

Between Customary Medicine and Modern Health Care: The Role of Mīrḡanī Family in Eritrea (1887-1940)

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This paper will deal with the role of the leading family of the Khatmiyya Islamic brotherhood in Eritrea during Italian occupation: the Mīrḡanī, or “Morgani” in colonial jargon.

The Mīrḡanī family had a prestigious genealogy, as descendants of Alī and Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet. Although already venerated for their noble birth, the family had a religious influence in Sudan and Eritrea thanks to Muhammad 'Uthmān al-Mīrḡanī, founder of Khatmiyya Islamic brotherhood.

In Eritrea they accommodated to colonial political and economical settings and participated in the process of modernisation of the country. In particular, we will explore the progressive transformation of their activity not only as religious but also medical mentor for local people. From a use of customary medicine they gradually expressed their interest for and appropriated to the colonial one. As social and religious focal point, they transformed gradually their charity activity for sick people from a customary to a modern health care system. In this way we will analyse how the Mīrḡanī family participate in a transformation process of old values to create and widespread new ones among its adherents. The dichotomy between European “modernisation” and Islamic “traditionalism” will be challenged by this case study in which an “orthodox” Islamic brotherhood accommodated to colonial domination and incorporated some values and social organisation connected with the “modernity”, namely the idea of modern health care system.