

Titles, ranks and offices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawho Church : a preliminary survey

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Titles, Ranks and Offices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawāḥdo Church A Preliminary Survey

One of the aspects which have been treated lightly is the hierarchical structure of the Church. Almost every writer dealing with the history of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawāḥdo Church has actually touched upon this institution. Some have in fact devoted chapters or considerable sections to its assessment. The bulk of the description is, however, dedicated to the so-called highest dignitary, namely the foreign metropolitan who is incorrectly referred to as “the Abuna” and whose national origin has earned for the Ethiopian Church the name “Coptic” abroad. A few exaggerated and at times fallacious judgments are passed on two or three politically active dignitaries, and the rest are dispensed with as uncanonical, minor clerics and/or offices of merely local significance. They are regarded above all as an economic burden for the Church.

From the historical point of view, it is the base and not the superstructure which sustained and will probably perpetuate that old Church. The individual church is deeply rooted in the society: it belongs to the congregation from which its clerical and lay ministers are drawn. It is an essential element of the societal life maintained and administered through the same means as other institutions within the particular locality, and external intervention was sought only occasionally when the blessing of the Tābot or church building or the ordination of the priests and deacons required it. This individual church known as the Dabr was, and to some extent still is, the centre of worship, learning, matrimony, burial, consolation or even recreation. As such it was recognized, revered and cherished by each community. This sense of affinity and responsibility toward each other contributed to the survival of the Church throughout the extended chains of war which bedevilled the country.

The multiple functions of the Dabr required a sizable corps of functionaries who, in accordance with ancient traditions and the political life prevailing in the society, was hierarchically structured. Each Dabr was also a nucleus for a number of small, simple chapels known as the Gaṭar and located at distances within the jurisdiction of the Dabr under whose auspices they rendered similar services as those of the mother church, only on a smaller scale. The clerics serving a Gaṭar

shared the duties and titles of the Dabr while the Gadām (monastery), which is a variation of the Dabr designed to serve a society of monks, nuns, hermits and retired people, has added some offices and titles to cater for its needs. After all, there existed no central institution which could initiate, define, bestow upon and unify titles and offices. In addition to the basic titles which were probably introduced together with Christianity, each Dabr devised, or let its patron do it on its behalf, high-sounding titles and offices, thus increasing greatly the number and making it difficult for anyone who wishes to draw a clear picture of the hierarchy. Apparently, there has been no consensus in Ethiopia itself on the categorization of the various groups of clergymen in terms of hierarchy. Kāhnāt (the plural form of Kāhen = “priest”) denotes all clerics in general, including the laymen serving as teachers and singers, though at times the teachers (Mamherān) are distinguished from the Kāhnāt. A royal decree of 1932 none the less avoided such general terms and listed in the preamble a few groups and individuals which presumably were upheld as clerical categories in the palace register: “This decree prescribes sequentially the land resources of all the following: the Alaqā (principal), the Gabaz (administrator), the Qasāwest (priests), the Deyāqonoč (deacons), the Dabta-roč (cantors), the Mamherān (teachers) of reading, singing, books and poetry, the Dawwāy (toller) and the Gwazgwāž (accomodator).” (*Māhtama Šellāsē*, 1962, 535). From the viewpoint of a single Dabr, the first two and the last two are individual office-holders, and needless to say that quite a few dignitaries are left out. A decade later, a senior government official and writer who had access to palace files attempted to present a description of the titles, ranks and offices of the Church which essentially amounted to the following:

	<i>Spiritual</i>	<i>Administrative</i>	<i>Dabr</i>	<i>Monastic</i>
1.	Liqa pāppāsāt	Nebura ^{ed}	Alaqā	Aba menēt
2.	Ečagē	Liqa liqāwent	Liqa ṭabbabt	Gabaz
3.	Ṕappās	Liqa kāhnāt	Gabaz	Maggābi
4.	Ēppisqoppos	Re ^{esa} re ^{usān}	Aggāfāri	Šerāg māsriyā
5.	Qomos	Monastic Mamherān	Re ^{esa} dabr	Liqa mazam- merān
6.	...	Mal ^{aka} ...	Qañ gētā	Samon azzāž

7.	...	Reḡesa dabr Qañ gētā Grā gētā Liqa ṭabbabt Adbārāt alaçoč	Grā gētā	Liqa radḡe
8.	...	Alaçoč & Mamherān	Mačanē	Maggābē beluy
9.	...	Mari gētā & abbots	Liqa deyāqon	Maggābē had- dis
10.	...	...	Liqa māḡem- erān	
11.	...	...	...	Maggābē salām

Several problems are connected with this list. In the first place, it is not comprehensive and objective enough to include all titles and offices of the Church. Only the major titles esteemed by the government at a particular period are depicted. This is justifiable in so far as the scope of the cited work is concerned, but the description is by no means limited to a specific period of history. Besides, only eight monasteries are recognized as high ranking. Secondly, it is scarcely based on historical fact when, for example, the Ečagē is placed in rank above the bishop or when it is stated categorically that he traditionally included the office and title of the bishop. The allegation that St. Takla Haymānot (c. 1215–1313) combined both functions, which incidentally is also echoed by international historians, still lacks adequate historical evidence. Thirdly, the general categorization is somewhat arbitrary and reflects once again the political perspective in which the unpatronized churches counted for little, and that the superstructure recently introduced by the head of the state holds the highest rank. Perhaps, it was such factors that moved the prominent theologian and writer, Liqa selṭānāt Abbā Habta Māryām Warqnah, to outline the hierarchical structure of his Church, a summary of which is as follows:

	<i>Gaṭar</i>	<i>Dabr</i>	<i>Gadām</i>	<i>Priestly Titles</i>
	A. Ordained			
1.	Nefq deyāqon	dto	dto	‘Ašāwē hohet
2.	Deyāqon	dto	dto	Anāgwenestis

3.	Qēs B. Teachers/Singers	dto	dto	Mazammer
4.	Dabtarā	dto	dto	Nefq deyāqon
5.	Mari gētā	dto	dto	Deyāqon
6.	Gabaz	dto	dto	Liqa deyāqon
7.	...	Mačanē	Ardeʾet	Qēs
8.	...	Aggāfāri	Liqa Ardeʾet	Abuna qasis
9.	...	Grā gētā	Egwāla mag- gābi	Liqa kāhnāt
10.	...	Qañ gētā	Maggābi	Qomos
11.	...	Reʾesa dabr	Şaḥafi	Ēppisqoppo
12.	...	Şawana dabr*	Gabaz*	Ṕāppās
13.	...	Liqa ṭabbabt*	Eqā bēt	Liqa Ṕāppās
14.	...	Liqa mazam- merān*	Mamher	Mētropolis*
15.	...	Afa liq*	...	Pātrejārk
16.	...	Mari gētā*	...	...
17.	...	Alaqā	...	...

N. B.: key-words marked with an asterisk are those which either have been repeated unnecessarily or are duplicates or do not exist in the Ethiopian Church.

The author's method of listing the functionaries from the lowest to the highest rank is unusual, but logical and rather interesting. It underlines the importance of the first six dignitaries who form the fundament of the hierarchical and functional structure. The most essential elements who enable a church function at all have thus received for the first time due attention. He himself remarks (cf. p.300) that, "If these ministers are not available, the church ceases to exist". Another important contribution is that he avoided the high-sounding titles and placed the "Alaqā" and the "Mamher" at the top of the Dabr and the Gadām respectively. He includes the rest under titles of honour and prestige (cf. p.303). The list should none the less be revised for some good reasons. He could have avoided unnecessary repetitions or du-

plications of functionaries which I have marked with asterisk. He lists, for example, separately Liqa ṭabbabt and Liqa mazammerān as if they were two different positions! Two titles – Ṣawana dabr and Afa liq – are, at his own admission, unique to two particular churches in Gondar and Addis Ababā respectively and, hence, they could be regarded as either a disguise of widely established offices or as exceptions which were created to serve the special needs of those churches. In any case, they cannot constitute a part of the normal hierarchy of the Church at large. For some obscure reason, the Qomos is excluded from the Gadām hierarchy while for equally inexplicable reasons the “Mētropolis” (metropolit) is included among the Ethiopian spirituals. The Coptic Ṕāppās or Liqa pāppās was indeed referred to as the “Metropolitan”, but mainly by outsiders.

To improve on this list, one should perhaps keep in mind two basic prerequisites: (1) The subject can be dealt with mainly through the historical approach of which time and regional characteristics are significant components. (2) A comprehensive list of the titles and offices of the Church must be compiled in order to establish regularities, variations, alternatives and differences. Both are by no means easy to accomplish without an extended effort and ample space. Suffice it to hint here that there are rich historical, philological and sociological materials pertaining to the subject in question.

The historical status of the Ethiopian Church may be characterized as double-sided or even paradoxical: on the one hand each individual church or monastery being established by a zealot or a group of zealot preachers and maintained by the converted community was for all intents and purposes autonomous, except perhaps in doctrinal matters, which in actual fact was also repeatedly challenged at various periods of history. The Church as a national organ, therefore, consisted of a confederation of autonomous churches and monasteries each with its own tradition of administration, attitudes and policies. On the other hand, the Church as a whole was regarded as being under the authority of the sovereign, which auspices culminated in the creation of the central administration or superstructure known as the Bēta Kehnat = “House of Priesthood”. The first element provided an opportunity for each individual church to ally itself in times of political crises with the one or the other contender without putting its credibility as a religious institution at risk, except of course when the contender embraced another religion. The policy of centralization was no doubt influenced by this historical factor.

The second enabled the ruler to exalt expediently some churches over the rest through the bestowal of wealth, titular honours and even political authority. From the point of view of the sovereign, the clergy constituted an integral part of the Imperial Court. “The Ethiopian King of Kings,” noted a writer who compiled government documents, “bestows upon the princes, the notables, the officials, the clergy, and the high ladies titles of rank as a mark of distinction of their status. They are addressed to with these, or their substitute, titles throughout and after their life.” (Cf. *Māhtama Šellāsē*, 1962, 641). The same writer adds (p. 655) that “The Ethiopian Royal Court maintains garments and articles of mark of honour ornamented with gold and silver for the bestowal according to status upon the princes, the notables, the officials as well as to the clergy and the high ladies. These insignia are to be borne exclusively on special occasions.”

It was, however, not only individual clergymen that were honoured. Individual churches or monasteries were raised in status by royal decrees and, hence, there existed a kind of hierarchy among the Adbārāt and Gadāmāt which changed from period to period. The Zāgwē Dynasty exalted the rock-hewn churches of Lālibalā over Aksum, while the early rulers of the Solomonic Dynasty favoured the monasteries of Hayq and Dabra Libānos. But, it was not entirely a dynastic policy, as there also existed variations within periods of the same ruling house. Zarʿa Yāʿeqob (1434–68) greatly honoured some churches in his new capital city of Dabra Berhan, while his son, Baʿeda Māryām (1468–78), turned his back on them and raised Tadbāba Māryām instead. Sarša Dengel (1563–97) revived Aksum as second only to Jerusalem and its top dignitaries as the highest authorities below him, while Susenyos (1607–32) allied with Dabra Libānos which turned against him only after his crude Catholic policy antagonized its clergy. A few of the latter’s successors to the throne renewed their covenant and sustained cordial relations with the same monastery. Tēwodros II (1855–68) struck it hard for supporting his opponent, but Menilek II rebuilt it some two decades later. Yoḥannes IV reinstated Aksum Šeyon to its lofty status, but soon created a rival with pompous titles and rich estates – the Trinity cathedral in ʿĀdwā – when its clergy offended him. He also replaced the Neburaʾed by the Eḩagē in his court, though strictly speaking Dabra Libānos was not under his direct control. This was possible as the result of the historical development in which the office of the Eḩagē gained political authority and the dignitary continued to reside by the Imperial Court since the early

17th century when incidentally the title was also mentioned for the first time in the royal chronicle. Earlier, it was the Aqābē saʿat, the abbot of Hayq whose monastery contributed to the political gain of the Solomonic Dynasty in the second half of the 13th century, who enjoyed this influential politico-religious post. His downfall occurred when in 1535 his monastery was destroyed by the invasion of Imam Ahmad. He, too, had presumably won it over from either the Mamher of Lālibalā or the Neburaʾed of Aksum, the remnants of whose prestige hint the magnitude of their original authority. With the prevalence of political and doctrinal aberrations of the 18th century, the prestige of the Eçagē waned and was nearly replaced by the Qēs haṣē and/or the Aqābē saʿat, both of which had gained prominence in Gondar. But the authority of the Eçagē revived with the monarchy in the next century and the dignitary continued to exercise considerable influence so long as the metropolitan was a Copt. Once the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawāḥdo Church became autocephalic in the middle of the present century, the prestige and authority of the Eçagē submerged in the patriarchate.

Many other churches also played either top role for short periods or were closely associated with the favoured ones and, hence, had a share in the royal blessing. Most of the titles were at any rate retained long after the churches and their dignitaries lost political influence or even suffered poverty. In several cases, the dignitaries retained the titles after they were dismissed or retired from office. On the surface, therefore, the number of offices and titles of the Church are astounding. Here is a tentative list (with approximate rendering) which I compiled from various Ethiopian documents as well as from the various churches themselves:

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|---|---|
| 001. Aba mēnet, father of monastery | 008. Afa neburaʾed, mouthpiece of the Neburaʾed |
| 002. Abbā, father (monk) | 009. Aggāfāri, usher |
| 003. Abun, our father (bishop) | 010. Alaqā, principal, head |
| 004. Abuna qasis, priestly father | 011. Amda berhan, pillar of light |
| 005. Afa gubāʾe, spokesman | 012. Anāgwenestis, lector |
| 006. Afa liq, mouthpiece of the master | 013. Anṭāfi, carpet-spreader |
| 007. Afa mamher, mouthpiece of the master | 014. Aqābē saʿat, guardian of the hour |
| | 015. Aqābi, custodian, confidant |

016. Aqābit, custodian, confidante
017. ʿAṣāwē hohet, door-keeper
018. Batra yārēk, abbot, patriarch
019. Dabtarā, cantor, teacher
020. Dawwāy, toller
021. Deyāqon, deacon
022. Eḩagē, prior
023. Eda berhan, hand of light
024. Egwāla maggābi, assistant purveyor
025. Emmā hoy, mother (nun)
026. Emma menēt, mother of convent
027. Ēppisqoppoṣ, episcopant
028. Eqā bēt, store-keeper
029. Gabaz, administrator
030. Gabaza aksum, admin. of Aksum
031. Gētāyē, my master
032. Grā gētā, master of the left
033. Gwazgwāḩ, accomodator
034. Kāhen, priest
035. Laḩeka mazammerān, representative
036. Liqa aksum, head of Aksum
037. Liqa ardeḩet, head of assistants
038. Liqa bēta qaṭṭin, head of the house of Qaṭṭin (?)
039. Liqa deyāqon, archdeacon
040. Liqa gubāḩē, faculty head
041. Liqa ḩemmat, in charge of fuel
042. Liqa ḩeruyān, head of the chosen
043. Liqa kēnot, archpriest(?)
044. Liqa liqāna kāhnāt, head of the archpriests
045. Liqa liqāwent, head of the scholars
046. Liqa māḩemmerān, head of the knowledgeable
047. Liqa mazammerān, head of cantors
048. Liqa pāppās, archbishop
049. Liqa radḩe, head of assistants
050. Liqa selṭānāt, head of authorities
051. Liqa ṭabbabt, head of the wise
052. Ligē, my master (scholar)
053. Maḩanē, measurer (steward)
054. Maggābē ardeḩet, purveyor of students
055. Maggābē beluy, master of Old Testament
056. Maggābē haddis, master of New Testament
057. Maggābē kāhnāt, steward of the clergy
058. Maggābē salām, purveyor of peace
059. Maggābi, purveyor
060. Makbeb, principal, supreme
061. Malāka aryām, angel of 7th heaven
062. Malāka berhan, angel of light
063. Malāka gannat, angel of paradise
064. Malāka ḩayl, angel of might
065. Malāka ḩeywat, angel of life
066. Malāka malāk, angel of angel(s)
067. Malāka meḩrat, angel of mercy

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|--|--|
| 068. Malāka ṣaḥay, angel of the sun | 084. Qañ gētā, master of the right |
| 069. Malāka sāhel, angel of comfort | 085. Qēs, priest |
| 070. Malāka salām, angel of peace | 086. Qēs haṣē, imperial priest |
| 071. Malāka ṣegē, angel of flower(s) | 087. Qēsa gabaz, administering priest |
| 072. Malāka ṣeyon, angel of Zion | 088. Qomos, consecrator |
| 073. Malāka tābor, angel of Tabor | 089. Reᶑesa dabr, head of Dabr |
| 074. Mamher, teacher, master | 090. Reᶑesa liqāna pāppāsāt, head of archbishops |
| 075. Mari gētā, guiding master | 091. Reᶑesa reᶑusān, head of heads |
| 076. Mazammer, cantor | 092. Rāyes, presiding abbot |
| 077. Mazgaba berhan, treasure of light | 093. Ṣabātē, deputy Eḩagē |
| 078. Neburaᶑed, on whom hands were laid | 094. Ṣaḥafi, scribe |
| 079. Nefqa deyāqon, assistant deacon | 095. Samon azzāž, in charge of the weekly schedule |
| 080. Pāppās, bishop | 096. Ṣawana dabr, defender of Dabr |
| 081. Pātrejark, patriarch | 097. Ṣawārē nāregē, carrier of Nāregē |
| 082. Qāla pāppās, mouthpiece of the bishop | 098. Ṣerāg māᶑesarē, anointing priest |
| 083. Qandalēft, candle-lighter, toller | 099. Yamana berhan, right of light |
| | 100. Yanētā, my master |
| | 101. Zagi, shutter |

Only a handful of these are permanent and universal or over-regional in application. More than two-thirds of the entries are regional or local variations or alternatives of the established ones. Some are also descriptions of functional positions (e.g. no.001, 005, 014, 028) and as such they are rather indicatives of offices. A few are modes of address of honour (e.g. 002, 003, 025, 100) pertaining to a variety of socio-religious and educational status.

From the practical viewpoint, they may be grouped into the following two broad ecclesiastical service-oriented areas: the national and/or regional administrative superstructure, and the local complex.

Traditionally, the national superstructure comprised a body of two persons – the Emperor who was the patron of the Church, and the for-

eign Metropolitan who was the spiritual head in whose hands lay the exclusive authority of ordination and consecration. Next ranked a dignity usually an abbot (the Neburaʿed, Aqābē saʿat, Eḥagē, Qēs haṣē, etc.), who was exalted to high office by an imperial favour. The Metropolitan was assisted by the Abuna qasis who lived in his vicinity, while the prime prior had regional deputies known as Liqa (pl. liqāna) kāhnāt. In some periods of history, there existed also a few bishops referred to as Ēppisqopposāt. In the 1950's, the Coptic Metropolitan was replaced by an Ethiopian Liqa Pāppās who was later promoted to Reʿesa liqāna pāppāsāt and Patriarch, his inferiors being likewise created archbishops who in turn were assisted by a number of Pāppāsāt or Ēppisqopposāt. The Liqāna kāhnāt were appointed to dioceses corresponding to political administrative divisions (Awrāḡḡā = “district” and Taqlāy gezāt = “governorate-general”) as overseers and judges, and a dignity known as the Liqa liqāna kāhnāt acted as a coordinator as well as a liaison between the church and the palace. Besides, an administrator-general with no particular title but with extensive prerogatives was instituted at the Bēta Kehnat. He received crucial orders directly from the sovereign. This office is retained despite the declaration of church-state separation in 1974, but it is not clear whether the Patriarchate has at the same time inherited the imperial authority of appointing and dismissing all levels of church officials including the administrator-general.

The local complex is broad and encompasses both ordained and lay members of the church, as *Ephraim* (1970, p.247) puts it: “Since church and society in Ethiopia form an inseparable entity, the leaders of the Ethiopian Church have come both from members of the ordained clergy and from learned laymen and churchmen.” An established functional departmental pattern is discernable in the division of responsibility and execution of duty, though titular variations and overlapping of tasks give a perplexing impression.

At the bottom of the echelon are predominantly lay functionaries with little qualification who have the duty of taking care of routine assignments: the Dawwāy (Tegr. Dawwāli) or Qandalēft in charge of tolling the church bell and lighting candles, the Anṭāfi or Gwazgwāž in charge of carpets as well as accomodating for visiting dignitaries, the Aqābit (m. Aqābi) in charge of fetching unadulterated water and grinding wheat for the holy bread, the Ṣaḥafī responsible for official correspondence, and the Eqā bet in charge of the movable possessions of the church. Only the ʿAṣāwē hohet (Zagi in some Amāreñā-speak-

ing areas) who is in charge of the church keys is an ordained member, but he actually belongs to another category in rank. In some churches, a functionary includes two or more duties and, hence, not all these functional nomenclatures are present in every church. This department is headed by the Gabaz (Amda berhan in Ḳādawā Trinity Church) who also has the responsibility of preparing banquets on proper occasions. In the latter task, he is assisted by the Maggābi and the Aggāfāri. In some churches, the last dignitary has an assistant known as the Maḡanē.

The next department consists of the core without whom the church cannot function; namely, the ordained members and the cantors. The leading ones are the Qēs or Kāhen of whom a minimum of three is required for the eucharistic service, the Deyāqon of whom a minimum of two is required. These are assisted by the Anāgwenestis. Since there are a number of these clerics within a Dabr and since the duties have to be executed in turns, two functionaries are raised from their number to act as prefects: the Samon azzāž who is in charge of the weekly programme and the Liqa deyāqon in charge of the deacons. Closely linked to these LeḲukān (“deputations” as they are known) is a group of singers and poets who complete the church service, which cannot be described here. They are known as the Dabtarā (a term variously interpreted by writers) or Mazammerān. Most important for the church service are the Qañ gētā or Yamana berhan, the Grā gētā or Eda berhan, and the Liqa ṡabbabt or Liqa mazammerān. These functionaries are usually a part of the next department.

A well established Dabr includes a full-fledged school in which the various areas of theological and literary studies are pursued. The teachers may bear various honorary titles, but in relation to their profession at least the biblical experts are referred to as Maggābē beluy and Maggābē haddis. The teacher of Qenē (poetry) has no special appellation while the specialist of a particular patrological work, law or history is referred to as Liq or Liqē. In rare cases, they are also addressed to as Gētāyē by their admirers. In some Adbārāt, a functionary is appointed as a warden with the title of Liqa ArdeḲet or Liqa radḲe. In at least Dabra Ṣeyon of Addis Ḳalam, an educational director is entitled Liqa gubāḲē.

Above all these groups is the dean or principal of the church known as the Alaqā (Tegr. halaqā) in a Dabr and as Mamher or Aba menēt (fem. Emma menēt) in a cloister. In some cases, he is elected by the society of the clergy, while in others he is appointed by the head of

state or by a high church dignitary depending on the traditional and political significance of the particular church or monastery. The greatest variation in titular appellation pertains to this post constituting almost one-third of the above entries. The variants may be grouped into the following categories:

1. In the course of their history, some monasteries have acquired unique titles the philological and historical origins of some of which are obscure and whose political significance varied in different eras. Most prominent are: Aqābē saʿat, Batra yārēk, Eçagē, Makbeb, Nebur ʾed, Qēs haşē, Rāyes, Reʿesa reʿusan, Şerāg māʿesarē. Some of them have also developed special titles for their deputies (e.g. Gabaza Aksum and Şabātē).

2. A few churches have high-sounding descriptive titles composed of “Liq” (which denotes elderliness, loftiness, greatness and knowledgeability) plus a magnificent term which connotes that the clergymen below the authoritative dignitary are also rather special (e.g. Liqa heruyān, Liqa liqāwent, and Liqa seltānāt). Normally, their inferiors bear the same titles as their peers elsewhere; only the second one, head of Baʿatā Church in Addis Ababā has a deputy known as Afa liq.

3. Similarly, the third group also bears a devised compound title, the primary element of which is “Malāk”. The principle emanates from the fact that each church has a special name to be used in prayers and official documents (e.g. Dabra Berhan, Dabra Gannat, Dabra Salām), the second component of which is salient in the composition of the title. The titles of the deans are thus Malāka berhan, Malāka gannat, Malāka salām, etc.

The Alaqā is the most interesting and perhaps most important dignitary from the historical point of view. He was always closely associated with the congregation and he enjoyed an immense prestige within and outside his parish. At certain periods of Ethiopian history, his authority in fact extended beyond the society of the clergy to the whole congregation in matters of civil and juridical administration so much so that it had to be redefined by at least two royal decrees when the centralization of political power culminated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was also from this position that the one or the other dignitary was elevated by a royal favour to a stately post.

Hamburg

Bairu Tafla

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