on religious issues, it actually sought to adopt a diversified approach towards those who were classified as “good” and “bad” Muslims. To this end, it evaluated various Muslim groups by their Islamic education and piety, additionally taking into account whether they were indigenous or foreign, as well as whether they posed a potential threat to the “religious orthodoxy” of the well-established “traditional” authority. According to Reynolds, the arguments put forward in *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*,⁹ which portrayed Islam as being suited to the nature and needs of African people, influenced the colonial policies of some British officials.¹⁰ Similarly, several French officials were struck “by the superiority of Islamic over animistic society.”¹¹

7 Although Christianity was generally considered to be superior to Islam, the colonial authorities were aware that proselytising could lead to trouble in predominantly Muslim societies, while support for Islam, on the other hand, was a more advisable alternative when it came to “spreading civilization among the indigenous population” and promoting trade. They, therefore, sought to do business with those local Muslim elites who were willing to negotiate.¹²

- 8 Indeed, certain Islamic brotherhoods and their charismatic leaders held leadership positions during the foreign occupation. They were often favored intermediaries for the colonial authorities, who wished to monitor and control religious and political unrest. At least from the 18th century on, Sufi orders (*tarīqa*, plur. *ṭuruq*) played a pivotal role in the Sub-Saharan African process of re-Islamisation, acquiring a socio-religious leadership role among those African societies that were suffering from political and economic unrest. During the Islamic renewal period of the 18th and 19th centuries, a number of charismatic personalities, organisations, and networks emerged and showed that they shared a common missionary, educational, and militant attitude towards Islam. Their response to foreign penetration in *Dār al-Islām* led to various reactions, which were often ambivalent and in opposition to one another, even within the same order. Phases of open resistance to, and conflict with, the colonial powers alternated with other moments of negotiation and mutual acknowledgement with the foreign establishment. In some ways, a complex relationship of surveillance and collaboration was established between colonial and religious authorities during this period, and religious leaders adopted some accommodation strategies and practices in their relations with the colonial rules.¹³
- 9 The most significant aspect of the “Islamic revival” in Northeast Africa was the emergence of new Sufi brotherhoods that were noteworthy for their more militant and centralised organisational structures, together with an intensification of the activities of existing orders. The controversial terms “neo-Sufism” or “reformed Sufism” have been employed with reference to these religious movements. According to O’Fahey, the idea of neo-Sufism originated from colonial encounters with Islam and the associated “literature of surveillance” produced by colonial officials in the context of the occupation. Taking account of the resistance to the foreign occupation led by a number of Sufi scholars such as ‘Abd al-Qādir (1808-1883) of the *Qādiriya* in Algeria, *sayyid* Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh Ḥasan (1899-1920) of the *Ṣālihiya* in Somalia, and Aḥmad al-Sharīf al-Sanūsi in Libya¹⁴, colonial scholars and administrators developed conspiracy theories based on which reformist Sufi leaders were depicted as key figures in the constitution of pan-

Islamic and fundamentalist organisations whose main aim was to undermine the colonial establishment and to “menace the progress of civilization in Africa.” This interpretation placed emphasis on the political, rather than the theological and intellectual, dimension of the phenomenon, but Aḥmad Ibn Idrīs al-Fāsī (1749/50-1837), who was one of the leading – and most popular – figures of the so-called neo-Sufi movement, was fundamentally a Muslim scholar and spiritual master (*murshid*), and not the founder of any order or political movement.¹⁵ Rather, he sought to rouse religious spirit through teaching and education; indeed, his participation in *ḡihād* was by *daw‘a* “invitation” and through litanies and prayers.¹⁶ Born in Morocco, he studied at the Qarawiyān Mosque in Fez, where he was initiated into various orders and was mainly associated with *šādilī* teachings. In 1799, he left the Maghreb, where he was already a respected scholar, and travelled first to Mecca and later to Upper Egypt. In Ḥiḡāz, he acquired great influence, and attracted Muslim students from all over the Islamic world. When the master died in 1837, a quarrel arose regarding who should inherit his spiritual leadership among his blood heirs and spiritual heirs, namely Aḥmad Ibn Idrīs’s sons and his pupils Ibrāhīm al-Rašīd, Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Sanūsi, and Muḥammad ‘Uṭmān al-Mīrḡanī,¹⁷ the future founders of the *Sanūsiya* and *Ḥatmīya* orders respectively. Indeed, despite their common affiliation, the divergences between the *Ḥatmīya* and the *Sanūsiya* increased. Rivalry between the two brotherhoods had yet already existed while Muḥammad ‘Uṭmān al-Mīrḡanī’s and Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Sanūsi’s master was still alive: Aḥmad had expressed his unhappiness with the situation because his aim was unity, mutual assistance, and devotion.¹⁸ When Aḥmad Ibn Idrīs died, Al-Mīrḡanī and al-Sanūsi went first to Mecca, where they established their orders and *zāwiyāt*. Al-Sanūsi then left the city because of conflicts that had arisen with local *ulamā* and established his *zāwiya* in Libya, where he attained a notable level of popularity.¹⁹ After the establishment of his order in the Ḥiḡāz, Muḥammad ‘Uṭmān al-Mīrḡanī appointed representatives in a number of regions, and sent his sons, including Muḥammad Sirr al-Ḥatm (1814/15-1855), who lived as a *šādilī* teacher in Yemen until 1853-54 (when he returned to Mecca), and Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-Mīrḡanī (1820-1869), who

lived in Sudan, to propagate his order in other areas of the Red Sea.²⁰

- 10 Both these Sufi orders were established in Northeast Africa with the support of the occupying Ottoman authorities, who had to deal with them. In fact, the historical roots of the *Ḥatmīya* in the Red Sea region developed with the consent of the Ottoman-Egyptian authorities. In the 1820s, the armies of Muḥammad ‘Alī, the Ottoman Governor of Egypt, had conquered the Sudanese region and created an administrative zone that included much of modern Sudan and Eritrea between 1821 and 1885. The Ottoman Empire, which was making special efforts to strengthen its political and legal control over the Red Sea area and was attempting to establish *ḥanafī* law as the only official interpretation of the *šarī‘a*, recognised the Mīrḡanī as influential *ḥanafī* learned men not only in Sudan and Eritrea but also in the Yemen, where a branch of the brotherhood was well established, thanks to another son of Muḥammad ‘Uṭmān, Muḥammad Sīrr al-Ḥatm.²¹
- 11 The *ṭarīqa* networks integrated previously-existing regional religious centres into the more centralised structure of the order. After the death of Muḥammad ‘Uṭmān in 1852, his order began a process of regionalisation. While the *Ḥatmīya* did not become a mass movement in Ḥiḡāz and Egypt, where it tended towards fragmentation, its main centres of influence were gradually created in Sudan and Eritrea.²² In Sudan, the *ṭarīqa* supported the centralised, “orthodox” Islam for which the government had expressed a preference, and collaborated with the Ottoman-Egyptian rulers, who tolerated and subsidised its religious centres and exempted the *Ḥatmī šayḥs* from taxation. The Mīrḡanī family worked to preserve the interests of its followers and acted as a mediator with political authorities. Under the religious authority of Ḥasan al-Mīrḡanī, the order strengthened its influence among Sudanese groups and supported *al-Turkiya*, the Ottoman-Egyptian rule (1820-1885). For example, many of the order’s supporters belonged to the Shayqiya people, among whom several members had been recruited as irregular troops and tax collectors after Muḥammad ‘Alī’s conquest.²³ Also in the Eritrean port of Massawa, the local representative of the order, *sayyid* Hāšim al-Mīrḡanī, was an influential figure among the irregular troops recruited by the Ottoman-Egyptians, who were enrolled and

integrated into the colonial army following the Italian occupation in 1885.²⁴

- 12 In Sudan however, relations with the government were not always cordial, especially in the years immediately following *sayyid* Ḥasan's death, when *Ḥatmī* agents were arrested and their privileges temporarily abolished.²⁵
- 13 The *Sanūsiya* was established in this period (from 1841 to 1842) in Cyrenaica, where the Grand Sanūsi, Muḥammad b. 'Alī (1787-1859), became particularly influential thanks to his successful mediation in local conflicts. His successors, Muḥammad Al-Mahdī – who led the order between 1859 and 1902 – and his nephew Aḥmad al-Sharīf also solved long-running inter-tribal conflicts in the region. Indeed, the order achieved particular success in the area due to its ability to create social cohesion, while its main goal revolved around religion and education.²⁶ According to Evans-Pritchard, the Ottoman administration formally recognised the order in 1856, and it cooperated with the authorities on tax collection, while the Sultan exempted *Sanūssi* properties from taxation, although Le Gall has made the point that the collaboration on tax collection cannot be verified. The alliance between the order and the Ottoman authorities strengthened after the French occupation of Tunisia and the British occupation of Egypt, and especially after 1887, when the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy) acknowledged that Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were under the sphere of Italian influence.
- 14 The *Sanūsiya* had to deal with the Ottoman administration in Libya, and openly opposed colonial penetration. Istanbul and the Sufi order shared political interests in the region. This meant that the *Sanūsiya* order was able to emerge as a regional authority that led a resistance movement against European colonial penetration in Libya with the support of the Ottoman Empire, especially in the context of the Italo-Ottoman conflict, which was in a way a prelude to the Great War.²⁷
- 15 In contrast, in Sudan and Eritrea, the *Ḥatmīya* accommodated the British and Italian colonial establishments that had followed Ottoman-Egyptian rule after the fall of the *Mahdīya* (1881-98). The order also pursued this political cooperation with the Italian and British administrations during the Italo-Ottoman war in Libya and the First World War, when it

expressly sided with the colonial powers. Despite their shared Sufi Master and religious affiliation, the two brotherhoods found themselves siding with opposing parties during the Great War; indeed, the rivalry between the two Islamic orders originated before European penetration and the Great War, as they dated back to their establishment in Northeast Africa.

- 16 The 19th and 20th century process of re-Islamisation was led by Sufi orders like the *Ḥatmīya* and the *Sanūsiya*, which were both supported by the occupying Ottoman powers while they were establishing their religious centers in Northeast Africa. The geopolitical setting changed with the weakening of the Ottoman rule and the colonial occupation in the Red Sea region, however, especially on the eve of the Italo-Turkish war in Libya and with the subsequent outbreak of the Great War.

Enlisting *Askaris*: Religious Support and Colonial Propaganda

- 17 The outbreak of the First World War was predated by the Italian conquest of the Ottoman provinces of Libya (Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, and Fezzān) in 1911-14, which has been viewed as a prelude to the Great War, as it helped set the stage for the outbreak of the conflict. In fact, the Italian occupation of Libya and the Dodecanese islands convinced the Balkan League that the *Sublime Porte* was already too weak to prevent the liberation of South-eastern Europe from Ottoman rule.²⁸
- 18 The war in Libya manifested itself and impacted the political establishment in the former Italian colonies without interruption from the time of the Italo-Ottoman war until the Great War. In fact, the impact of the war also began to be felt in Eritrea – the first Italian colony in Africa (1890-1941) – in 1912, since the country joined in the escalation of the conflict that gradually led to the Great War from this time on.
- 19 As war threatened, Italy resorted more and more systematically to using African colonial troops, mainly from Eritrea and Somalia, to fight in Libya. This was both because they were seen as being better suited to desert warfare and due to their supposed Muslim background.
- 20 Some scholars have pointed out that it was especially from the time of the Italo-Ottoman conflict that Italian colonial policy began to look on Eritrea as a military colony, mainly as a source for enlisting *askaris*.²⁹ As Uoldelul Chelati Dirar has

noted, colonial legislators reported the “myth” of enthusiastic voluntary enlistment of Eritreans into the colonial army, but despite this, the colonial gaze passes over the coercion and power dynamics that influenced “voluntary” recruitment, and oral sources insist on the motives of prestige that drove Eritrean men to enlist in the army, such as enjoying the image of the successful soldier, acquiring a wife, or having a taste for adventure. Enlistment was not necessarily or always for economic motives.³⁰ Massimo Zaccaria points out that the experience of the Italian campaign in Libya had a huge impact in Eritrea, and considerable visibility was given in both Italy and Eritrea on this occasion to the impressive level of participation in the war by Eritrean *askaris*. The colonial media and propaganda machine became particularly active in promoting their mobilisation and celebrating the quality of their fighting skills, exalting the Eritrean *askaris* as examples of “martial races,”³¹ while at an international level, Italian propaganda acted to limit the voices against the war in Libya which were being raised through Turkish emissaries among Muslim countries at the time, such as on the opposite shore of the Red Sea, along the Arabian peninsula.³²

21 In Egypt, which lay at the heart of the Italian policy to seek a consensus in the region during the conflict,³³ the Mīrḡanī became especially involved in anti-Turkish propaganda. The “queen without a crown” of Eritrea, the *šarīfa* ‘Alawīya al-Mīrḡanī, who was recognised by the Italian Government as the representative of the Muslim community in Eritrea, sent a letter to her relatives in Alexandria asking them to intervene to restrain and counterbalance the anti-Italian propaganda that had become widespread in Arabic countries after the occupation of Tripoli.³⁴ Her letter, which was initially addressed to family members in Alexandria, was later considered by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to be worthy of publication to give prominence to her claims regarding the special treatment reserved for Muslims in the Italian colonies. The *šarīfa* had sent the letter to Alexandria just a couple of months after the beginning of the war, at the end of December 1911. She was well informed about the rumors against the Italian government circulating in Egypt in a general context of popular opposition to the colonial occupation of Libya. In particular, the Italians were alleged to be interfering

in Muslim religious affairs and offering bribes to make Muslim women turn to prostitution. In response to these rumors, the *šarīfa* stated that the Italians practiced their own religion in Eritrea and left Muslims to follow theirs, and did not interfere in religious affairs except to help Muslims profess Islam, build mosques and shrines, and pay Muslims salaries as teachers, *qāḍī* and so on. She used these arguments to ask her relatives in Egypt to tone down the anti-Italian rumors.³⁵

22 Opposition to the Italian conquest was led by the *Sanūsiya* Sufi order, which owed its loyalty to pan-Islamic positions associated with the Ottoman Empire. Internationally, several Muslim countries contributed to the anti-colonial movement, with growing numbers of arrivals of aid and volunteers from Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Chad, and India to fight the Italian colonial army in Libya.³⁶

23 In Eritrea, on the other hand, the *Ḥatmīya* expressly sided with the anti-Ottoman party and promoted the enlistment of *askaris*. Both *sittī* ‘Alawīya and *sīdī* Ğa‘far, the order’s other representative in Eritrea, organised fundraising campaigns among the native population to support the families of *askaris* who had died or been injured in Tripolitania.³⁷ Beginning at the end of 1911, the campaign “for the fallen and injured in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica” saw popular participation in all the colony’s territories, with a noteworthy participation of Muslim notables in Massawa and Kärän, which was emulated by the Christian and Greek communities.³⁸ At official events, *sīdī* Ğa‘far also incited the Eritrean battalions to fight the “Turks.” On 31 January 1912, the Italian government organised a solemn ceremony in Massawa with the participation of military and civil dignitaries to bid farewell to the Eritrean battalions who were leaving for Libya by steamship. The day after, another demonstration took place with the participation of the *abuna* of the Orthodox Church and *sīdī* Ğa‘far, as representative of the *Ḥatmīya*. Both the *qāḍī* of Massawa – who was also the *ḥalīfa al-ḥulafā’* of the *ṭarīqa* – and the prior of the Bizen Monastery blessed Muslim and Christian *askaris* and encouraged them to uphold the honor of the colonial army.³⁹ An evocative article in *Rivista Coloniale* celebrated this event, reporting on the widespread stereotypical arguments circulating in the Italian media and propaganda of the time,

such as the bravery and exceptional qualities of the Eritrean *askaris* employed in the colonial war:

We must be grateful to the Italian-Turkish war, which in addition to awakening the national consciousness, drew the motherland's attention to that abandoned land [...]. Today, Eritrea is recognized as a good place for providing soldiers, if for no other reason, and we are adding soldiers whom, we can say without fear of contradiction, no other colony can recruit. In fact, the Eritrean native soldier possesses all the best qualities of a colonial war.[...] Eritrea therefore wanted to greet its soldiers in a dignified manner, and without mentioning the official ceremonies, we can say that on the occasion in Massawa, all the native notables of the colony, Christians and Muslims, and the Morgani, authentic descendants of the Prophet, gathered together with the authorities, who, having brought together the Muslim *askaris*, made a speech encouraging them to fight the usurpers of the caliphate.⁴⁰

- 24 This discourse lays emphasis on the distinction between the prophetic ancestry and legitimate religious authority of *sīdī Ġa'far* in Eritrea, and the completely unlawful caliphate of the Ottomans. The propaganda also appealed to the authenticity of the Islamic faith. In this instance, *sayyid Ġa'far*, in his capacity as lawful descendant of the Prophet, played an important role by supporting the war against the “Turks,” who were accused of being the illegitimate heirs of the caliphate and “false Muslims.”⁴¹
- 25 This argument was reported in detail in Italian propaganda, the aim of which was to give visibility to the antagonism of Muslim communities towards the fracturing Ottoman Empire in its former territories and provinces, and to affirm the friendship between Italy and Islam. As scholars have recently noted, this period of the Libyan war was merely a prelude to the First World War, and saw increasing appeals from the European powers to pro-Islamic attitudes in order to seek the support and “loyalty” of their African colonies on the one hand, and to promote the appointment of Muslim soldiers in colonial armies on the other.⁴²
- 26 In line with the Italian propaganda discourse, the reporter was also able to claim that:

the awakening of anti-Turkish attitudes on the part of the natives is natural. Above all else, it is an ancient hatred of the ancient tyrants that is awakening. Certainly, today in Eritrea,

old men frequently evoke ancient traditions to incite hatred of the Turks, because in Eritrea, as in Yemen, the Turk is considered to be a false Muslim, a usurper of the rights due to the real descendants of the Prophet. It is enough to ask Morgani, a Muslim holy man revered throughout East Africa who claims to be direct descendant of Mohammed, to hear what he says about Muslim Turks and the Caliph of Constantinople, whom he regards as a usurper of rights. But the best evidence of all will be provided by the Eritrean battalion as soon as they arrive in battle. We are absolutely sure of this. Our askaris have already fought against the Mahdi; many of them are Muslims, but they have done their duty just like the rest.⁴³

- 27 It is worth noting that the contribution of the Eritrean and Muslim *askaris* to the Italian war in Libya brought back memories of pre-colonial regional conflicts, such as the participation of the Mīrḡanī in the conflict against the *Mahdī* in Sudan, which was also not only an anti-colonial movement, but also a religious war during which opposing sectarian parties employed Islamic rhetoric to legitimise their political agendas.⁴⁴
- 28 In Libya too, conflicts within the Muslim community played an important role and channelled rival parties towards their claim of “Islamic authenticity;” while the *Sanūsiya* order swore allegiance to the Ottomans and led a *ḡihād* against the “unbelievers,” the *Ḥatmīya*, its traditional rival, sided with the Allies and accused the Turks of being “usurpers of the caliphate.”⁴⁵
- 29 During the First World War, the Mīrḡanī were among the privileged interlocutors for British and Italian officers at a supra-regional level across the Red Sea and its hinterland. In Sudan, the British General Wingate recommended that *sayyid* ‘Alī al-Mīrḡanī, the leading representative of the order in the country, be made a Knight Commander (of the Order) of St. Michael and St. George (KCMG) in 1916. The *sayyid* had served the government as an intermediary between Wingate and ‘Alī Dinār.⁴⁶ Alī Dinār, who was the **Sultan** of Darfūr, refused to pay a tribute to Khartoum and declared a defensive *ḡihād* – in accordance with orthodox Islamic practice – against the potential threat of British aggression against Darfūr and its Muslim subjects in April 1915. Even though the declaration was made during the **First World War**, the *ḡihād* was declared

before the Ottoman Minister of War Enver Pasha invited the Sultan to join the war against the British. The British saw the Sultan as a “Muslim fanatic” and a “Turco-German conspirator,” a fear that justified the British invasion and annexation of Darfūr, whereas ‘Alī Dinār’s “jihad reflected a realisation that the British were closing in on his sultanate, and was an attempt to rally support (external and internal) against the imposition of foreign, Christian rule,” by following the example of other Muslim authorities who led anti-colonial movements in Africa. The Sultan’s appeal to the rightful defensive *ḡihād* emerges in several messages he addressed to both Wingate and *sayyid* ‘Alī al-Mīrḡanī.⁴⁷

30 From their side, the representatives of the *Ḥatmīya* asserted their anti-Ottoman position in several instances and played a leading diplomatic role in the course of the conflict. In 1917, *sayyid* ‘Alī al-Mīrḡanī, who was in touch with the leaders of the Arab revolts against the Ottomans, wrote to Sharīf Hussein of Mecca from Sudan, congratulating him on his victories in the Arab revolt.⁴⁸

31 During the Great War, from Egypt to Eritrea, the Mīrḡanī family sided with the Allies against both the “Turks” and the *Sanūsiya*.⁴⁹ Their support for England and the Allies was reported on several occasions. A 1914 propaganda article entitled “A descendent of the Prophet against the holy war” reported that:

Sceik Said el Morghani, a direct descendent of the Prophet, who enjoys great influence in Egypt, Arabia, and Sudan, has sent a telegraph strongly deploring the Turkish Government’s activity and the war against Great Britain and the Allies. Morghani declares that Turkey is sacrificed to German ambition. By placing themselves under Germany’s influence, those who hold authority in Constantinople have alienated the good feelings of Muslims across the entire world, and will drag the Turkish people to certain ruin... Morghani declared his and his followers’ most sincere and loyal devotion to England, to which Muslims are highly indebted. Šayḡ Yūsūf Al-Hindī, a religious personality of great authority, has made a similar statement, and protestations of loyalty have been sent from all the leading šayḡs and ‘ulamā’ in Sudan.⁵⁰

32 Such claims of loyalty to the Allies were part of a wide-scale wave of proclamations by Muslim notables across Africa, including in British Nigeria, as the article of Dewiere and

Barron in this volume analyses, but also in French West Africa, where religious leaders wrote letters and poems in praise of France and condemning the Ottoman-German Alliance.⁵¹

The Post-War Period: Colonial Rewards and Honours for Muslim Allies

33 Until the First World War, as representatives of a centralised organisation with extensive influence, the Mīrḡanī were the favored intermediaries between British officials and the Sudanese in Sudan. In 1916, Wingate publicly acknowledged the loyalty shown to the Government by the Mīrḡanī and their important role in the introduction of some reforms that were considered necessary for the country's administration. In the post-war period, however, with the introduction of the Native Administration in Sudan, the situation began to change, and other groups began to play important political roles.⁵² The Italian authorities in Eritrea adopted similar religious policies towards them, consulting them as intermediaries, especially when they needed to deal with the Muslim population of the lowlands. A prominent public role was reserved for *sayyid* Ġa'far and *sittī* 'Alawīya by the colonial authorities during official ceremonies, similar to the situation in Sudan with *sayyid* 'Alī, who was treated as the unofficial leader of the country until the 1920s. In 1921, according to British intelligence, the *Ḥatmīya* was the most popular and most widely-followed order in Sudan.⁵³ The Eritrean branch of the order, which was officially represented by *sayyid* Ġa'far, was, in fact, directed by his *ḥulafa'*, who were mainly of Sudanese origin. The Mīrḡanī from Kassala continued to appoint their representatives in Eritrea, and it was they who effectively manipulated the activities of the Italian-appointed leader of the order in the colony.⁵⁴ On the other hand, although she was not officially recognised by the Government, *sittī* 'Alawīya had real socio-religious authority and great political influence, especially in the region of Massawa and through her regional networks, which extended well beyond the colonial borders. However, it was not only religious personalities who became part of the Sufi center: the order also co-opted key figures from the political and economic establishment as *ḥulafa'* and mere followers alike. Some of *sarīfa* 'Alawīya's followers were *askaris* who were working for the Government but supported

her at the same time and looked on her as their leader.⁵⁵ This was the case of the *ḥalīfa* Alī Muḥammad (b. 1898 in Khartoum) who worked as the *šarīfa*'s counselor for a number of years. He assisted the Mission of Governor Gasparini in Yemen (1927), of which *sīdī* Ğa'far al-Mīrḡanī was also a member. He was awarded the Colonial Order of the Star of Italy and accompanied the *šarīfa* on her visit to Mussolini in Rome in 1938.⁵⁶ The *šarīfa*, whose epithet was the "warrior" (*al-ḥarbiya*), "the one who dresses like a warrior" (*al-lābisa al-ḥarbiya*), was particularly influential in one section of the colony's military class; and here we can observe a sort of continuity with the popularity her father *sayyid* Hāšim had enjoyed among irregular soldiers in Massawa.⁵⁷

34 The main function of Eritrea – the so-called "first-born colony" (*colonia primogenita*) – was to produce the soldiers who were needed to consolidate the Italian colonies in Libya and Somalia. By 1914, recruitment numbers were slightly over 10,000. The military sector was a vast economy, and the army was a prestigious centre for recruitment into the money economy.⁵⁸

35 In a way, a part of the country's military and trade sector was co-opted into the *Ḥatmīya* organization: the *šarīfa*'s principal "domains" were the *Azienda Trasporti*, the transport company of Asmara and the so-called Kārān Battalion (which may have been the 4th Battalion), and they were her most important donors. When she visited Asmara, she and her large entourage would be hosted by the *Azienda Trasporti*, where she would hold private talks with the *sciumbasci* Muḥammad Aberra Hagos.⁵⁹ The higher ranks of the army – who had been decorated by the government – were appointed as representatives of the order: influential figures in the colonial economy and policy such as Maḥmūd Ibrāhīm Muḥammad and the above-mentioned Muḥammad Aberra Hagos, both of whom were appointed simultaneously as *ḥulafa'* of the *Ḥatmīya* and *sciumbasci* ("marshal") in the colonial army (the highest military rank available to African soldiers in the Italian armed forces), are found among them. As in other contexts, a military career offered social mobility and represented one way of achieving higher social status.⁶⁰ After Maḥmūd Ibrāhīm enlisted in the *Regio Corpo Truppe Coloniali d'Eritrea* and took part in the Campaign in Libya in 1913-14, he was first

promoted to *muntaz*, then to *bulucbasci* and finally to *sciumbasci* in 1923.⁶¹

- 36 In the post-war period, *sayyid* Ğa‘far was decorated with the highest colonial honors thanks to his commitment to supporting the *pax colonial* not only in Eritrea but also on the Libyan front. A Royal Decree of 29 January 1929 decorated him with the 2nd Class Degree of the Colonial Order of the Star of Italy, that of Grand Officer (*Grande Ufficiale*). The Colonial Order of the Star of Italy (*Ordine coloniale della Stella d'Italia*) had been created by King Victor Emmanuel III on 18 June 1914 as a colonial order of knighthood to reward soldiers deployed to the colony of Libya. Some years later, at the end of October 1932, another decree awarded him the highest colonial decoration, the Knight Grand Cross, in his capacity as “leader of the tariqa in the Eritrean Colony.” His decoration coincided with the revocation of both decorations from *sīdī* Muḥammad Idrīs al-Sanūsī, who was in exile in Egypt at that time following a brief parenthesis of negotiations with the occupying powers between 1916 and 1923, when the Italian authorities had lent support to his authority, providing him with armed forces and allowing him to adopt the symbols of government in a semi-independent Emirate in Cyrenaica.⁶² In June 1930, a government Decree ordered the closing of the *zāwiyāt* of the *Sanūsia* and the confiscation of all their assets in Libyan territory.⁶³ The pacification of “Libya” was only declared after the execution of the Libyan rebel leader Omar Mukhtar (September 1931), when Badoglio claimed the end of military operations on 24 January 1932. One year later, in addition to *sayyid* Ğa‘far, the Italian Government awarded the Knight Grand Cross decoration to one other indigenous figure, al-Shārif al-Gharyānī (1877-1945), a Libyan religious *ṣayḥ* and statesman⁶⁴ who had acted as an intermediary between the resistance leaders and the Italian government in Libya, and had been accused of being a traitor partly responsible for the capture of Omar al-Mukhtar.
- 37 From the mid-1930s, the deterioration in British-Italian relations created tensions within the *Ḥatmīya*, whose main center was located at the heart of the disputes between the two colonial powers in Northeast Africa. During World War Two, which spread to the region in June 1940, the British authorities considered *sayyid* ‘Alī al-Mīrḡanī to be a very influential figure;

he was given a seat on the Advisory Council for Northern Sudan, which had been formed during the war.⁶⁵ The situation was however different in Eritrea, the other front, where the Mīrḡanī representatives, who had been regarded as advisors and intermediaries throughout the Italian occupation, occupied a controversial role, mostly because of their close ties with the Sudanese branch of the *Ḥatmīya*, which was under British influence.

38 Between 1935 and 1941, the Italian colonial policy was marked by racism. During this period, a series of provisions that aimed at separating the colonial settlers from their subjects were issued. *Sīdī Ġaʿfar* condemned the Fascists' racial policies, which he considered to be contrary to Islamic values, and lent his definitive political support to the British front.⁶⁶

Conclusion

39 The claim for Islamic legitimation during the Great War was in line with the longer-term dynamics that can be identified with the establishment of the so-called neo-Sufi brotherhoods in Northeast Africa up to the Second World War. At first, some anti-colonial movements resorted to jihadist rhetoric in the context of colonial occupation, but the asymmetrical military power increasingly obliged top religious leaders to look for different negotiation strategies. The previous rivalry among Sufi orders as well as the long-term political, religious, and social dynamics shed light on the claims of "authentic" Islam by Muslim notables and Imperial powers alike during the war.

40 Northeast African religious orders accommodated the colonial scramble for Africa. The changing political establishments and the weakening of the Ottoman administration in Northeast Africa and the Red Sea region induced some religious notables, including the Mīrḡanī family, to negotiate with the colonial powers. The international support for the colonial establishments pursued by religious notables of the *Ḥatmīya* in the region during WWI was part of its long-term regional policy in the Red Sea, the aim of which was to support territorial continuity and political stability. This was no longer granted by the Ottoman Empire, especially with the newly established British, French, and Italian colonies in Northeast Africa and on the Red Sea.

- 41 The international conflict also exacerbated the existing rivalry among transnational Sufi orders and drove the conflicting parties to resort to religious legitimisation within Islamic rhetoric. Whereas the *Sanūsiya* coped with the Pan-Islamic positions associated with the Ottoman Empire and led a *ḡihād* against the European colonial powers, notably in Egypt and Libya, one of its rival orders, the *Ḥatmīya*, supported the war against the “Turks,” who were accused of being illegitimate heirs of the caliphate and “false Muslims.”
- 42 The political position of the *Ḥatmīya* was pursued through a variety of actions that included a call to Muslims to enroll in European armies as well as through diplomatic and intermediation activities with leading political and religious authorities in the Red Sea region. Eventually, the involvement by representatives of the order and their affiliated members was rewarded in the post-war period. In the end, their political position had a remarkable political and economical impact on their representatives, who were able to foster their religious authority in the political arena, and also paved the way for their affiliated members who –partly thanks to their military careers in European armies– became influential actors in the colonial economies of Eritrea and Sudan in the post-war period.

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Note

1. Zürcher 2016, 14.
2. Zürcher 2016, 14-16. Various leading political actors, such as the Idrisids in 'Asīr and the Hashemite Sharīf of Mecca, rejected the Ottomans' call, however.
3. For the French, see Harrison 1988, 118-136. Several Italian scholars also published studies on Islam in the Italian colonies during this period: see Cerulli 1917; Ferrara 1914; Odorizzi 1916.
4. Donham and Wendy 1986.
5. Battera 1998. Copious literature is available on the relations between Islam and Modernity. For an overview of the debate, see Masud, Salvatore and van Bruinessen 2009. For a study focusing on the ideas of a number of contemporary modernist and liberal Muslim thinkers and their incorporation of modern Western ideas, see Nettler, Mahmoud and Cooper 1998. The available historiography has pursued the study of the socio-political dynamics that developed in a number of African societies in Francophone and Islamic West Africa extensively, but less attention seems to have been dedicated to the former Italian colonies in Northeast Africa. See in particular the works written and edited by David Robinson and Jean-Louis Triaud: Robinson and Triaud 1997; Triaud and Robinson 2000; Robinson 2000; Triaud 1995. On Italian East Africa, a study of Somalia may be found in Battera 1998, 155-185.
6. See also Motadel 2014. On "Islam Noir" in particular, see Harrison 1988, 94-117.
7. Piga 2004; Robinson 1988. According to Robinson, the French used the Senegalese-Mauritanian "laboratory," located along the border between "black" and "white" Africa to formulate policies and practices to apply in other regions. Robinson 1997 and Robinson and Triaud 1997, 155-180.
8. Reynolds 2001, 601-618.
9. Blyden 1887.
10. Reynolds 2001, 601-618. Edward Blyden, a West Indian-born Christian missionary, was the first Afro-diasporan scholar to call for an alliance between global Islam and Pan-Africanism. Considered as a father of Pan-Africanism, his book laid the basis for a Pan-Africanism with strong Islamic support.
11. Harrison 1988, 131-133.
12. Reynolds 2001, 602. The same idea was widespread in Italian colonial policy towards Islam in Northeast Africa: Marongiu Buonaiuti 1982, 103-107.

13. Robinson 2000; Robinson 1991.
14. Clancy-Smith 1994; Said S. Samatar 1992; Triaud 1995. For a comparative study of two famous anti-colonial movements led by Sufi *ṣayḥs* such as ‘Abd al-Qādir in western Algeria and Aḥmad al-Sharīf al-Sanūsī in eastern Libya and the Sahara, see Vikør 2014, 170-186.
15. O’Fahey and Radtke 1993, 52-87.
16. O’Fahey 1990, 23.
17. On Muḥammad ‘Uṭmān al-Mīrḡanī, see Miran ‘Muḥammad ‘Uṭmān al-Mīrḡanī,’ EAE, 3, 1060-1061.
18. Thomassen and Radtke 1993, 46.
19. On the *Sanūsīyya*, see Vikør 1995; Triaud 1995; Le Gall 1989, 91-106; Gazzini 2004.
20. According to Voll 1969, 247-248, Muḥammad Sīr al-Ḥatm was recognised as the representative of the order in Yemen and after his father’s death as the head of the order. No member of his family was established as the main leader after him. The dates I have followed are those provided in Hofheinz 1992, 21. For an overview of Muḥammad al-Ḥasan’s life, see Miran 2014.
21. Melis 2012, 115.
22. Voll 1969, 254.
23. Ahmed Al-Sahi 1981,16.
24. Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (hereafter ASDMAECI), Archivio Eritrea (hereafter AE) 43, Regio esercito italiano, Comando superiore in Africa al Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 16 Jan. 1887. On *sayyid* Hāšim in Eritrea, see also Romandini 1984, 1985 and Miran 2005.
25. Warburg 2013, 212-213.
26. Baldinetti 2010, 30-31.
27. Baldinetti 2010, 32-33. For a recent work on the Italo-Ottoman war in Libya, which “raised the curtain on the Great War,” see Stephenson 2014. The British understanding of the *ḡihād* was framed within the parameters of the Great War, in particular “within the contours of the efforts by the Ottomans and Germans to foment uprisings among Muslim populations against the Allied powers.” See Slight 2014, 238.
28. Vandervort 2005, 819.
29. This section is a revised and reworked version of my contribution in Bruzzi 2018, 175-186.
30. Uoldelul Chelati Dirar 2007, 50-51; Volterra 2005, 76-79.
31. Zaccaria 2012. On the notion of “martial races” in the British Empire, see Streets 2004.
32. Zaccaria 2013, 218.
33. Baldinetti 1997.

34. ASDMAECI, Archivio Storico del Ministero dell’Africa Italiana (hereafter ASMAI), vol. 2, posiz. 104/1 (1911-1912), fasc. 12 “Musulmani in Tripolitania,” Roma 20 Jan. 1912. See also Erlich 1994.
35. ASDMAECI, ASMAI, vol. 2, Libia, Guerra italo-turca 1911-1912, Posiz. 104/1 1911-1912, fasc. 12 “Guerra italo turca.” Commissariato di Cheren, 21 Dec. 1911, “Lettere della sceriffa Alania al Morgani.”
36. Ahmida 1994, 118.
37. ASDMAECI, AE 608, fasc. 2, Telegramma. Keren 26 Dec. 2011; *Bullettino Ufficiale della Colonia Eritrea*, 21, 9, 29 Feb. 1912, 30-32. Cit. in Zaccaria 2012, 36. On *sīdī* Ġa’far, see Bruzzi 2006, 435-453 and Bruzzi 2018, 44-58 and 149-186.
38. Zaccaria 2012, 36-39.
39. Zaccaria 2012, 35. See also ASDMAECI, ASMAI, vol. 2, posiz. 115/1, fasc. 2, 30 Jan. 1912 “Telegramma in arrivo da Asmara a Roma;” 1 Feb. 1912, “Telegramma in arrivo da Massaua a Roma.”
40. *Rivista coloniale*, Roma, 1912, 206.
41. Bruzzi 2006, 435-453.
42. With regard to British propaganda that claimed that it was a Muslim power during World War One, see Reynolds 2001, 605. For the French case, see Renard 2013; Harrison 1988, 118-136.
43. *Rivista coloniale*, Roma, 1912, 206.
44. The spectre of the prior war against the *Mahdī* was widespread in British and Italian perceptions of anti-colonial movements during the WWI, but it is also offered in *sittī* ‘Alawīya’s letter: ASDMAECI, ASMAI, vol. 2 “Libia, Guerra italo-turca 1911-1912,” posiz. 104/1, 1911-1912, fasc. 12 “Guerra italo turca,” Commissariato di Cheren, 21 Dec. 1911, “lettere della sceriffa Alania al Morgani.”
45. On the *Sanūsiya* role in promoting enrolment, see Koloğlu 2007, 126.
46. Daly 1986, 166.
47. Slight 2010, 240-251. “Enver Pasha, Ottoman war minister, invited the sultan to join the war against Britain in a letter sent to El Fasher in February 1915. This missive mentioned the Ottoman jihad proclamation of 11 November 1914 and ‘Alī Dinar’s duty as a ‘zealous’ Muslim ruler to repudiate British hegemony and unite with his co-religionists” Slight 2010, 244.
48. Voll 1969, 458.
49. For the text of the Ottoman proclamation of Jihad in 1914 see Lewis 1975, 157.
50. This is my own translation from Italian to English. See AE, pacco 43, “Un discendente del Profeta contro la guerra santa,” *L’Idea Nazionale*, 17 November 1914.
51. See Harrison 1988, 119.

52. Voll 1969, 565, 573.
53. Voll 1969, 574-583.
54. ASDMAECI, AE 1022, Governo dell'Eritrea, Commissario regionale del Gasc e Setit, Oggetto: Azioni del Morgani. Cheren, 5 Jun. 1913.
55. My interview with *šarīfa* ‘Alawīya, a namesake descendent of *šarīfa* ‘Alawīya and daughter of Ġa‘far al-Mīrghanī, Cairo, May 2009.
56. Puglisi 1952, 12.
57. According to Commissioner Vittorio Fioccardi, no one who travelled to Kārān failed to pay her a visit, and her residence was especially frequented by soldiers, with whom she was extremely popular. See ASDMAECI, AE 1022, Cheren, 6 Sep. 1917, Colonia Eritrea, Commissariato di Cheren, Riservato-Urgente, Al Signor Reggente il Governo della Colonia. Oggetto: Grave dissidio seguito da ingiurie tra Morgani e Scerifa.
58. Tekeste Negash 1986, 48. See also Tekeste Negash 1987.
59. ASDMAECI, AE 1022, telegramma, Commissariato Regionale di Cheren, 4 Sep. 1917.
60. For the Sudanese case, see Lamothe 2011.
61. Puglisi 1956.
62. See the study by Ryan 2018.
63. Marongiu Buonaiuti 1982, 254.
64. *Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia*, 70, 7, no 25, Wed. 30 Jan. 1929, 25, 489; *Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia*, 74, 11, no. 68, Wed. 22 Mar. 1933, 1186-1187.
65. Voll 1969, 417.
66. In his discourse entitled “Islam and Freedom,” *sīdī* Ġa‘far appealed to pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism to confront a new Fascist colonial policy that was being pursued through racially discriminatory laws during this period, justifying his alignment with the British by pointing out the conformity of democratic values with Islamic orthodoxy. A complete version of his speech has been published in Bruzzi 2012.

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