

The 'Mad Mullah' and Northern Somalia

Author(s): Robert L. Hess

Source: *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1964), pp. 415-433

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/179976>

Accessed: 12/11/2008 05:12

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=cup>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



Cambridge University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of African History*.

## THE 'MAD MULLAH' AND NORTHERN SOMALIA

By ROBERT L. HESS

UNTIL a few years ago the Mullah Muhammad Abdullah Hassan of Somalia was written off by most Western writers as the leader of a localized revolt devoid of significance for the future of Somalia. In the eyes of the British, Muhammad Abdullah Hassan was an outlaw, a madman, a profligate, and a libertine. But, grudgingly, the British acknowledged the power he had over his followers and his extraordinary tenacity of purpose in facing a European power with whom he never compromised himself or came to terms. To the Italians, the Mullah at times seemed to be 'a little African Napoleon . . . equal to the great Corsican perhaps only in his hatred of the English'.<sup>1</sup> The Italians, however, never regarded the Mullah as an outlaw. Rather he was a not ignoble rebel moved by an ideal—fanatic, barbaric, but nevertheless an ideal.

Today, the figure of Muhammad Abdullah Hassan, proud symbol of freedom from outside influences, commands a new respect among the Somali people. Thus, shortly before the Republic of Somalia became independent, one Somali author referred to 'the famous Somali nationalist Muhammad Abdullah Hassan'.<sup>2</sup> Not since the days of Ahmad Grañ, who overran Ethiopia four hundred years ago, has there been a Somali leader of men from many tribes. Ahmad Grañ is for the Somalis a symbol of their past conquests; similarly, Muhammad Abdullah has become for modern Somalis a symbol of a national unity transcending tribal lines but true to Islam and the Somali's love of independence.

For the contemporary Somali, too, the Mullah has become a literary figure in his own right, and today he has been called the greatest poet of the Somali people. Perhaps it would be best to evaluate him in the light of the criteria he himself established in one of his poems:

He who adores Allah and follows the Law,  
Who never neglects the Creed in which he was raised,  
Who never disdains or denies undeniable truth;

He who at the hours of prayer invites others to pray,  
Who is faithfully charitable, offering the first fruits,  
Who does not cut short his fast in Ramadan;

He who hospitably offers cattle and other goods,  
Who never answers defensively because he is ashamed,  
Whose forefathers were never charged with avarice;

<sup>1</sup> Francesco S. Caroselli, *Ferro e Fuoco in Somalia* (Rome: Ministero delle Colonie, 1931), 300.

<sup>2</sup> These are the words of J. J. Vianney, a Somali, in his article, 'The Frontier Between Abyssinia and Somalia', in *Somali Chronicle*, Mogadiscio, 30 November 1957, 2.

He who in these times is loyal to the Faith,  
 Who does not flee in disorder, like the Obo to the Amhara,  
 Who does not fight for the uncircumcised heretic;

He who keeps afar from that vile set of Somalis,  
 Who does not serve the infidel for recompense,  
 Who does not haggle insisting on tenths of a cent;

He who for the holy war is crowned with flowers,  
 Who kills the English, dogs, unceasingly,  
 Who has a victory rich in songs and hymns;

O men—(ignorance is certainly against the ways of Man,  
 Nor is it good to contradict oneself if one seeks the truth)—  
 He who is known by these virtues,

Is he not perhaps a true Muslim?<sup>3</sup>

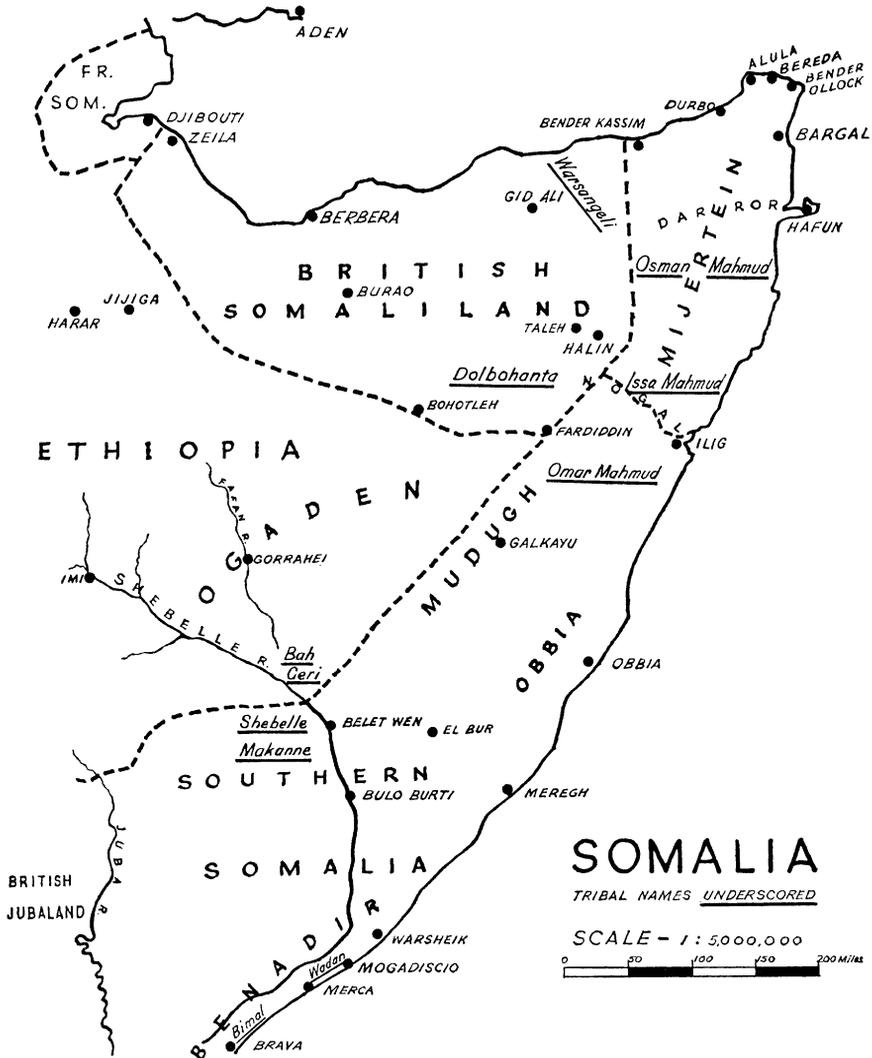
## I

At the end of the nineteenth century the Horn of Africa had been partitioned among Ethiopia, Great Britain, and Italy. The evacuation of the Egyptian garrison at Harar and the military prowess of Ras Makonnen had permitted Menelik to extend his new Ethiopian empire eastwards into the Ogaden region inhabited by various Somali tribes. In 1884 the British had extended a protectorate over northwestern Somalia for the strategic defence of Aden and the Bab el Mandeb entrance to the Red Sea. In 1893, after years of difficult negotiations, an Italian chartered company had assumed its concession of the Benadir coast of southern Somalia, and an Italian protectorate had in anticipation been proclaimed over the rest of southern Somalia in 1889. In that year of apparent but ephemeral diplomatic success, when Italy assumed that Ethiopia, too, was its protectorate, northeastern Somalia came under Italian influence.

The last decades of the century saw the emergence in that part of Somalia of two independent, mutually hostile sultanates. Yusuf Ali, ruler of Obbia, had won his sultanate by force from the Sultan of the Mijerteins in 1884, and since then had to contend with Mijertein hostility and a growing rivalry for control of the interior and the hotly disputed region of the Wadi Nogal. In February 1889 Yusuf Ali accepted Italian protection in order to influence the balance of power in northeastern Somalia.<sup>4</sup> For the Italians, the protectorate cost little and could be managed by the

<sup>3</sup> The above is the author's translation of Bruno Panza's Italian version of the Somali *gabai* (poems) of Muhammad Abdullah Hassan. The Mullah's son, Sheikh Abdurrahman Said Muhammad, has preserved much of his father's poetry. The Somali original and the Italian translation of this poem, 'Sow Ma Aha?' ('Is He Not Perhaps?'), appear in *Somalia d'Oggi*, I (12 October 1956), 21-2.

<sup>4</sup> Libro Verde: Somalia italiana (Atti Parlamentari, Legisl. XIX, Prima Sessione, N. XIII quater, 25 luglio 1895), doc. 2, p. 27. letter from Consul Filonardi to the Foreign Minister, Zanzibar, 17 December 1888; doc. 6, p. 30, telegram from Crispi to Filonardi, Rome, 30 January 1889; doc. 10, annex 1, pp. 36-7, Treaty for Protectorate over Obbia.



chartered company, which was interested in the export of ostrich feathers and incense from Obbia. In April, Osman Mahmud, Sultan of the Mijerteins and son-in-law of Yusuf Ali, requested Italian protection. He, too, saw the possibilities inherent in 'submitting' to the Italians: guns, a source of income in the small annual subsidy, and a successful countermove to Yusuf Ali.<sup>5</sup>

In the years that followed scant attention was paid to Obbia and the Mijertein. Vincenzo Filonardi, whose trading company had been entrusted with the administration of southern Somalia, made an annual tour of inspection to present the Sultans with their subsidies. Occasionally the

<sup>5</sup> Libro Verde, doc. 11, annex I, p. 39, Treaty for Protectorate over the Mijertein.

two Sultans demanded arms and munitions, ostensibly to combat the tribes of the interior. They were usually satisfied with the gift of two or three rifles and a few hundred cartridges.<sup>6</sup>

The rivalry between the two Sultans flared up again in 1897, when Osman Mahmud sought to establish a town at the mouth of the Wadi Nogal in the disputed area. The Italians carefully avoided committing themselves to one side or the other. The Mijertein Somalis continued to prove troublesome, as they engaged in their customary practices of raiding Obbia, smuggling guns in from Djibouti to Alula, and engaging in acts of piracy on the seas as far as Socotra.<sup>7</sup> Only when Osman Mahmud seemed to be penetrating into the Mudugh and threatening the precarious peace of southern Somalia did the Italians join with the Obbians in a punitive expedition in April 1901. They bombarded the coastal villages of Bereda and Bender Kassim and confiscated more than 500 rifles and 30,000 cartridges at Alula and four other coastal villages.<sup>8</sup> The Italian intervention aimed, not at subduing the Mijerteins, but at restoring the *status quo ante* to northeastern Somalia. By the Convention of Bender Ollok on 18 August 1901, the Sultan of the Mijerteins again recognized his dependence on Italy, and the Italians compelled Yusuf Ali to end his occupation of several of the villages of his northern neighbour. The Nogal remained a disputed area, and, like British Somaliland, the protectorates continued to be loosely administered. No European agent resided in the interior, and the Europeans had few sources of information on developments within the mountainous region of northern Somalia.

The restoration of the *status quo* in northern Somalia was not to be easily accomplished; inevitably, new elements entered into the picture. The relations of Ethiopia, Great Britain, and Italy with the Somali tribes were soon complicated by the appearance of a leader who was to keep not only the sultanates, but also British Somaliland, the Ogaden area of Ethiopia, and the Benadir, in a state of turmoil for two decades. One cannot avoid the conclusion that the course of events in the great eastern Horn of Africa was strongly influenced by the personality of that one man—Muhammad Abdullah Hassan, later known to the British as the ‘Mad Mullah’.

<sup>6</sup> Archivio del Ministero dell’Africa Italiana (AMAI), pos. 55/4, f. 22, letter (reserved) from Editor G. Dalla Vedova of the Bulletin of the Italian Geographic Society. In this same period there were several instances of Government reprimanding the Society for publishing inaccurate information about Somalia; Libro Verde, doc. 85, pp. 201–2, report of Commander Rebaudi of the *Piemonte* to the Naval Ministry, Zanzibar, 1 January 1895.

<sup>7</sup> In June a certain Ahmad Hassan Urbeita twice succeeded in smuggling several hundred rifles into Alula under orders from his employer, Abu Bakr Pasha of Djibouti; on his third attempt he was jailed by British authorities at Aden. AMAI, pos. 59/2, f. 25, report of Acting Vice-Consul Lang to the Foreign Minister, Aden, 6 June 1900. Also, AMAI, pos. 59/2, f. 26, memorandum from British Chargé d’Affaires to the Foreign Minister, Rome, 14 September 1900; letter from British Agent Hardinge to Governor Dulio of Southern Somalia, Zanzibar, 8 September 1900.

<sup>8</sup> AMAI, pos. 59/2, f. 25, report from Governor Dulio of Southern Somalia to the Foreign Minister, Mogadiscio, 6 February 1900.

Born in the upper Nogal valley in eastern British Somaliland in the early 1860s, Muhammad Abdullah travelled as a boy to Aden, where he studied Islamic law and tradition. There he heard of the accomplishments of the Sudanese Mahdi and of other religious reformers of the Muslim world of the nineteenth century. Several times he made the pilgrimage to Mecca, earning for himself the honorific of 'Hajj', and gradually established a reputation as a holy man and sheikh. At Aden he was exposed to the influence of the Ahmadiyah sect, which preached a puritanical Islam. During his sojourn at Aden he became particularly convinced of the truth of the Ahmadiyah teacher, Muhammad Salih, who soon broke with the sect. Muhammad Abdullah then attempted to make converts to the new Salihyah school of his teacher, but his efforts at proselytisation met with little success in sophisticated Aden.<sup>9</sup>

In 1895 he returned to British Somaliland and set up a school in Berbera. To the unreceptive Somalis, who were of the less strict Qadariah order, he preached renunciation of all earthly vanities and aspirations, solitude and isolation as far as possible from all others, and strict abstinence from coffee, tea, and tobacco.<sup>10</sup> Like many another religious reformer, Hajj Muhammad, for all his enthusiasm and prophetic vigour, at first gained but few adherents. Soon he retreated to the interior among the Dolbohanta, the tribe from which his mother came. At Bohotleh he preached with greater success, and his reputation as a *mullah* (judge, or religious dignitary) spread among the Darod tribes of Ethiopia and British and Italian Somalia. By April 1899 the Mullah had acquired a following of approximately 3000 tribesmen.<sup>11</sup>

As Muhammad Abdullah's power and reputation grew, he became increasingly impatient with the British authorities, whose rule over the Somaliland protectorate was as nominal as that of the Italians in Somalia. The British, unaware of what was really taking place outside the coastal towns of Zeila and Berbera, soon attributed to the Mullah the goal of establishing his authority over southeastern British Somaliland and eastern Ethiopia. British information sources asserted that the Mullah was laying claim to supernatural powers and that there was no longer any doubt that he was organizing a movement antagonistic to the British Administration.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Caroselli, *Ferro e Fuoco in Somalia*, 7-8; Douglas Jardine, *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1923), 35-48.

<sup>10</sup> The Qadariah is the oldest self-perpetuating order in Islam; there are few parts of the Islamic world where it is not active. It was the first order to be introduced into northeast Africa and consequently is more widespread than the more recent orders. See J. S. Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 238-42.

<sup>11</sup> Jardine, *op. cit.* 41. This estimate of the Mullah's strength was sent by the British Consul-General, Colonel J. Hayes-Sadler, to the Marquess of Salisbury.

<sup>12</sup> In August 1889 the Mullah wrote to the British, 'This is to inform you that you have done whatever you have desired. You have oppressed our ancient religion without cause. . . . Now choose for yourselves. If you want war, we accept it; but if you want peace, pay the fine.' Cited in Jardine, *op. cit.* 43.

Exactly how the British obtained their information is unknown, for the Mullah's followers were bound by a solemn oath of secrecy.

Provoked by the British and annoyed at those Somalis who would not accept the Salihyah, Muhammad Abdullah defiantly led his followers to occupy the strategic watering holes at Burao, a village midway between Bohotleh and Berbera. With all the fervour of a man certain of the exclusive truth of his religion, he declared a holy war on all infidels. The jihad, it seems, was at first aimed at Somalis of the Qadariyah sect, but it was only a matter of time before the term was applied to the Ethiopians and the British as well.<sup>13</sup> The proclamation of the jihad led to an increase in the strength of the Mullist dervishes, who in their religious enthusiasm soon turned to excesses of fanaticism and forced conversions. By the beginning of February 1900 the Mullah's strength had gained considerably, and Sultan Osman Mahmud began to sell to Muhammad Abdullah some of the rifles he had procured from Djibouti. The Sultan of the Mijerteins was aware of the potentialities inherent in having an ally on the flanks of his enemy, Yusuf Ali. Moreover, he was also a shrewd businessman and profited from the sale of rifles at the going price of 300 camels each.<sup>14</sup>

As the dervish movement spread, trade in the Ogaden and the British protectorate came to a standstill. The movement became an international problem in March 1900, when the Mullah's men dared to attack an Ethiopian encampment at Jijiga, only forty miles east of Harar. The Ethiopians under Gerazmatch Bante claimed to have repulsed the attack with great ease and heavy losses to the enemy. The British Vice-Consul at Harar reported otherwise: 'The Abyssinians, it seems, fear the Somalis very much. I have never seen men so afraid as they are now; they have given rifles to the children to show they have troops here.'<sup>15</sup> But the Mullah did not attack Harar; instead he contented himself with domination of the whole of the Ogaden, raiding Qadariyah Somali tribes for camels, provisions, and rifles.

### III

In the course of the next five years the British and Ethiopian governments co-operated in a series of futile expeditions against the Mullah and his followers. In 1901 a joint Anglo-Ethiopian expedition of almost 17,000 men failed to accomplish anything other than to drive the Mullah temporarily across the border into the Mijertein.<sup>16</sup> Borders were ignored by both British and Somali. The British could do little to weaken the Mullah, and the Ethiopians were effective only in preventing the dervish movement from occupying the western part of the Ogaden. Time and again the British were frustrated in their goals and forced to retreat.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> A. Baldini, 'Somalia Italiana', in *Enciclopedia Italiana*, xxxii, 115.

<sup>14</sup> J. J. Vianney, 'Mohamed Abdulla Hasan: A Reassessment', in *Somali Chronicle*, Mogadiscio, 13 November 1957, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Jardine, *op. cit.* 46.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 56; A. Gaibi, *Manuale di Storia politico-militare delle Colonie italiane* (Rome: Ministero della Guerra, 1928), 170.

<sup>17</sup> Jardine, *op. cit.* 85-6.

After the failure of the first two expeditions, the British decided that Italian as well as Ethiopian co-operation would be needed in a three-pronged attack against the Mullah. Italian public opinion and government officials, however, were still affected by the disaster at Adowa, and the Foreign Ministry limited its commitment merely to permitting the British to land forces at Obbia.<sup>18</sup> Again the military met with failure, and the Mullah's forces pressed hard upon the British.

From the beginning, the Italians were more realistic than the British about military action against the Mullah. The commander of one of the Italian ships off Obbia wrote: 'I wish that I were mistaken, but I fear that the expedition will end in a fiasco; the Mad Mullah will become a myth for the British, who will never come across him, and a serious worry for the Benadir and our sphere of influence.'<sup>19</sup> To make matters worse, the British at Obbia had wrongly accused the Sultan of favouring the Mullah's cause and had had him exiled to Eritrea and his goods and properties confiscated. After a change in personnel, the Foreign Ministry learned of its error and gave orders to restore the situation as best as possible. In May 1903 Yusuf Ali's son was appointed to act as regent for his exiled father. The action was undertaken just in time, for the people of the Mudugh, who had remained loyal to their Sultan, threatened to rebel against the British and the Italians. Thus the Italians learned that they had to contend not only with the threat of the Mullah, but also with that of British mismanagement.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, in the background there always hovered the threat of Ethiopian expansion eastward.

By the end of June the British again withdrew in defeat, and this time the Mullah took full advantage of their retreat. He swept down to the coast and occupied the whole Nogal valley from Halin in British Somaliland to Ilig on the Indian Ocean.

A fourth British expedition in 1904 was initially more successful, and in March drove the Mullah again into the Mijertein. In April the British landed a force of 500 men at Ilig. With the defeat of the Mullah in the offing, the British magnanimously offered the Mullah safe conduct into permanent exile at Mecca. Hajj Muhammad did not bother to acknowledge the offer.<sup>21</sup>

The fact that the Italians had not participated in military operations on a large scale intrigued the Mullah, and he saw in the Italian position a way out of his troubles. On 16 October 1904 the Mullah met with an Italian agent for the first time and listened with a sympathetic and critical ear.

<sup>18</sup> Speech by Under-Secretary of State Baccelli in the Chamber of Deputies, 10 February 1903, in *L'Africa italiana al Parlamento nazionale, 1882-1905* (Rome: Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 1907), 681-2.

<sup>19</sup> AMAI, pos. 59/3, f. 43, report by the Commander of the *Caprera* to the Foreign Minister, Obbia, 14 March 1903.

<sup>20</sup> AMAI, pos. 59/3, f. 43, telegram from the Foreign Minister to Consul Sola, Rome, 20 February 1903; f. 50, report by Capt. Ajroldi to the Minister of War, Obbia, 7 September 1903; f. 50, report by Admiral Mirabello to the Foreign Minister, Obbia, 16 May 1903.

<sup>21</sup> Caroselli, op. cit. 57. Jardine makes no mention of this offer.

The Mullah, resentful of the English and the Mijertein Somalis, was willing to negotiate: 'My people and I will be the Italian government's people, and we shall be dependent on it, if it will favour us and . . . permit us to build a town on the coast.'<sup>22</sup> Such an agreement was concluded at Ilig on 3 March 1905. The Mullah, regarded by the British as a madman and an outlaw, was assigned the territory of the Nogal between the sultanates of Obbia and the Mijertein. On 24 March the British authorities at Berbera expressed their approval of the agreement, which also permitted the Mullah's followers to enter part of the British protectorate for pasturage in the dry season.

With the Ilig agreement, the Italians increased the number of their protectorates in northeastern Somalia to three, but the quality of each remained unchanged. The Territory of Nogal, it is true, acted as a buffer state between Obbia and the Mijertein. Moreover, the threat of a dervish invasion of southern Somalia was averted at a time when Italy was particularly concerned over the future of that area. It remained to be seen, however, whether the Mullah might not foment trouble between his new protector and dissident elements of the hinterland of the Benadir. If anything, the Italians gained time while the Mullah refrained in his own interest from committing any overt act of hostility. The price paid was cheap enough, but the goods obtained were not of enduring quality.

With the establishment of the Nogal protectorate and the Italian recognition of the Mullah as a political as well as a religious leader, the prestige of the Mullah rose high among Somalis of all tribes. Somali tribalism, however, asserted itself even in this non-tribal movement, which was dominated by the Darod; the dervish followers of Muhammad Abdullah Hassan were for the most part from the Dolbohanta tribe of his mother or from the Bah Geri of his father.<sup>23</sup> But although the Mullah's message of religious prophecy was not well received outside the Darod tribal regions, other Somalis saw the Mullah as a symbol of revolt, the embodiment of their nomadic concept of freedom and liberty and of their dislike for the non-Somali. For this reason the Italians greatly feared the spread of dervishism into southern Somalia. 'Dervishism' had come to mean revolt, and the Bimal and Wadan tribes of the Benadir, while not adhering to the religious message of Hajj Muhammad, understood well his political triumph.<sup>24</sup> Emissaries of the Mullah, often Bah Geri converts, were especially active in supplying arms to the Bimal and in preaching their message of revolt among the Somalis of the Benadir.

To contain the Bimal revolt and to prevent a Bimal-Dervish alliance, the Italians depended on the forces of Obbia and the Mijertein. Reliance upon the northern Sultans for the maintenance of an equilibrium in the north, however, was an unsure gamble. It was rumoured that Osman Mahmud, at his most Machiavellian, wanted to attack the Mullah in league with

<sup>22</sup> Declaration by the Mullah to Pestalozza, Ilig, 17 October 1904, cited in Caroselli, *op. cit.* 78-9.

<sup>23</sup> Caroselli, *op. cit.* 161-2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 163.

Yusuf Ali, his traditional enemy, whom the Italians had restored to power in 1905.<sup>25</sup> There followed a series of battles, now won, now lost by the Mullah. In an attempt to break out of Obbian–Mijertein encirclement, the Mullah sought closer alliances with the Warsangeli of British Somaliland and the Bah Geri of Ethiopia.

Thus from 1905 to 1908 an uneasy peace, punctuated by raiding, prevailed in northern Somalia. The nominal protectorate was a contradiction in terms, and Italy appeared to be sovereign over northeastern Somalia only upon sufferance of the local rulers.

Foreign Minister Tittoni, who had given his fullest support to the military operations then taking place in the 'peaceful penetration' of southern Somalia, still hesitated to intervene directly in northern affairs.<sup>26</sup> The head of the Central Directory for Colonial Affairs, moreover, warned the Minister of the complications that would ensue from intervention: the need to suppress arms-smuggling, the delicate problem of dealing with rumoured relations of Yusuf Ali and Osman Mahmud with the Ethiopians and the English, and the impossibility of Italian action without first providing for a definitive settlement of Italy's relationship with the three protectorates. The only effective remedy was one that the Italian Parliament was not yet willing to underwrite—a military expedition of 1000 men, which at an estimated cost of one million lire could disarm the northern Somalis as a preliminary to further political action.<sup>27</sup>

In September 1908 the dervishes became more daring. They invaded the Mudugh in an attempt to establish direct contact with the Ogaden Bah Geri on the upper Shebelli. At the same time, in connexion with the Warsangeli alliance, the Mullah's followers once again invaded British territory. In the months that followed, Mullist raids on the Ogaden and Obbia increased, and northern Somalia's thirty months of relative peace—marred only by occasional intertribal raiding—came to an end.

#### IV

The resumption of hostilities meant only a return to the frustrations of the 1900–5 period. There was one ray of hope: Abdullah Shahari, a trusted friend and adviser of the Mullah, defected from the dervish movement. It was he who had concluded most of the arrangements leading to the Ilig Agreement of 1905. But Muhammad Abdullah had recently alienated Abdullah Shahari by disapproving of the latter's marriage to a Mijertein woman. Now, having split with the Mullah over this personal matter, Abdullah Shahari sought revenge.

Armed with accusations against the conduct and religious orthodoxy of

<sup>25</sup> AMAI, pos. 59/4, f. 59, Foreign Ministry memorandum on northern Somalia, January 1908.

<sup>26</sup> AMAI, pos. 59/4, f. 59, note from Tittoni to Cappello, Rome, 6 December 1906.

<sup>27</sup> AMAI, pos. 59/4, f. 59, memorandum from Central Directory of Colonial Affairs to the Foreign Minister, Rome, 15 July 1907.

the Mullah, Abdullah Shahari led a mission to Mecca, where he had an audience with Muhammad Salih, the founder of the Salihyah. After an absence of several months, Abdullah Shahari appeared at Aden, bearing a letter to the Mullah which he claimed came from his venerable teacher. Revenge was sweet, and the Mullah's ex-friend conferred with the Italian Acting Consul to determine how the strongly worded message could be put to political use against Muhammad Abdullah. Late in March 1909 Abdullah Shahari sailed from Aden aboard the *Elba* in the company of Acting Consul Renato Piacentini. At Ilig a messenger was sent to Muhammad Abdullah to give him Muhammad Salih's letter:

I have before my eyes the news that you and your people have got into bad ways and no longer respect the *Shari'a*. Of this I have proof, for you and your people raid, and rob, and enjoy the women and wives of those men whom you kill and whose goods you take for your own. . . . I do not approve of this, for it is against the law and the word of our holy prophet Muhammad. . . .

From this moment on I wish to have nothing to do with you and your people. I will not write to you again, and I do not want you to write to me. Those who follow the path of God have his protection, but those who do evil shall surely be punished. . . .

Listen to all I tell you, and choose; but if you do not follow my advice and continue to do as you have been doing, all I have to do is say one word, and all the faithful will raise their voices with me against you and your people.

What you have done is now enough; leave off your bad ways. For if you do not change I will not write you again, nor will I have anything to do with you, and I shall inform all the faithful brethren of your wicked actions, and you shall no longer belong to [the Salihyah].<sup>28</sup>

In effect, Muhammad Salih excommunicated the Mullah. The *Qadi* of Ilig declared in the presence of the Mullah that he approved of Muhammad Salih's decision; he and eight other men were killed on the spot.<sup>29</sup> The news of the excommunication and the death of the *Qadi* caused great consternation among the followers of the Mullah. Though some of them believed the letter to be a forgery, many dervishes left the Mullah's camp to return to their tribes in the Ogaden, in the Mijertein, among the Dolbohanta. The Mullah's influential brother-in-law, Ali Dere bin Osman Sheikh, defected with 400 dervishes and their horses and rifles.

The practical effects of the excommunication were felt primarily in the Benadir, where letters from Muhammad Salih to the principal religious leaders propagandized against the Mullah and his 'heresy'. In northern Somalia, however, the repercussions of the excommunication were much less than anticipated, either for reasons of ignorance of the action or because of the loyal spirit the Mullah had instilled in most of his followers. The prestige of the Mullah, though lessened, was still great enough to

<sup>28</sup> An Italian translation of the Arabic letter appears in Caroselli, *op. cit.* 129-31, and an English translation in Jardine, *op. cit.* 184-5. It would seem that the English text is not entirely accurate.

<sup>29</sup> Jardine, *op. cit.* 186; Caroselli, *op. cit.* 131.

create some uneasiness among his immediate neighbours in the Mijertein, British Somaliland, and Obbia.

The British, particularly, erred in their estimation of Muhammad Salih's letter. On the basis of the letter, they sent Sir Reginald Wingate and Slatin Pasha in April 1909 to persuade the Mullah to come to terms with them. If Wingate and Slatin Pasha had hoped to solve the Somali problem, they were poorly prepared to do so. Their mission failed completely; the much-vaunted colonial experience of Wingate and Slatin in the Sudan amounted to little in dealing with the intransigent Muhammad Abdullah Hassan.<sup>30</sup> On 12 November 1909 the Protectorate government was ordered to withdraw from the interior of British Somaliland and to concentrate its small forces at three towns on the coast. The Somalis of the interior were to be armed for their own protection against the dervishes of the Nogal.

The British now undid whatever good might have been accomplished by the Mullah's excommunication. By their evacuation of the interior they left the door open for the dervishes to return to Somaliland, while the prospects for expansion out of the narrow Nogal valley allowed the Mullah to rally his remaining followers with the promise of earthly success.

It soon seemed only a matter of time before the dervishes would be on the move again. Because the Italians were unaware of the turn that British policy was taking, they felt certain that 'if the Mullah should abandon the Nogal, he would in all probability direct himself to the southwest and would menace, in alliance with the Bah Geri, the territory of the Sultanate [of Obbia] and of those tribes loyal to us in the Benadir itself'.<sup>31</sup> The major concern of the Italians, thus, was the safety of southern Somalia; Yusuf Ali was not to direct his forces to the north, but was to act as 'an outer wall' to protect the Benadir and its hinterland.

The Italian Colonial Office's evaluation of the Mullah was based on 'our trusted informant, Abdullah Shahari'. 'Of all the projects attributed to the Mullah,' claimed the Colonial Office, 'the oldest and the one dearest to him, the truest and most convenient, his endless dream, is to go to the Benadir, not to the coast, not against the presidios, but to the Benadir of the interior, rich in water and in livestock.'<sup>32</sup> If this analysis were true, and if Muhammad Abdullah and his estimated four to six thousand rifles and three thousand lances were to move south, then the Italian position in southern Somalia was indeed in grave danger. The entire Somali peninsula could fall under the Mullah's control.

## v

As the British withdrew from the interior, *pari passu*, the Mullah stepped up his raids into the eastern part of their protectorate. Anarchy prevailed

<sup>30</sup> Jardine, *op. cit.* 189-92. The text of the letter is given.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> AMAI, pos. 171/2, f. 13, memorandum from Agnesa to the Foreign Minister (reserved), Rome, 27 July 1909.

here too, and old intertribal rivalries were renewed. First the Dolbohanta were raided, and 800 warriors fell before the dervish onslaught. Then the Issa Mahmud, an Italian-protected tribe, felt the Mullah's wrath. And lastly the Mullah directed his forces against those of the Sultan of the Mijertein himself.<sup>33</sup>

Osman Mahmud now had to face the Mullah, dissident chiefs, and the Italians, who disapproved of his independent policy and wished to control him more tightly. The Sultan had dallied with the cause of the Mullah in the past, supplying arms and munitions to the dervishes to be used against Yusuf Ali. At one time Osman Mahmud had even presented one of his daughters to the Mullah as a bride. With the onset of dervish raids into the Mijertein, Osman Mahmud broke off all relations with the Mullah, and Muhammad Abdullah in retaliation cut the throat of his new bride.<sup>34</sup> Osman Mahmud thereupon turned to the Italians with the demand for an honourable settlement.

The Italians now had Osman Mahmud in an unenviable position. Rather than depose him and thus present no front to the Mullah's threat to the Mijertein, the Italian Foreign Ministry decided to negotiate for the renewal of an effective protectorate over the Sultan.<sup>35</sup> Early in March 1910 the Mijertein Sultan recognized that he had violated the Bender Ollok Accord of 1901 and promised to observe rigorously the stipulations of that accord. For his past misdeeds he agreed to a penalty of 1800 Maria Theresa thalers, that is, the amount of the subsidy for 1909. Local chiefs were given the right to deal directly with the Italian Consul at Aden, who was to act as Commissioner for the Protectorate. The Sultan gave the Italians full right to the institution of residencies 'in all places that the Government shall establish them'. Lastly, the Sultan again promised not to deal directly with foreign powers.<sup>36</sup>

In his report summarizing the negotiations, Piacentini underscored the need for Italy to maintain her promises or threats to the Sultans in order not to compromise Italian prestige. In the past the Italians had threatened direct, though limited, government action in the north, but when a crisis arose the government always backed down, giving the Sultans the impression that the Italians were weak, or not willing to expend the effort necessary to maintain the *status quo*. With the evacuation of the Somaliland protectorate and the increased activities of the Mullah, Piacentini foresaw the need to organize the forces of the Mijertein to serve better the double purpose of resisting the Mullah and of indirectly protecting the Benadir.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Caroselli, *op. cit.* 138-40.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 143.

<sup>35</sup> AMAI, pos. 59/6, f. 92, letter from the Foreign Minister to the Consul at Aden, Rome, 3 March 1910.

<sup>36</sup> The text of this accord is given in Caroselli, *op. cit.* 144.

<sup>37</sup> AMAI, pos. 59/6, f. 92, report from Piacentini to the Foreign Minister, Aden, 16 March 1910.

The Foreign Minister now recognized the true nature of the Mullah's threat to Somalia:

The central point of the northern Somalia question, like that of British Somaliland, is the situation created by the Mullah; until the phenomenon of the Mullah is eliminated or modified, it does not seem to me right to hope that the region will overcome the present phase of insecurity and of anarchy and enter into the phase of political and economic settlement. . . . To remove this tumor from the breast of Somalia . . . [we must] employ a consistent bland remedy of weakening the Mullah by making the coastal and land blockade about him ever tighter and by increasing the powers of resistance of the Sultanates and of the peoples that surround him.<sup>38</sup>

The Mullah, indeed, still remained the main problem facing the Italians in northern Somalia. The British, having abandoned the interior of their protectorate, indicated a willingness to co-operate with the Italians wherever possible; the two European colonial powers agreed to aid each other in the surveillance of the Somali coast, in the blockade of the trade of hostile tribes, and in promoting collaboration among those tribes still under British influence and those in the Italian protectorates.<sup>39</sup> London's point of view on the Mullah was fixed: His Majesty's Government no longer felt bound by the Ilig Accord of 1905. But the British, in effect, were in no position to do much more than protest verbally against the Mullah's aggressiveness.<sup>40</sup> This time the Ethiopians did not enter the picture because of the uncertainty created by Menelik's failing health.

The first success in this policy of Anglo-Italian co-operation came in December 1910. In that month the British Warsangeli and the Italian Mijertein Somalis peacefully resolved all their outstanding disputes and, convening in Bender Kassim, agreed to act jointly in combating Muhammad Abdullah and his dervishes. This accord marked the first real strategic success for the Italians and the British in the policy of containing the Mullah.<sup>41</sup> Slowly the Italians began to gain some control over the political situation in northeastern Somalia, and the Somali tribes showed greater respect for the protector Power. The Mijertein-Warsangeli accord led to a common offensive against the Mullah, whose forces were now cut off from arms and munitions ordinarily smuggled in from the coast. For a brief time the Mullah procured arms from Harar, until Dedjaz Tafari Makonnen (later known as Haile Selassie) assumed control of the military command in Harar, his family's hereditary fief, in June 1911.

In the first half of 1911 the Mullah maintained a steady series of raids against the Mijertein Somalis, who in June succeeded in launching a

<sup>38</sup> Camera dei Deputati, *Eritrea e Somalia: Discorso del Ministero degli Affari Esteri Conte Francesco Guicciardini pronunziato nella seduta del 12 marzo 1910* (Rome: Tipografia della Camera dei Deputati), 24.

<sup>39</sup> AMAI, pos. 59/6, f. 94, letter from the Foreign Minister to Governor De Martino, Rome, 4 October 1910.

<sup>40</sup> AMAI, pos. 59/6, f. 94, letter from the Foreign Minister to Governor De Martino, Rome, 25 June 1910.

<sup>41</sup> Caroselli, op. cit. 148.

counter-attack with the aid of their Warsangeli allies. By the end of the year the Mullah and his followers were driven out of Italian Somalia into British Somaliland, where they occupied Bohotleh with great cruelty and oppressed the Dolbohanta, who had shifted their allegiance back to the British. Thus the dervishes completely abandoned the Nugal valley, and the last vestige of the Ilig Accord of 1905 was done away with.

Meanwhile the death of the aged Sultan Yusuf Ali enabled the Italians to strengthen their hold on Obbia. Yusuf Ali had been ailing for several months, and when he finally died on 28 September 1911, Iacopo Gasparini, the Director of Civil and Political Affairs at Mogadiscio and assistant to the Governor of southern Somalia, was on hand to regulate the succession.<sup>42</sup> Yusuf Ali left five sons, who were undecided on the division of their father's estate. Several of the younger sons preferred to divide the sultanate among all five sons, which would have complicated the 'political settlement' of northern Somalia. Thanks to the work of the Resident at Obbia, who had been appointed in 1909, the prestige of the Italians had risen considerably, and Gasparini was invited to settle the dispute, to Italy's advantage.<sup>43</sup>

Gasparini expressed the opinion that Ali Yusuf, eldest son of the late Sultan, should be nominated Sultan. His role in regulating the succession, so similar to that of the British Agent in Zanzibari affairs twenty years earlier, naturally placed Ali Yusuf under obligation to the Italians, who did not hesitate to press their advantage. To win full Italian support against his brothers, the new Sultan reaffirmed his acceptance of the protectorate and enlarged Italian control over the sultanate. The Obbian was not to initiate an offensive against the Mullah without the consent of the Resident, whom he recognized as the representative of the Italian government in all matters. Obbian expansion in the direction of Meregh was halted, and all movements by government-subsidized or -armed *askaris* (that is, all military movements) had to be approved by the Italian Resident.<sup>44</sup>

The following year Governor De Martino of southern Somalia brought both Obbia and the Mijertein into still closer contact with the colonial government by the creation of a Commissariat of Northern Somalia with its seat at Alula. Finally, then, the northern protectorates were removed, as provided by a law of 1908, from the jurisdiction of the Consul at Aden, who for several months of the year was not in communication with the sultanates. De Martino, under whose administration the vast hinterland of the Benadir was occupied, did not feel that the time was right to press further controls on the northern Sultans. Osman Mahmud had received the Governor at Bargal with every indication of loyalty to the Italian

<sup>42</sup> AMAI, pos. 59/7, f. 104, report from Gasparini to the Foreign Minister, Obbia, 1 October 1911.

<sup>43</sup> AMAI, pos. 59/7, f. 104, report from Governor De Martino to the Foreign Minister Mogadiscio, 8 October 1911.

<sup>44</sup> AMAI, pos. 59/7, f. 104, Gasparini report annexed to De Martino report of 8 October 1911.

government after his very chequered past. The new Sultan of Obbia was weak and uncertain of his control over Obbia tribesmen, and had willingly turned to the Italians, permitting the Resident a great deal of interference in Obbian matters. The Mullah had withdrawn from Ilig to Bohotleh. In sum, the colonial government regarded the situation in northeastern Somalia as satisfactory.

The Mullah had once more become a purely British problem, as far as the Italians were concerned, and dominated the British 'protectorate', where there was 'an ever-growing anarchy unparalleled on British soil'.<sup>45</sup> Dervish raiders at one time penetrated deep into the town of Berbera, completely unnerving the townspeople.<sup>46</sup> The abandonment of the interior was tantamount to giving the Mullah control of the greater part of British Somaliland. Even the Mullah claimed to be losing control of the situation; to the British Consul at Berbera he wrote late in December 1912, 'I inform you that I am disposed to make peace and settlement. . . . I also inform you that most of the dervishes have got beyond my control, and frequently raid the people without my orders.'<sup>47</sup>

In January 1913 the Mullah moved his headquarters to Taleh, thirty miles west of Halin, where over the years Arab masons from the Yemen had constructed a fortress of remarkable strength. The stronghold consisted of a stone wall-ring of enormous strength and thickness, varying from 12 to 14 feet at the base to about 6 feet at the top. The main walled enclosure was surmounted by thirteen forts and protected by three 60-foot-high outlying forts at a distance of about 500 feet from the main construction. Within the main enclosure there was space for several hundred head of livestock. Each fortification also had its own wells and stone granaries. In this formidable citadel the Mullah was to make his headquarters for the next seven years.<sup>48</sup>

The outbreak of the First World War found the Italians in a relatively secure position in both southern and northeastern Somalia. In February 1914 a Residency had been established at Alula, and brought to bear upon Osman Mahmud's followers the same Italian action that had been effective in Obbia since the creation of the Residency of Obbia five years earlier.<sup>49</sup> Osman Mahmud, however, continued to reside at Bereda or Bargal, and thus the usefulness of the Resident at Alula was less than that at Obbia. Ali Yusuf continued his friendship for the Italians. With the evacuation of the Nogal, Obbian forces turned again towards the Mudugh and the Ogaden. In the Benadir the Italians continued their penetration into the interior, and occupied Bulo Burti in May 1914. The new Residency at Bulo Burti thus became the advance post against the Bah Geri allies of the Mullah, who were led by his brother Khalifa Abdullah Hassan. From the region of Belet Wen, the Bah Geri harassed the Bantu Shebelle and

<sup>45</sup> Jardine, *op. cit.* 199.

<sup>47</sup> The text of this letter appears in Jardine, *op. cit.* 209.

<sup>48</sup> Jardine, *op. cit.* 212-13.

<sup>49</sup> AMAI, pos. 151/1, f. 3, unsigned and undated memorandum on 'Atti di Governo' (Mogadiscio, 1913).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 237.

Makanne tribes along the Shebelli river, occasionally penetrating further down-river. The Bah Geri also attempted in vain to spread their message of religion and political revolt among the Hawiya tribes that had submitted to Italian rule. By 1915, however, the Bah Geri found themselves facing the Obbian forces in the Mudugh and at El Bur and the Italian-led forces at Bulu Burti.<sup>50</sup> Thus the dervish movement was contained by the Italians and their Somali subjects.

The war itself had little influence upon the colony and the protectorates, despite the preoccupations of the Foreign Ministry about a general Muslim uprising. The Caliph at Constantinople had proclaimed a holy war against all infidels on 12 November 1914, five months before Italy entered the war, but the decree had little effect in the Horn.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the Mullah had been conducting his own personal jihad since 1900, a holy war discounted by the majority of Somalis as easily as they discounted the jihad proclaimed by the Caliph during the Libyan war.

A graver preoccupation was caused by events in Ethiopia, where a dynastic struggle had been taking place for several years. The Italians were clearly worried by the trend of events. Rumours kept reaching Mogadiscio of Muslim Ethiopian leaders in the camp of the Mullah and of the expected conversion of Emperor Lijj Iasu to Islam. Most appalling was the prospect of an alliance of the Muslims of Ethiopia and northern Somalia to 'liberate' their lands from the Christians. The Turkish representative at Addis Ababa even went so far as to justify the Ottoman alliance with Germany by claiming that Kaiser Wilhelm had become a convert to the religion of Muhammad.<sup>52</sup> In April 1916, Italian fears appeared to materialize with the announcement by Lijj Iasu of his conversion to Islam. The announcement, however, unleashed a storm of opposition in Ethiopia, culminating on 27 September 1916 in the deposition of the Emperor and his precipitous flight into the Danakil country.

Before his deposition the young Lijj Iasu had entered into negotiations with the Mullah, with whom he contracted a marriage alliance. In August 1916 the Ethiopian Emperor dispatched a mission from Harar to the Mullah's camp at Taleh to fetch the bride, but the fall of Lijj Iasu in September prevented the celebration of the marriage.<sup>53</sup> Lijj Iasu had also installed a completely Muslim administration at Harar, and thereby attracted the Somalis of the Ogaden into his orbit. But this too came to an end, and Ras Tafari, a cousin of Lijj Iasu, bloodily suppressed the embryonic Muslim coup.

Italian fears of a Muslim uprising were based, admittedly, on exaggerated news of events in Ethiopia. The evidence at the time seemed to justify the fears of the European Powers, and Lijj Iasu's actions after his deposition in

<sup>50</sup> Caroselli, *op. cit.* 210-14.

<sup>51</sup> AMAI, pos. 153/3, f. 27, telegram from Governor De Martino to the Colonial Ministry, Mogadiscio, 21 August 1915.

<sup>52</sup> AMAI, pos. 59/8, f. 118, *passim*. 'Situazione politica, 1915-1916.'

<sup>53</sup> Jardine, *op. cit.* 246.

maintaining sporadic contact with the Muslim elements of the eastern part of the Empire and of Somalia gave added life to European fears.

The position of the Mullah throughout the affair was most equivocal. From correspondence intercepted by the British and by the Italians, we know that he was negotiating with Lijj Iasu.<sup>54</sup> Yet haughtily he looked down upon all alliances as a sign of weakness. Muhammad Abdullah Hassan, like many leaders, was independent of mind, and refused to regard himself as bound by mere pieces of paper, especially if contracted with 'infidels', a word that he applied indiscriminately to his personal and political enemies. From his fortress the Mullah wrote to the British in March 1917:

It was suggested that we were in communication with Lijj Iasu and had dealings with the Germans and the Sultan of Turkey; that feeling weak we required assistance. . . . It is you who have joined with all the peoples of the world, with harlots, with wastrels, and with slaves, just because you are so weak. But if you were strong, you would have stood by yourself as we do, independent and free. It is a sign of your weakness, this alliance of yours with Somalis, Yibir [an outcast group living among the Darod], and Arabs, and Sudanese, and Infidels, and Perverts, and Yemenis, and Nubis, and Indians, and Baluchis, and French, and Russians, and Americans, and Italians, and Serbians, and Portuguese, and Greeks and Cannibals [*sic*], and Sikhs, and Banias, and Moors and Afghans and Egyptians. They are strong and it is because of your weakness that you have had to solicit as does a prostitute. So much for my answer to you.<sup>55</sup>

While the Mullah did not consider himself weak, nevertheless he was wise enough to take advantage of the possibilities inherent in any alliance proffered him. In the summer of 1917, as a result of information furnished by Osman Mahmud, the Italian authorities arrested at Alula a certain Sheikh Ahmed Shirwa bin Muhammad. The Sheikh, who was unaware of the import of the papers in his possession, was carrying correspondence between the Mullah and Ali Said Pasha, commander of the Ottoman troops at Lahej in the Turkish-occupied portion of Aden protectorate. Muhammad Abdullah Hassan had, in effect, placed himself under Turkish protection.<sup>56</sup>

Immediately after the war the Mullah's following seems to have diminished in number. Four years of limited action by the Italians and their protected sultanates, by the Ethiopians and the British, had confined the Mullah's activities to southeastern British Somaliland, where his chances of gaining new recruits became increasingly meagre. The anarchy in the interior had led, according to British estimates, to the death of one-third of the population of the Somaliland protectorate.<sup>57</sup> Stagnating at

<sup>54</sup> The Italian Consul in Harar informed the Governor of Eritrea of Lijj Iasu's relationship with the Mullah on 14 August 1916. See Caroselli, *op. cit.* 219.

<sup>55</sup> The full text of this letter appears in Jardine, *op. cit.* 249. Where Jardine translates 'Kaffirs', I have substituted the literal meaning, 'infidels'.

<sup>56</sup> The Arabic original and the Italian translation of the Treaty of Protection and related correspondence appear in Caroselli, *op. cit.* 222-5. <sup>57</sup> Jardine, *op. cit.* 315.

Taleh, the Mullah passed his peak of power and groups of his adherents began to desert the dervish movement. With the Mullist following weakened and local troops well trained, the British Governor was able to convince London that operations on a modest scale would be sufficient to cause the downfall of the dervishes.<sup>58</sup>

In January 1920 the British again confronted the dervishes on the battlefield. In the area of Jid Ali the British recruited an additional force of 1500 tribesmen and then unveiled their secret weapon—'Z' unit of the Royal Air Force. Aerial bombardment was a new phenomenon to the Somalis, who, according to one British author, variously conjectured that the aeroplanes were chariots of Allah coming to take the Mullah to paradise, or a Turkish invention come to tell of the Turkish Sultan's victory in the First World War.<sup>59</sup> When the first bomb fell, narrowly missing the Mullah, it became obvious that the Mullah had been ignorant of the existence of aeroplanes. Baffled, he ordered a retreat southwards. By 1 February the British land and air forces pressed on to the gates of Taleh, where the dervish forces had converged. On 12 February the British took Taleh, only to find that the Mullah and a small band of followers had slipped out of the fortress a few nights earlier.<sup>60</sup>

Not until ten weeks later did the British discover the whereabouts of the missing Mullah. British land forces had blocked the Mullah's path into the Italian protectorates; the only direction open was the southwest, into the Ogaden. His fortune at its lowest ebb, Muhammad Abdullah and his small party unsuccessfully attempted to gain support from the Ogaden Somalis, who had heard of his great defeat. Early in May the Mullah set up his camp in the neighbourhood of Gorrahei on the Fafan river. Soon a British tribal levy of some 3000 Somalis penetrated into the Ogaden, with Ethiopian permission, and reached the Mullah's encampment at the end of July. The Mullah's brother Khalifa, his eldest son, and many of the dervishes, they found, had died in a recent smallpox epidemic. After brief resistance, Muhammad Abdullah was again forced to flee. With a few hundred followers he stopped in the area of Imi at the headwaters of the Shebelli in October 1920. Disease and famine struck the camp of the Mullah and the faithful remnant of his once mighty dervish movement. On 10 February 1921 news reached Mogadiscio that the Mullah had died at Dimtu on the Shebelli some time in the first week of January. Later news confirmed that the proud religious leader had died of pneumonia, probably following an attack of influenza.<sup>61</sup>

With the death of the Mullah the dervish movement came to an end, and

<sup>58</sup> Jardine, *op. cit.* 239.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* 266.

<sup>60</sup> AMAI, pos. 161/2, f. 12, letter from the Foreign Minister to the Italian Embassy in London, Rome, 19 March 1920.

<sup>61</sup> British sources contend that the death of the Mullah occurred on 23 November 1920; Italian sources are consistent in the January 1921 date. Cf. Jardine, *op. cit.* 307, and Caroselli, *op. cit.* 299. The Mullah's son claims that his father died on 21 December 1920, cf. B. W. Andezejewski and I. M. Lewis, *Somali Poetry* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964), 55.

a new era began for southern Somalia, the protected sultanates, and British Somaliland. Muhammad Abdullah Hassan had been regarded by his followers as their only leader, and with his death his followers returned to their tribe of origin. Thus the dervish problem resolved itself after twenty-one years of free rein.

The problem of the disposition of the Nogal, however, arose again. As in the past, the Sultans of Obbia and the Mijertein presented their conflicting claims for possession of that disputed territory. During the course of the long struggle with Muhammad Abdullah, both the Obbians and the Mijerteins had come into the possession of a large number of modern rifles and ammunition, and the peace of northern Somalia was in jeopardy. Moreover, the Italians could not hope to settle the dispute by drawing a boundary line between the Omar Mahmud tribesmen dependent on Ali Yusuf, and the Issa Mahmud tribesmen dependent on Sultan Osman Mahmud. Indeed, adjudging the boundary between those two tribes would have been as difficult and troublesome as the delineation of some of the boundaries of eastern Europe in the days after Versailles.

In the summer of 1923 Governor Riveri proposed the institution of a commissariat in the Nogal territory with its headquarters at Ilig.<sup>62</sup> His proposal, which was accepted by the Colonial Ministry, provided for presidios along the frontier with British Somaliland, and the Italian occupation of the disputed areas between Obbia and the Mijertein. Although a temporary halt was called by the withdrawal of Riveri in October 1923, it would have been a safe bet to predict that the new Governor, Fascist Quadrumvir C. M. De Vecchi, would attempt to instil the new Fascist militaristic spirit in the Indian Ocean colony and protectorates.

#### SUMMARY

In the first two decades of the twentieth century the affairs of northern Somalia were dominated by the politico-religious movement led by Muhammad Abdullah Hassan. The 'Mad Mullah', as he was styled by the British, proved to be an elusive adversary and at one time forced the British to evacuate their Somaliland Protectorate. The Italians too were concerned about the Mullah's dervishes, who disturbed the peace of Italy's two nominal protectorates, the sultanates of Obbia and the Mijertein, and of their colony in southern Somalia. At one time the Italians found a temporary solution to the problem by granting the Mullah the Nogal Territory in northern Italian Somaliland. For the Ethiopians the Mullah's movement posed a threat to their Empire's expansion eastward to the Indian Ocean because of its appeal for support from among the Ogaden Somalis. Although the Mullah's recruits were mostly Darod Somalis, for Somalis of other tribes he was not only the agent of a not always acceptable religious movement, but also the symbol of political revolt against foreign domination of any kind. Today the Mullah is regarded as a forerunner of contemporary Somali nationalism.

<sup>62</sup> Renato Lefevre, *Politica somala* (Bologna: L. Cappelli, 1933), 43.