

Between Informal Political Authority and Religious Leadership: The Case of a Female Sufi Leader in Eritrea

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This paper will deal with the eminent political as well religious role assumed in Eritrea by Sitti 'Alawiyya, a female Sufi leader. From her residence in the Eritrean port of Massawa she exercised her socio-religious as well political influence upon local people. Her personality challenged the limits imposed both by colonial and Islamic authorities to woman access to a position of power in the public and political sphere. She was recognised as a « queen without the crown » during Italian colonial occupation in Eritrea. Her informal political role became progressively official during Fascist era. She finally became a relevant female public figure in that period. In fact, in 1939, in occasion of anniversary of the Italian Empire she was probably the only female Muslim leader to be invited by Mussolini in Rome.