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**Complementary Oriental Cities, the Case of Harar and Dire Dawa
(Eastern Ethiopia)**

Abstract

The article touches on a number of themes relevant to the topic of complementarity of cities. Two cities of Eastern Ethiopia are being considered, Harar, an ancient and religious centre of Islam, also called a holy city of Islam in the Horn of Africa, and Dire Dawa, founded as a railway station, which further developed into a commercial and industrial centre and a second chartered city of Ethiopia – after the capital city of Addis Ababa. Statistical data presented in the article show complementary character of both cities on the level of business and economic development, while cultural data answer the question on how two cities can be complementary in the cultural sphere of a society life, the final result of the article being a suggestion that complementarity can be observed not only as an economic, but also as a cultural phenomenon.

mehedenew Harer, mehedenew Dirre
“I am going to Harer, I am going to Dirre”
Bole2Harlem

The phenomenon described as a complementarity of cities corresponds to the concept of supply and demand as, in the modern world, new urban centres emerge to supply the demands of the old ones. This phenomenon can be presented on the example of two cities situated in Eastern Ethiopia, Harar and Dire Dawa. The reason for including both cities into the domain of the oriental world is their Muslim character within the Horn of Africa. They are both Islamic centres, having specific aesthetic and religious features emblematic of the Orient.

Harar, a holy city of Islam

Harar is believed to have been founded in the 9th century but its prominence in the region is connected with its role as a trading centre, which began from the 12th century. Its location on the trading routes from central Ethiopia to the port of Zeila and a gradual penetration of Islam in the Horn of Africa caused the development of the city. By the early 14th century, Islam was “well entrenched in the area. Muslim influence was, however, probably for a long time limited to the towns”¹. It was Shaikh Abadir from Arabia who named and organized the town. In the 16th century, Harar became the capital of the Sultanate of Adal, with its own currency, water supplies and a great number of mosques and holy graves. Citizens of Harar were engaged in agriculture, but the character of the town was strictly commercial.² The city was constantly threatened by the Oromo tribes living around it and, as a consequence, Emir Nur ibn Mujahid decided to build the Jugol wall to protect the town from an invasion by the Oromo people. A sense of security improved the city’s condition, and up to the 19th century Harar developed as an independent Harar Emirate, a trade market and a centre of Islamic learning in the region. After ten years of Egyptian occupation (1875–1885), in 1887 the city was conquered by Menelik, the Emperor of Christian Ethiopia. According to historical comments, “(t)he town’s identity from that moment was continuously degraded [...]. During the reign of Menelik and subsequent regimes, the Harari inhabitants were effectively marginalized from any participation in public government and main civic economic activities”³. At the same time, Näggadras⁴ of Harar, Haylä Giyorgis, who imposed “new customs regulations and additional duties on the trade between Harar and Addis Ababa”⁵, became the richest man in Ethiopia and a figure in the Menelik’s court, and finally was appointed a minister of commerce and foreign affairs.⁶ Harar remained a major commercial centre until 1908 and, consequently, “(t)he Harar and Diré Dawa customs were among the most lucrative in the country”⁷. A modernization of the town took place only under Italian occupation in 1934–1940, as Italians designed an urban planning prospect. Harar had a chance to become one of the best developed towns in Ethiopia. Yet, “at the end of the 1950s, economic growth slowed down”⁸. Moreover, an agrarian reform implemented by DERG (1974–1991) reduced the productivity of neighbouring fields and cut the city off its main commercial items, such as coffee and qat. In addition, a New Harar was established in

¹ R. Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian borderlands*, Red Sea Press, Lawrenceville-Asmara 1997, p. 61.

² R. Pankhurst, *History of Ethiopian Towns*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Wiesbaden 1982.

³ *Harar. A Muslim City of Ethiopia*, P. Revault, S. Santelli (eds.), Maisonneuve et Larose Paris 2004, p. 18.

⁴ Näggadras (Amharic: “head of merchants”), “the title of a person who was appointed to control trade as well as to tax and judge in market areas”, in P.P. Garretson, *The Näggadras, trade, and selected towns in nineteenth and early twentieth century Ethiopia*, “The International Journal of African Historical Studies”, 12, 3 (1979), p. 416.

⁵ P.P. Garretson, *The Näggadras, trade, and selected towns in nineteenth and early twentieth century Ethiopia*, “The International Journal of African Historical Studies”, 12, 3 (1979), p. 421.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 421.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 431.

⁸ *Harar, A Muslim City*, p. 27.

1902 at a distance of 50 km from Harar, and it soon became the biggest city of the region and the second biggest city of Ethiopia. The city was called Dire Dawa. From that time on, Harar began its transformation into a living museum and a local marketplace. Now, the main tourist attraction of Harar is the historical Jugol wall, which was included in the World Heritage List by UNESCO in 2006, as well as the House of the French poet Arthur Rimbaud, who spent eleven years of his life (1880–1991) in Harar. By its inhabitants Harar is considered the fourth holiest city of Islam, with 82 mosques and about a 100 holy graves.⁹ A dense concentration of shrines within the city wall “protects people and place from some of the potential dangers lurking in the open spaces beyond”¹⁰. As a city of a strong social cohesion¹¹, improving living conditions in sensitive neighbourhood and developing a true urban conviviality, Harar won UNESCO’s Cities for Peace Prize for the African Continent in 2002/2003.¹²

Dire Dawa, the railway station

Dire Dawa, often called Dirre, was founded as a railway station on the road from the capital city of Addis Ababa to the port of Djibouti. The railway authorities planned to include Harar into the network but the costs of building a tunnel from Dire Dawa to Harar from the elevation of 1200 m up to the 1885 m elevation of Harar were too high and the project was given up. As a consequence, Harar lost its position on the trade route from Addis Ababa to the ports of the Red Sea, and, therefore, its commercial dominance in the region. The impact of Ethiopian railway development on Harar’s urban dynamics was negative, but led to the emergence of a new town called Dire Dawa.

Over the last hundred years Dire Dawa has developed to become one of the largest cities of Ethiopia and, according to Proclamation No. 416/2004, the second chartered city of Ethiopia, after the capital city of Addis Ababa. “For much of the 1980s and early 1990s, Dire Dawa was known throughout the country as the primary market for contraband imports”¹³. Afterwards, in the late 1990s, when the government changed its policy towards foreign exchange, the contraband market fell down. The importance of Dire Dawa declined as the incidence of poverty in the town increased from 18.2 in 1994 up to 36.6 in 1997.¹⁴ Still, Dire Dawa has a railway station, an international airport and

⁹ Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁰ C. Gibb, *Baraka without Borders: Integrating Communities in the City of Saints*, “Journal of Religion in Africa” vol. 29, fasc. 1, 1999, p. 101.

¹¹ Compare: C. Gibb, *Constructing past and present in Harar*, in: *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective*, eds. Katsuyoshi Fukui, Eisei Kurimoto, Masayoshi Shigeta, vol. II, Kyoto, 1997, pp. 378–390; C. Gibb, *Baraka without Borders: Integrating Communities in the City of Saints*, “Journal of Religion in Africa”, vol. 29, fasc. 1, 1999, pp. 88–108.

¹² *ex aequo* with Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), see: <http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/>.

¹³ A. Bigsten, B. Kebede, A. Shimelis, *Poverty, Income Distribution and Labour Markets in Ethiopia*, Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala 2005, p. 40.

¹⁴ Ibid.

an industrial zone. There are modern hospitals and schools as well as big international markets in the town. Even though “the decline of Dire Dawa as a commercial centre is visible in the declining of business income there”¹⁵, the administration and management of Dire Dawa successfully encourage Ethiopian and foreign investors to settle there and establish new enterprises. The character of the city is changing from commercial into industrial.

Complementarity

According to a definition accepted for the need of this article, “[...] complementary cities should have different urban functions or activities and the urban functions of one city should provide services to business or household making use of functions/activities in other centres. [...] activities in one city should provide their services also to business or citizens located in the other city”¹⁶. Complementarity is understood and estimated mainly by economic data, but in the case of Harar and Dire Dawa I would include also another aspect of complementarity: a religious and cultural one, which indirectly influences the synergy between them, meeting the condition of “urban functions” at the same time. Statistics show balanced elements (annual population growth rate, poverty profile) as well as major differences between both cities.

Table 1. Statistics for Harar and Dire Dawa¹⁷

	<i>Harar</i>	<i>Dire Dawa</i>
<i>Number of inhabitants</i>	183,344	342,827
<i>Annual population growth rate</i>	2.6	2.5
<i>Population size: urban/rural %</i>	50/50%	67/32%
<i>Number of households: urban/rural</i>	28,000/18,000	53,000/12,000
<i>Poverty profile (Per capita expenditures, in Birr)*</i>	1459.68	1397.00

* Source: Welfare Monitoring Unit (1999) from: *Poverty, Income...*, p. 55.

In respect to the number of inhabitants, Dire Dawa is bigger from Harar, but its population growth is slightly less intensive from Harar’s. The important thing for the residents of the region might be its climate, which in the case of Dire Dawa is very

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 121.

¹⁶ E. Meijers, *Synergy in polycentric urban regions: complementarity, organising capacity and critical mass*, IOS Press, Amsterdam 2007, p. 51.

¹⁷ Data of 2007, according to: *Summary and Statistical Report of the 2007 Population and Housing Census, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Population Census Commission*, UNFPA, December 2008, Addis Ababa.

hot and dry, with a low level of precipitation. The average maximum of Dire is 31.4 degrees Celsius, while its average minimum is about 18.2 degrees Celsius. Harar's climate is considered one of the most pleasant in the country, with the average minimum and maximum temperatures of 14 degrees Celsius and 25 degrees Celsius, respectively. Even though people prefer to reside in Harar, the number of Dire inhabitants is twice bigger than that of Harar as they settle in the place where they can get a job.¹⁸ Harar is more balanced considering its population profile (50% urban/50% rural), while Dire Dawa (67/32%) is more urbanized. According to another source¹⁹, the level of Dire Dawa's urbanization is even higher (73.6/26.4%) which shows the general tendency and intention of the city's government. The poverty profile shows that the per capita expenditure of Harar is higher²⁰ than that for Dire, which means that Dire is slightly poorer, nevertheless the difference does not create a discrepancy and shows that there is some kind of balance between the two cities.



Photo. 1. (left) Dire Dawa, Office of Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway authorities; (right) Harar, Marketplace at Asmaddin Gate. Photo: Joanna Kamińska

Harar is the tourist and cultural centre of the region, deriving its income mostly from the tourist business being intentionally promoted by the municipal authorities. For example, within nine months of 2008/2009 Harar earned about 2.3 million Birr²¹ coming from 4530 foreign tourists visiting the city.²² Harar and the nearby Kulubi are the main religious places of Islam in the Horn of Africa, pilgrimage destinations which attract thousands of

¹⁸ There is no statistics available regarding the age of inhabitants but the possible data might show that Dire is a city of young, educated and active people.

¹⁹ Dire Dawa Profile prepared by Dire Dawa Provisional Administration Investment, p. 2.

²⁰ In 1995–1996.

²¹ 1 UDS is around 10 Birr (2009).

²² The information comes from Abdunasir Edris and the Harari State Culture, Tourism and Information Bureau at: <http://hararconnection.ethionetlink.com/HC>

pilgrims from Ethiopia and other Muslim countries of the region. Most of them arrive by train or by plane via Aba Tenna Dejazmach Yilma International Airport of Dire Dawa, the only airport in the region. Harar's increasing tourist traffic has already surpassed the capacity of its hotels, therefore many tourists visiting Harar must stop overnight in Dire. Harar still remains the biggest holy city of Islam in the Horn of Africa, supplying Dire Dawa with the religious and cultural background, as well as catering to clients of faith tourism. On the other hand, the historical town does not develop its social infrastructure, such as hotels or hospitals, while Dire Dawa has modern hospitals and a lot of hospital beds which serve not only Harar, but the whole North-Eastern region of Ethiopia.

Harar is a large agricultural centre, as 50 percent of its inhabitants own their agricultural farms, cultivating the famous Harari coffee, qat or sorghum. And here again, cooperation between Harar and Dire is observable, as coffee is sent to mills situated in Dire Dawa, close to the railway. The Harari families cultivate coffee around Harar but have their mills in Dire Dawa, using its industrial facilities as well as economic encouragements offered by Dire's administration. Harar remains the town of a small, local trade and traditional handicraft, like books' binding or basketry. From the point of view of education, both cities have equal and balanced opportunities, as Alemaya/Haramaya University is placed in between them. In addition, there is a Military Academy in Harar established in 1957, which serves the whole country, while Dire Dawa has its own Dire Dawa University, Technical College and some private high schools.

However, the complementary character of both cities can be seen not only in the sphere of economy and social infrastructure. In Ethiopian pop culture there are many songs about Harar and Dire Dawa, like Ehsan Abduselam's "Harariya"²³ or Mikiyas Chernet's "Abo Mela Alat Dire". The latter sings: *Medhanit nat Dire; Dire Dire fiqir nat Dire* (Dire is like a medicine, my love Dire). In 2006 Abdul Kadir released an album "Harar love", while in his next album of 2009, "Harar Hop", there is a song "Dire Dawa" sung in the Harari language. Some of the songs literally connect both cities, and the example might be a song by Bole2Harlem pop group, "*Enseralen Gojo*" (We will build a house together), which starts from the words of a refrain: *mehedenew Harer, mehedenew Dirre*, which means "I am going to Harer, I am going to Dirre". The song is about a boy who is going to Harar to marry a beautiful Harari girl. In a clip to this song we can mainly see Harar, but Dire Dawa appears as a train travel destination. There are some other pop songs about Harar which, at the same time, mention Dire Dawa in lyrics or in a clip, and vice versa, like "Dire" by Birhanu Tezera, which has an unofficial title "Dire, Harar". In comments to the clip we can find a very emotional one: "Dire Harar 4 life!" Such expressions show the mental attitude of the Ethiopians towards the co-existence of both cities.

²³ All songs and clips can be found on Youtube (DireTube).

Conclusion

Harar, having Arabic origin and developing Muslim culture, was founded in the Cushitic environment of the Horn of Africa. Its geographic position on the route to the Red Sea guaranteed development and wealth for its inhabitants for centuries. When it became a part of the Christian Empire, its Muslim character was not an advantage any more and its elevation was not convenient for the railway track. As a consequence, a New Harar called Dire Dawa, built in 1902 as a railway station, supplied its communication and transport functions, becoming the biggest town of the region and the second biggest city of Ethiopia. Modern technology and industrialization changed the definition of public utility, pushing Harar away from the main route to the position of an ancient, historical and religious centre, a city with a great number of mosques and tourist attractions. Dire Dawa has become, literally and metaphorically speaking, an economic locomotive of the region, serving Harar as a transport, communication and industrial support. The survival of the Semitic, Muslim society of Harar in the Cushitic environment of the Christian Ethiopian Empire is regarded as an anomaly.²⁴ In this context, I would consider the complementarity of Harar and Dire Dawa to be a result of the marginalization of Harar at the turn of the 19th century, which ensured the continuation of the process of economic interdependence and co-operation which started as soon as the town was established in the Cushitic territory in the 9th century.

The complementary character of both cities has its surface exposure in some Internet maps of Ethiopia. Not all of them, even those presenting a high level of generality, include both cities, choosing one of them to be a representative – in most cases Dire Dawa. Buses from Addis Ababa to Harar stop at the crossroads between both cities, leaving foreign tourists to change into a taxi. The phenomenon of common identification observed in pop culture reflects the cultural complementarity of both cities and sustains their complementary character in general. For tourists and pilgrims, Dire Dawa is an airport on the way to Harar – for businessmen, Harar is a local attraction to be visited. Statistics show that both cities are self-sufficient regarding the basic level of existence, still, because of a different character of their populations and activities, their symbiosis is observable. Means of transport and communication, the business attitude as well as spiritual and cultural needs create their complementary environments, making it possible for the cities to keep their internal and external balance.

²⁴ Compare: R.A. Caulk, *Harār town and its neighbours in the nineteenth century*, “Journal of African History”, XVIII, 3, (1977), pp. 369–386.