CHAPTER FOUR

ITALIAN COLONIAL RULE AND MUSLIM ELITES IN LIBYA:
A RELATIONSHIP OF ANTAGONISM AND COLLABORATION

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In Libya, under Italian rule, ʿulama’, Sufi shaykhs and other religious dignitaries played an important role, as Islam not only legitimated the resistance but also became a fundamental element in colonial policies. However, the relationships between the colonial authorities and the religious elites, beyond what the colonial laws prescribed, have as yet not been examined, except for the Sanusiyya order. This paper aims to fill this research gap, focusing mainly on the region of Tripolitania.

LIBYA UNDER COLONIAL CULTURAL SCRUTINY

During the early years of colonial rule, the Italian authorities paid no particular attention to the gathering of any kind of information about the inhabitants, religious customs or culture of Libya. Moreover, the Italian occupation of Libya had been planned without any preliminary cultural knowledge of the territories. It was only in September 1911, just a month before the start of the military operations, that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs began to gather some bibliographical material on Libya.

From the very beginning of their occupation of Tripoli (1911) the Italians proclaimed the principle of religious freedom and guaranteed...

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1 In December 1934 Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were unified into a single colony named Libya; before this date the denomination “Libya” is used for convenience.

2 For a general overview of Italian colonial policy towards religions, see Cesare Marongiu Buonaiuti, Politica e religioni nel colonialismo italiano (1882–1941), Varese 1982. The only work relating specifically to Libya is Salvatore Bono, "Islam et Politique Coloniale en Libye," The Maghreb Review 13 (1988), pp. 70–76.


4 On this issue, see the documentation contained in the Archivio Storico del Ministero dell’Africa Italiana (hereinafter: ASMAI), housed in the Archivio Storico-Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome (hereinafter: ASMAE), Libia 132/1–2.
complete respect for Muslim practices. In spite of their poor knowledge of the Islamic reality of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, religion was of great importance in the peace negotiations between Italy and the Ottoman Empire, which ended with the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne in October 1912. However, ambiguities and mistakes regarding the caliphate and the caliph’s role in the treaty limited the nature of Italian sovereignty over the region. The treaty not only allowed the sultan to continue to be mentioned as caliph in the Friday prayer. It also permitted the chief qadi, whose task it was to protect the inhabitants’ religious interests, to be appointed directly by the şeyhülislâm in Istanbul—that is, in the name of the sultan. These provisions made the Italian occupation look illegal and embodied an admission of the chief qadi as a sort of vice-sultan, who would act as a protector of the native believers against Italian abuses.

Italy’s mistakes in the Treaty of Lausanne were due to a poor knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence and of the religious situation in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, as the Italian scholar Santillana reported. It was only in December 1914 that a Committee for the Study of Islamic Issues, under the aegis of the colonial authority, was established. The committee, whose members included eminent scholars on Islamic law and history, was given the task of conducting studies and expressing opinions on behalf of the colonial administration. However, Italian scholars continued to blame the Italian authorities for their superficial and inaccurate cultural knowledge of Libya.

Interestingly, a completely different attitude was adopted by the Italian invaders vis-à-vis the Sufi orders or fraternities (turuq). This particular interest was hardly disinterested. Acknowledging their effective political power and assuming that their support could facilitate penetration into the countryside, the Italians paid them a great deal of attention. This idea was explicitly broached in what I believe to be

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6 In practice, however, the chief qadi was never appointed by Istanbul, since this would have meant imposing a Hanbali jurist over a Maliki majority population.

7 Nallino, Appunti sulla natura del “Califfato,” pp. 21–22.

8 Santillana, “Il Trattato di Losanna,” p. 36.

9 On the setting up of the committee, see the relevant file in ASMAE, ASMAI Libia 109/1.