

World War II: “Islam and Freedom” in the East African Campaign

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Introduction

The *Ḥatmiyya* Sufi brotherhood (*ṭarīqa*, pl. *ṭuruq*) was founded in the Ḥiǧāz around 1840 by *sayyid* Muḥammad ‘Uṭmān al-Mīrḡanī (d. 1853), descendant of a Meccan *šarīf* family¹ marked by the Sufi tradition of Central Asia. After *sayyid* Muḥammad ‘Uṭmān completed his studies in orthodox religious sciences, he expressed his interest in Sufism and was initiated into five *ṭuruq*, namely the *Naqšbandiyya*, the *Qādiriyya*, the *Šādiliyya*, the *Ġunaydiyya* and the *Mīrḡaniyya*, the brotherhood founded by his grandfather. The man was influenced by *Naqšbandiyya* and by the doctrinal and reformist ideas of his master Aḥmad b. Idrīs (d. 1837), who sent him to Egypt and Sudan as an itinerant preacher. After the death of Aḥmad b. Idrīs, Muḥammad ‘Uṭmān al-Mīrḡanī founded the *Ḥatmiyya*, the seal (*ḥatm*) of all *ṭuruq* and established a number of *zāwiyas* in Makka, Madīna, Jidda and al-Ṭā’if.² The *ṭarīqa* consolidated its position in East Africa thanks to the activi-

¹ For the biography of *sayyid* Muḥammad ‘Uṭmān al-Mīrḡanī (1793-1853), see Nicole Grandin, “Le Shaykh Muhammad Uthman al-Mirghani (1793-1853). Une double lecture de ses hagiographies,” *Archives des sciences sociales des religions*, 58, 1, 1984, pp. 139-155. On the genealogy of the al-Mīrḡanī family, see Albrecht Hofheinz, “Sons of a hidden imam: The genealogy of the Mīrḡanī family,” *Sudanica Africa*, 3, 1992, pp. 9-27.

² Ali Salih Karrar, *The Sufi brotherhoods in the Sudan*, Northwestern University Press – Hurst, London, 1992, p. 66.

ties pursued by *sayyid* Muḥammad ‘Uṭmān’s sons who assumed an important political and religious role in Sudan and Eritrea.

The aim of this article is to point out the positions that al-Mīrḡanī representatives assumed during the years of the East African Campaign (July 1940 – November 1941), when World War II involved the main Sudanese and Eritrean regional centres of the *Ḥatmiyya*, namely Kassala and Keren. Special attention is paid to a break in al-Mīrḡanī leaders’ attitude towards the Italian policy in Eritrea and, more in general, in the region, since part of *Ḥatmiyya* representatives aligned with the British.

1. The *Ḥatmiyya* in Sudan and the Eritrean region

In Sudan, the *Ḥatmiyya* was established by *sayyid* Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-Mīrḡanī (d. 1869),³ son of Ruqayya bt. Ġallāb from Kordofan and the aforementioned *sayyid* Muḥammad ‘Uṭmān al-Mīrḡanī, the founder of the *ṭarīqa*.

After *sayyid* Muḥammad al-Ḥasan completed his studies under the supervision of his father in the Ḥiḡāz, he went to Sudan where he spread and consolidated the *Ḥatmiyya*. Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-Mīrḡanī began an intensive missionary tour in several regions and established the main centre of the *ṭarīqa* close to Kassala, in Eastern Sudan, where he founded a village named *Ḥatmiyya*. Considered as a Sudanese holy man, who held *baraka*, a beneficent force of divine origin, *sayyid* Muḥammad al-Ḥasan strengthened the *Ḥatmiyya*, especially in the Northern and Eastern Sudan, where the *ṭarīqa* attracted followers among the Beja population, as well as in Eritrea.

Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-Mīrḡanī assumed an important role as mediator between the Egyptian administration and the local people,

³ On *sayyid* Muḥammad al-Ḥasan, see Nicole Grandin, “Al-Sayyid Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-Mirghani,” *Islam et Sociétés au Sud du Sahara*, 3, 1989, pp. 107-118; Hofheinz, “Sons of a hidden imam,” p. 22; Karrar, *Sufi Brotherhoods*, pp. 73-88; Jonathan Miran, s.v. “Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-Mīrḡanī,” in Siegbert Uhlig *et al.* (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, v. 1-4, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 2003- (hereafter *EAE*); John O. Voll, ‘A History of the Khatmiyyah Tariqah in the Sudan’ (unpublished PhD dissertation, Harvard University, Cambridge – Mass., 1969).

contributing to maintaining public order during this period. His achievements as mediator were interpreted by people as *karāmāt*, miracles. During the crisis of 1864-65, when the Sudanese troops mutinied in Kassala, *sayyid* Muḥammad al-Ḥasan and his *ḥulafā'* acted as intermediaries between the mutineers and the Government, and they finally succeeded in ending the mutiny.⁴ When he died, fragmentation prevailed within the leadership of the *ṭarīqa*.

In spite of this fragmentation, during the Anglo-Egyptian condominium (1899-1956), British authorities considered *sayyid* 'Alī al-Mīrḡanī (d. 1968), another representative of the al-Mīrḡanī family, their preferred interlocutor. The man was "regarded as the unquestioned religious leader of the country. It was *sayyid* 'Alī who took precedence as first citizen at all official functions" until World War I, when other eminent Sudanese personages emerged as equals in power and prestige in the government's view.⁵

In Eritrea, the most important representative of the *ṭarīqa* was *sayyid* Hāšim al-Mīrḡanī (d. 1901),⁶ another son of *sayyid* Muḥammad 'Uṭmān al-Mīrḡanī. Around 1860, he was sent from Ḥiḡāz to Massawa where he exercised authority over *Ḥatmiyya* followers such as the Beni Amer, Ad Tekles, Asaorta, Habab, and others. Hāšim al-Mīrḡanī married the daughter of an influential trader of Suakin and, after a stay in Western Eritrea, he got married a second time to a woman from the Beni Amer. It was from these two marriages that respectively *sittī*⁷ Maryam (d. 1952) and *sittī* 'Alawiyya (d. 1940) were born. During the first colonial period, the Italian authorities sought to contact *sayyid* Hāšim as they considered his role as a mediator instrumental in the control of the Muslim population in the Colony. However, they got poor results from that mediation.⁸

⁴ Voll, *A History of the Khatmiyyah Tariqah*, pp. 195-196.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 412.

⁶ On *sayyid* Hāšim, see Nicole Grandin, "La Sharifa Myriam bint al-Hashim al-Mirghani," *Islam et Sociétés au Sud du Sahara*, 2, 1988, pp.122-128; Jonathan Miran, s.v. "Hāšim al-Mīrḡanī," in EAE and John O. Hunwick – Rex S. O'Fahey (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa. Volume I. The Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to c. 1900*, Leiden, Brill 1994, pp. 203-204.

⁷ *Sīdī*, or its feminine correspondent *sittī*, is the abbreviation of *sayyidī* (f. *sayyidatī*), meaning "my Master" ("my Mistress").

⁸ Massimo Romandini, "Politica musulmana in Eritrea durante il governatorato Martini,"

Sayyid Hāšim's passing left no male offspring. Italian authorities feared that the death of the only male representative of al-Mīrḡanī holy family would lead to a destabilizing religious leadership vacuum in the Colony. Consequently, they began to actively seek another al-Mīrḡanī willing to reside in Keren, in the Eritrean territory. The choice fell upon *sīdī* Ġa'far al-Mīrḡanī (d. 1943), who, until that time, had been residing in Kassala in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.⁹ *Sīdī* Ġa'far's relationship with the Italian colonial power is testified by his participation in colonial ceremonies as a representative of the Muslim community.¹⁰ According to colonial propaganda records, Ġa'far al-Mīrḡanī also contributed to mobilizing colonial soldiers (*ascari*) during the conquest of Libya in 1911.¹¹

Against the Italian authorities' expectations, *sayyid* Hāšim al-Mīrḡanī's daughter, *sītī* 'Alawiyya, also emerged as another important religious mentor in the country. Her authority was also related to successful achievements in conflict mediation among locals, as well as between Italian authorities and local people.¹² According to colonial data, *sītī* 'Alawiyya's influence was particularly relevant among colonial soldiers.¹³

When in July 1940 WWII broke out in East Africa, British authorities in Sudan referred to *sīdī* 'Alī al-Mīrḡanī, giving him a seat in the Advisory Council for Northern Sudan, which formed during the war.¹⁴ As for Eritrea, the al-Mīrḡanī representatives, who had been regarded as advisors and intermediaries during the Italian occupation, found

Islam, storia e civiltà, 3, 2, 1984, pp. 127-131; *Idem*, "Personaggi musulmani nelle pagine di Ferdinando Martini," *Islam, storia e civiltà*, 4, 1, 1985, pp. 57-62.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ On *sayyid* Ġa'far, see Silvia Bruzzi, "Il colonialismo italiano e la Ḥatmiyya in Eritrea (1890-1941). *Sayyid* Ġa'far e *šarīfa* 'Alawiyya nelle fonti coloniali italiane," *Africa (Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente)*, 66, 3, 4, 2006, pp. 435-454; *Idem*, 'Ġihād, sufi e colonialismo in Africa sub-Sahariana. Il caso della Khatmiyya in Eritrea' (Tesi di dottorato, Università di Cagliari, 2011); Jonathan Miran, "Ġa'far al-Mīrḡanī (1871-1943)," in *EAE*; O'Fahey, *Arabic Literature of Africa*, p. 208.

¹¹ *Rivista Coloniale*, Bollettino ufficiale n. 5 del 1/02/1912.

¹² On *sītī* 'Alawiyya's role in Eritrea, see Bruzzi, 'Ġihād, sufi e colonialismo,' pp. 133-221.

¹³ Lettera, Riservato urgente, Cheren, Commissariato Regionale di Cheren, 6 settembre 1917, *Archivio Eritrea* (AE), pacco 1022, Ministero Affari Esteri – Roma (MAE); Telegramma espresso di servizio, Commissariato Regionale di Cheren, 7 settembre 1917, AE, pacco 1022, MAE.

¹⁴ Voll, *A History of the Khatmiyyah Tariqah*, p. 417.

themselves in a controversial position, mostly because of their close links with the Sudanese branch of the *Ḥatmiyya*. The following part of this contribution aims at pointing out how the racist attitude of the Italian colonial government contributed to alienate the support of a branch of the al-Mīrḡanī family.

2. *Sīdī Ġa‘far al-Mīrḡanī’s condemnation of Fascist racial laws*

From 1935 to 1941 racist attitudes characterized the Italian colonial policy, and a number of provisions were issued that separated colonials from their subjects.¹⁵ According to an Arabic article found in a Mīrḡanī’s private archive in Cairo, entitled *al-Islām wa-l-ḥurriyya* (Islam and Freedom),¹⁶ *sīdī Ġa‘far al-Mīrḡanī* (1871-1943) condemned the Fascist racial policy. This document complicates the relationship between al-Mīrḡanī family and the Italian government. Indeed, *sīdī Ġa‘far*, who was recognised by the colonial authorities as the representative of Eritrean Muslim communities, would claim an alignment with the democratic forces, namely a political support to the British front.

I got a copy of this document in Cairo in 2009 from the grandson of *sīdī Ġa‘far*, Aḥmad b. *sītī* ‘Alawiyya bt. *sīdī Ġa‘far al-Mīrḡanī*. Handwritten on the article, is the date 1938. The latter is probably approximate and it should be post-dated 1940, when the East African Campaign took place. According to Aḥmad b. *sītī* ‘Alawiyya, the article contains a

¹⁵ For a study on inter-racial legislation and relationships in Eritrea, see Barbara Sorgoni, *Parole e corpi. Antropologia, discorso giuridico e politiche sessuali interrazziali nella colonia Eritrea (1890-1941)*, Liguori, Napoli, 1998. Regarding racism in Fascist colonialism, see Luigi Goglia, “Note sul razzismo coloniale fascista,” *Storia contemporanea*, 19, 6, 1988, pp. 1223-1266; *Idem*, “Sul razzismo coloniale italiano,” *Materiali di lavoro*, 2, 3, 1991-92, pp. 97-116; Richard Pakhurst, “The development of racism in fascist Italy’s colonial empire (1935-1941),” *Ethiopian Journal of African Studies*, 4, 2, 1987, pp. 32-51. For a study on the local perception of racist laws in oral memories, see Alessandro Volterra, *Sudditi coloniali: ascari eritrei 1935-1941*, Angeli, Milano, 2005, pp. 140-154.

¹⁶ The origin of the newspaper from which this article derives is unknown and the research is still ongoing. I assume it should have been published in Sudan or in Egypt, within an anti-Italian propaganda. The original document belongs to the al-Mīrḡanī family private archives in Cairo.

speech that would have been delivered in the Agordat area.¹⁷ Here follows a facsimile of the article and my translation in English.



¹⁷ Interview of the author with Aḥmad al-Mīrḡanī, Cairo, 2009.

اننى وكل معتنق للدين الاسلامى ، أو كل من غرى فى
عروقه الدم العربى ، يمتعت حسب تعاليم دينه أى اعتداب أو
طمع ، ويحارب بقوته كعرب يعتز بكرامته كل ظلم أو جشع
وانه لمن المؤلم أن نرى فى هذه الأيام الأخيرة دعاة
للتفرقة على حساب اللون . نظام جديد يخالف تعاليم ديننا
وتقاليدنا العربية القوية ، وينادى بتشريع لا يقره ديننا
الحنيف إذ لا فضل للانسان على انسان الا بالتقوى

ان الشورى هى سنة نبينا صلى الله عليه وسلم ومن تبعه
من خلفائه الراشدين وهى توازى فى عصرنا هذا النظام
الديموقراطى ، وهو ما نرتضيه تشريعاً لنا يحفظ حقوق
الفرد والامن . فمن حرية فى الفكر الى حرية فى القول
لحرية فى العمل الى ما غير ذلك من حريات

فلا غرابة اذا رأينا العالم أجمع يتحد ويحارب من أجل
هذا المبدأ السامى الذى يناشئ ومبادئنا . ولا شك مطلقاً
أن النصر النهائى سيكون حليفهم ماداموا يكافحون من أجل

الانسانية حمماء ورخائها وسعادتها . .

ولكن يجب أن نعتقد نحن الشعب الارثري ، أن هذه الحرب ليست كما ظنناها بادىء الامر حرباً خاطفة تنتهى فى وقت قصير بل هى كما تدل على ذلك مجريات الحوادث لن تنتهى الا بعد أن تأتى على كل حرث وتلتهم كل زرع أو ضرع

ونحن ما دمنا قد فرضنا على أنفسنا الاشتراك لتحقيق النصر وجب علينا أن نلتفت الى أمور ديننا ونتمسك بأهدابه . وليلزم كل منا الصبر ويتذرع بالجلد حتى تنقضى هذه الايام العجاف وتزول النصة ويكون كل أمر صعب المال الآن فى متناول الايدى فيما بعد

بهذا وحده نكون بحق وحقيق قد ضربنا المثل فى حفظ كيانتنا ونكون قد قمنا بواجبنا بمد يد المامونة للأمم المتحدة ، مامونة لا أشك أنها ديدن كل مسلم يفار على دينه ويرتجى الخير لأمتة والعالم . . .

2.1 Islam and Freedom

His eminence *al-sayyid* Ġa'far b. *al-sayyid* Bakrī b. Ġa'far b. *al-sayyid* Muḥammad 'Uṭmān al-Mīrganī, Eritrean religious leader.

I, every believer in Islam and every person of Arabic blood disdain, according to the teachings of our religion, any usurpation and greed. As Arabs proud of our dignity, we strongly fight every act of injustice or voraciousness. It is painful for us to see advocates of discrimination on the basis of colour during these days. This is a new system that contradicts the teachings of our religion and our Arab ethnic traditions and it advocates for legislation that is not supported by our righteous religion according to which there is no preference for any human being on another except through piety.¹⁸

The Consultation (*ṣurā*) is the practice (*sunna*) of our Prophet, may God's salutations and peace be upon him, and his Rightly-Guided Successors who followed him. It corresponds in our present time to the democratic system which protects the rights of individuals and nations and this is the legislation that we are satisfied with. From the freedom of thought, to the freedom of speech, from the freedom of work, to other such freedoms. It is therefore not strange when we see the entire world united in fighting for this sublime principle that are in line with ours. We have absolutely no doubt that the

¹⁸ In the Qur'ān there are two verses with a reference to the issue of color and race (all Qur'ānic references are based on the Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an: Text and Explanatory Translation*, Muslim World League, New York, 1977). The first states: "Among the signs of Allah are the creation of the Heaven and of the Earth, and the diversity of your languages and colours. Lo! herein indeed are portents (signs) for men of knowledge" (XXX: 22). The second states: "O mankind! Lo! We have created you from a male and female, and We have made you into nations and tribes, so that ye may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you in the eyes of God is the most pious, for Allah is Knower and Aware" (XLIX: 13). There are also several *ḥadīṭ* claiming the equality of human beings. Among this, one is often reported as belonging to the Prophet's Last Sermon, mentioned in almost all books of *ḥadīṭ*s. It states: "All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action" (Fadel Abdallah, "Islam, Slavery, and Racism: The Use of Strategy in the Pursuit of Human Rights," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 4, 1, 1987, p. 42). In his speech, *sīdī* Ġa'far seems to make a reference to this *ḥadīṭ*.

final victory will be before them as long as they struggle for the sake of all of humanity, its happiness and prosperity.

However, we the Eritrean people must know that this war is not, as we initially thought, a short war. As suggested by the latest events, the war will not end until it covers all the lands and consumes everything.¹⁹ As long as we make obligatory on ourselves to participate to achieve the victory, we must pay attention to the dictates of our religion and follow them. Every one of us must be patient and resist until these miserable days end, when the pain will come to an end and all the difficult matters will be in our reach.

Only in this way, in truthfulness, we would have been exemplary to protect our being and would have carried out our duty to help the united nations; a help, I have no doubt, that is the nature of every Muslim who takes his religion to heart and who wishes for the well-being of his nation and the world.

3. al-Mīrḡanī's position during the East African campaign

In the speech "Islam and Freedom," *sīdī* Ġa'far al-Mīrḡanī appeals to pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism to face the new colonial Fascist policy that was pursued, in that period, through racial discriminatory laws. *Sīdī* Ġa'far justifies his alignment with the British front on the basis of the conformity of democratic values to the Islamic orthodoxy. He finally anticipated the devastating effect of the war, a conflict that will reach its climax in 1941 with the battle of Keren. The city, the headquarters of the Eritrean branch of the *Ḥatmiyya*, would be the theatre of one of the bloodiest battles of the WWII East African Campaign.

The position of Ġa'far al-Mīrḡanī is to be ascribed to the context of local disagreement with Fascist racist policy. This policy fostered local disaffection towards the Italian Government, as well as divisions among the supporters of the Italian and British military forces. Throughout the war, the two Eritrean representatives of *Ḥatmiyya*, *sīdī* Ġa'far and *sītī* 'Alawiyya, would show a difference

¹⁹ Literally "all plants and livestock."

in their approach to the Italian Government. *Sīdī* Ġa‘far would confirm his favour for his Sudanese links. In fact, at the time of this speech, which urged Muslim people to espouse the Democratic cause supporting the British front, Ġa‘far al-Mīrḡanī was about to, or had already, withdrawn from Keren, to move to Agordat towards the Sudanese border. According to an oral source widespread in Keren, *sīdī* Ġa‘far dreamt about his burial in Kassala.²⁰ After his retreat to Agordat, he left his first son, *sīdī* Bakrī in Keren.²¹ After a stay there, he moved to Teseney where he died in 1943 and was finally buried in Kassala, beyond the Eritrean border.²²

On the contrary, *sītī* ‘Alawiyya stayed in Massawa up to the outbreak of World War II, when she finally moved to Keren,²³ and her activities remained rooted within the Eritrean interests. A number of oral traditions regarding *sītī* ‘Alawiyya tend to stress her involvement and influence within the Italian occupation of Sudan, which took place from July 1940 to January 1941. I have heard one of such accounts from a relative, bearing the same name as her illustrious ancestor. According to this narrative, during World War II *sītī* ‘Alawiyya went to Sudan, and the Italians followed her. British authorities asked the above-mentioned *sīdī* ‘Alī al-Mīrḡanī to meet her in Kassala. On that occasion, he is said to have asked her not to go to Sudan again since, if she did, the Italians would have followed her.²⁴ This tradition was told to me in another version, as an example of *karāma* performed by the *ṣarīfa* in that period. *Sīdī* ‘Alī supposedly asked *sītī* ‘Alawiyya not to go to Sudan and in this way prevented the Italian army, that always followed her, from occupying other parts of Sudan.²⁵

The Italian conquest of Kassala also complicated the relationship between the *ṭarīqa* and the colonial administrators in British Sudan.

²⁰ Interview of the author with Faquh Aḥmad, *ḥalīfat al-ḥulafā’*, Keren, 2004. The full text has been reported in Silvia Bruzzi, ‘Colonialismo italiano e Islam in Eritrea (1890-1941)’ (Tesi di Laurea inedita, Università di Bologna, 2005).

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ Interview of the author with *sītī* ‘Alawiyya b. *sīdī* Ġa‘far al-Mīrḡanī, Cairo, 2009.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ Interview of the author with Hāšim Muḥammad ‘Alī Blenai (102 years old, follower of Ḥatmiyya), Massawwa, 2009.

As Gabriel Warburg states, for example, the Italian invasion of the region seemed to be detrimental to ‘Alī al-Mīrḡanī’s fortunes. Indeed, because of the close relations that his relatives in Eritrea had with Italian authorities, the British government suspected him.²⁶ However, al-Mīrḡanī representatives in the region remained loyal to the British playing an important role during the conflict in a crucial period when the threat of an Italian invasion from Ethiopia and Eritrea appeared to be imminent.²⁷

According to an oral tradition widely widespread in Sudan and reported by John O. Voll,

when the Italians occupied Kassala, Sayyids Muhammad ‘Uthman and Hasan (sons of Sayyid Ahmad and nephews of Sayyid ‘Alī), assumed real leadership in the occupied area and dealt with the Italians. At the same time the Sayyids and others, including Sayyid ‘Alī’s representative in Kassala, ‘Abdallah Faqīrī, helped refugees escape and sent out “information of greatest value” to the British forces. The major contribution of the sayyids was that their prestige and leadership made it possible for Kassala to survive two evacuations and occupations with a minimum of public disorder.²⁸

These narratives emphasize the role of the al-Mīrḡanī family in maintaining the order among the locals and in mediating with the colonists. On the other hand, European powers reserve a special attention for the *Ḥatmiyya* during the war. Kassala and Keren were both the main centres of the brotherhood, respectively in the Sudanese and Eritrean region, and the main targets of the Italian-British conflict in the region. After the Italian occupation of Kassala in July 1940, the British stated that *Ḥatmiyya*, the centre of the order in which *sayyid* al-Ḥasan al-Mīrḡanī’s tomb is located, “should remain as a sanctuary whatever happened.”²⁹ At the same time, following an Italian bombardment of Omdurman, it was stated that the Italians would never at-

²⁶ Warburg, *Islam, Sectarianism*, p.108

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 585-586

²⁸ Voll, *A History of the Ḥatmiyyah Tariqah*, p. 586.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 587.

tack sīdī ‘Alī’s quarters.³⁰ According to a local tradition, ‘Alī al-Mīrḡanī foreshadowed the bombing of Kassala.

It is told that the Italians sent a message to the Mirghani family in Kassala that they would bomb the town at 4:00 a.m. on a certain day and suggested that they leave. Sayyid ‘Alī, who was in Khartoum, was informed and told the family to stay. That night, in an impossibly short time, he made the round trip from Khartoum to Kassala by car. While he was in Kassala he went to the mountain at 4:00 a.m. wrote something in the air with his finger, and the bombing was prevented by this action.³¹

This is surely a *karāma* narrative that celebrates the *baraka* which *sayyid* ‘Alī held during the conflict between the Italian and British Government, but it also emphasizes the Italian prudence with regards to the Mīrḡanī.

The final stage of Italian occupation of Eritrea has been symbolically associated with *sīttī* ‘Alawiyya al-Mīrḡanī’s death in 1940. In particular, the present *ḥalīfat al-ḥulafā’* in Keren relates her disappearing with the pain for the impending Italian defeat.³² This subsequent interpretation emphasizes that both *sīttī* ‘Alawiyya’s and the Italians’ authorities were deeply entwined. In *Barīd al-Imbirāṭūrīa*, an Arabic newspaper published by the Government in Addis Abeba during the Italian occupation, *sīttī* ‘Alawiyya’s death is announced stressing Muslim grief and mourning within the Italian Empire. On that occasion the fact that she had always been very close to the Government is celebrated: “Al-Šarīfa al-Mīrḡanī died. Sadness prevails among all the Muslims of the Empire. [...] She was always close to the Italian Government.”³³ Besides, *sīttī* ‘Alawiyya’s passing represented especially for all her entourage a loss of an eminent ref-

³⁰ “[F]ollowing an Italian bombardment of Omdurman, the Khatmiyya leaders spread a rumour that the attack was directed against Sayed Abdel Rahman personally, since all the bombs fell in the Abbasia district. The Italians, it was pointed out, would never attack Sayed Ali’s quarters” (*Sudan Monthly Intelligence Summary* cit. Warburg, *Islam, Sectarianism*, p.108).

³¹ Voll, *A History of the Khatmiyyah Tariqah*, p. 563.

³² Interview of Silvia Bruzzi with Faquḥ Aḥmad.

³³ *Barīd al-Imbirāṭūrīa*, Anno V, N. 156, Addis Abeba, 27 October 1940 - XVIII. *Barīd al-Imbirāṭūrīyya* is an Arabic version of the Fascist newspaper “*Il Corriere dell’Impero*,” published in Addis Abeba during the Italian occupation.

erence mentor in a crucial period. In the *qaṣīda* composed by her *ḥalīfa* on that occasion, the coming of much harder times is lamented following the loss of her protection.³⁴

To sum up, in Eritrea there had been a well-established relationship between Italian authorities and the representatives of the al-Mīrḡanī family. However, since the East African Campaign began, the Mīrḡanī's unconditional support of the Italian policy in Eritrea had undergone an important break. While *sīttī* 'Alawiyya continued supporting the Italian government, *sīdī* Ġa'far al-Mīrḡanī adopted the pro-Britain position assumed by the Sudanese branch of the *Ḥatmiyya*. Significantly, the two Mīrḡanī representatives were buried respectively in Eritrean and Sudanese territory, thus confirming the important relationship that had characterized their careers. However, it is unlikely to view this break as an anti-colonial movement, since in this period the movement was still at an early stage in Eritrea.³⁵ On the Sudanese side, the British were also linked to *sīdī* 'Alī al-Mīrḡanī and *sīttī* 'Alawiyya's sister, *sīttī* Maryam.³⁶

In the post-war years, only *sīdī* Bakrī al-Mīrḡanī (d. 1954),³⁷ a son of *sīdī* Ġa'far al-Mīrḡanī, remained as representative of the al-Mīrḡanī family in the Eritrean region, since *sīttī* 'Alawiyya was childless. Already begun in the colonial period, *sīdī* Bakrī's role as a Muslim religious representative in the Western Eritrean lowland continued after the end of WWII. He acted as a mediator in the following years,

³⁴ *Ḥalīfa* Aḥmad's private archive, current *ḥalīfat al-ḥulafa'* of the *Ḥatmiyya* in Keren.

³⁵ Volterra, *Sudditi coloniali: ascari eritrei 1935-1941*, p. 147. Alessandro Volterra also points out that the racial legislation and the idea of a separate society contributed to the political reprocessing of a minority part of the Eritrean society that began to consider the end of Italian occupation as the only option (*Ivi*).

³⁶ For example, during the final years of WWII, British authorities appealed to Maryam to intervene and solve a conflict that had arisen in the Eritrean-Sudanese region between the Beni Amer and the Hadendowa, the two populations from which *sīttī* 'Alawiyya and *sīttī* Maryam respectively descended on their mothers' sides (Voll, *A History of the Ḥatmiyyah Tariqah*, p. 593).

³⁷ On *sīdī* Bakrī al-Mīrḡanī's role, see Silvia Bruzzi, s.v. "Bakrī b. Ġa'far b. Bakrī b. Ġa'far al-Ṣadiq b. Muḥammad 'Uthmān al-Mīrḡanī," in *EAE*; Tekeste Negash, "Italy and its relations with Eritrean political parties, 1948-1950," *Africa (Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente)*, 59, 374, 2004, pp. 417-452; Joe L. Venosa, 'Paths toward the Nation: Islamic Identity, the Eritrean Muslim League and Nationalism in Eritrea, 1941-61' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Ohio University, Athens – Ohio, 2011).

which were crucial for the future political organization of the country. Elected president of the Muslim League in 1946, he ended up declaring his alignment with the Unionist party in 1948.³⁸ His political reliability was criticized when his allegiance shifted from the Unionist Party to the Independence Bloc in 1949.³⁹ Little is known about his role during the Federation period (1952-1955), but according to a newspaper article published at the time of his death, Bakrī al-Mīrgānī adapted to the new political setting and was on good terms with Haile Selassie's Government.⁴⁰ As for Sudan, Ahmed al-Shahi states that the continuity of the *Ḥatmiyya* in the region, as both a religious and political organisation, manifested itself with a particularly flexible and moderate attitude in religion and politics.⁴¹

³⁸ Negash, "Italy and its relations with Eritrean political parties," p. 427.

³⁹ Venosa, "Paths toward the Nation," p. 168.

⁴⁰ The announcement of *sīdī* Bakrī al-Mīrgānī's death was published in the Eritrean Arabic newspaper *al-Zamān*, Asmara, 10 July 1954. The announcement reports that, on the occasion of Haile Selassie's visit to Keren in 1953, *sīdī* Bakrī was chosen as representative of the people of Keren and of the Sahel regions to offer their presents and homages to the Emperor.

⁴¹ Ahmad al-Shahi, "The continuity of the Khatmiyya Order in Northern Sudan," *Bulletin of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies*, 8, 1, 1981, pp. 13-29.