

## RACIST DISCOURSE ABOUT ETHIOPIA AND ETHIOPIANS BEFORE AND AFTER THE BATTLE OF ADWA

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For the Ethiopians, the victory at Adwa was a strategic success, which permitted Menilek II (r. 1889-1913) to reconstruct and enlarge the old Solomonic state. For the black diaspora, the shining Ethiopian triumph signified present dignity and future possibilities. For Europe, the Italian disaster was a surprise which caused westerners to reconsider their notions about Ethiopia. European discourse about Africa was characteristically racist, ethnocentric, and ignorant. Concerning Ethiopia, there were, however, elements of an alternate discourse<sup>2</sup> that stemmed from the long-standing mythology in Europe about Prester John; from the existence in the Ethiopian highlands of an ancient Christianity; and from travellers' reports of a prosperous and salubrious land.<sup>3</sup>

In the mid-19th century, for example, Cornwallis Harris, for example, commented on "the green and lovely highlands of Abyssinia," (actually Shewa) with its "rich and thriving cultivation." He admired each "fertile knoll...with its peaceful hamlet" and "each rural vale...traversed by its crystal look." He esteemed the teaming herds and flocks, the mountain breezes "redolent of eglantine and jasmine," and the fields emitting "the aromatic fragrance of mint and thyme [and] "spangled with clover, daisies, and buttercups." Birds of course "warbled among the leafy groves, and throughout the rich landscape reigned an air of peace and plenty," which Harris attributed to the leadership of King Sahle Sellassie (r. 1813-1847).

The negus, the Englisman wrote, also sought to return Christian rule to areas south of Shewa that had been separated from the Solomonic Empire in the 16th and 17th centuries. Yet, Harris editorialized that the king's expansionism was motivated by "revenge ...and the insatiable love of plunder inherent in the breast of every savage." His regal brutishness was matched by his subjects, who evinced a "spirit of merciless destruction" towards their enemies, since to die while on campaign against "the accursed Gentile," ensured "a high reward in heaven." Harris found it barbaric that priestly absolution before battle led to "ruthless slaughter [and] savage atrocity ...[in] the name of the Most High."<sup>4</sup> He had probably not heard of the Prussian battle cry, "Gott mit Uns!," and other such slogans, nor of the practise of chaplains accompanying European armies to offer soldiers religious solace and justification before battle.

The European alternate discourse appears in the writings of Charles E.x. Rochet d'Hericourt. He understood Ethiopian Christianity as a sophisticated, flourishing religion that had cooperated with

'This essay is based on my "The Black Men Who Turned White: European Attitudes Towards Ethiopians, 1850-1900," *Archiv Orientalni*39 (1971): 155-166.

<sup>2</sup>Not to be confused with a counter discourse, described by Richard Terdiman as one created by the oppressed to oppose the dominant or hegemonic discourse. See Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (London, 1985), p.65.

<sup>3</sup>J.H. Arrowsmith-Brown, trans. and ed., and Richard Pankhurst, annot., *Prutky's Travels in Ethiopia and Other Countries* (London, 1991), chapters 15-32; C.F. Beckingham and G.W.B. Huntingford, eds., *The Prester John of the Indies*, Vols. I, II (London, 1961); Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley and London, 1994), p. 14. For a controversial analysis, see John Sorenson, *Imagining Ethiopia* (New Brunswick, 1993), pp. 21-27.

<sup>4</sup> W. Cornwallis Harris, *The Highlands of Ethiopia*, 2nd ed. (London, 1844), Vol. I, pp. 352, 354, 400; Vol. II, p. 182; Vol. III. pp. 369-370.

the state to organize a complex society and to sustain Ethiopian nationalism. He regarded its ideology and its support as necessary contributing factors in the inevitable modernization of Ethiopia. As d'Hericourt put it: "in religion lies the surest points of contact which we have with the Abyssinians; it will once again join Abyssinia to the general civilization of the world."<sup>5</sup> Not so certain was the German Hermann Steudner, who believed that achievement stemmed from proper education, discipline, cleanliness, industriousness, frugality, and the like. Since Ethiopian Christians did not behave as good Lutherans, he questioned the teachings and the theology of the Orthodox Church.<sup>6</sup> Gerhard Rohlfs had such a thoroughgoing disregard for Ethiopian Christianity that his words sneer when he discussed the church or its clergy, whom he described as "inhospitable, greedy, rude, and filthy."<sup>7</sup>

The Austrian Werner Munzinger, an agent of Egyptian imperialism in Ethiopia, also disliked Ethiopian Christians, doubtless because they resisted their country's dismemberment. He rationalized Ethiopian Orthodoxy as a form of African fetishism, more formalistic than ideological, and thus could argue that Islam was more adaptable to modernity.<sup>8</sup> As another German explained, "dogma alone does not make a people civilized," and then cited the ingestion of raw meat as evidence of Ethiopian barbarism.<sup>9</sup> One wonders ~ eating beef steak tartare (generally made from horse meat) made the French less Christian and civilized. God alone knew the deleterious effects wrought on the culture of North Sea Germans through devouring a local speciality made of raw chopped beef and herring! Finally, in 1874, an Austrian wrote that the Ethiopians liked the Maria Theresa dollar because "The image of the Empress in a low cut dress and with full bosom has an appeal that corresponds to the Arabian taste."<sup>10</sup> He completely ignored the Ethiopians' long familiarity with the coin and its intrinsic value in silver. And, of course, he never asked why the Austro-Hungarian treasury struck such sexy specie. Maybe it corresponded with Mittel-Europaer tastes.

Germanic discourse generally was deeply racist, even in apparently positive commentary. In 1868, an anonymous writer in *Globus* characterized the Ethiopian soldier as "brave, fearless ...and efficient," but "in his own way," obviously not up to European standards. He cautioned nonetheless the paradox at work again--that the Ethiopian army should not be underestimated as an adversary, even if it would be unable to confront "an infantry with European training, in an open field, as the riflemen cannot cope with artillery; *besides this al777 will never get accustomed to European tactics* [italics mine]."<sup>11</sup> This ludicrous assessment ignored the severely transected, mountainous terrain of highlands Ethiopia, to which local tactics and strategy were admirably adapted. In my view, the Italians were misled by the pervasive European racism of the day and the generally negative discourse that characterized most western writings about Ethiopia.

They were also deceived by European assessments of Menilek II (King of Shewa, 1865-1889; Emperor, 1889-1913), who was seen as only a nominal Christian, whose habits were "in general

<sup>5</sup>Rochet d'Hericourt, "Les Moeurs religieuses dans le royaume de Choa," *Bulletin de la Societe de Geographie* 3e s., 4 (1845): 3290.

<sup>6</sup>Hermann Steudner, "Reise von Adoa nach Gondar, Dec. 26, 1861-Januar 1862," *Zeitschrift fOr allgemeine Erdkunde* 15 (1863): 121-124, 128.

<sup>7</sup>Gerhard Rohlfs, "Nach Axum uber Hausen und Adua," *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft fUr Erdkunde zu Berlin* 3 (1867): 487.

<sup>8</sup>"Abyssinien und die Europaer," *Globus* 13 (1868): 49, 51.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.: 255.

<sup>10</sup>Richard Andree, "Zur geographischen Verbreitung des Maria-Theresia-Thalers," *Mitteilungen der K. und K. Geographischen Gesellschaft in Wien* 17 (1874): 270.

<sup>11</sup>"Aus dem Kriegerleben der Abyssinier," *Globus* 13 (1868): 10.

sullied by paganism."<sup>2</sup> His methods of governing were "inadmissible in civilized lands." He and his uneducated people were narrow minded bigots with a xenophobic dislike of Europeans, although that paradox again--Menilek was "too clever to show his true feelings." His brutish nature was revealed to one sensitive soul, when he refused to buy over-priced goods and took what he wanted at an equitable price.<sup>13</sup> Sebastiano Martini speculated that the king's materialism might lead him to agree to transform Shewa into some form of dependency.<sup>14</sup> Italians generally believed that Ethiopians were incapable of acting out of patriotism or nationalism or developing and following policy, and the notion that Menilek might be using Italy as a pawn in his various political struggles was simply unthinkable.

After he became emperor in 1889, he used an Italian request to define Ethiopia's frontiers, whose ultimate aim was transparent, for his own nationalistic reasons. In his circular letter to the powers in 1891, he defined Ethiopia's frontiers as Khartoum in the north, the upper Nile basin in the west, Lake Victoria in the south, and the coast from Suakin to Cape Guardafui.<sup>5</sup> The various chanceries totally disregarded his statement and divided eastern Africa according to their own designs. After the battle of Adwa, when European countries were forced to reckon with the obvious power of Ethiopia, Menilek ignored their territorial arrangements and negotiated on the basis of *uti possidetis*. When western diplomats mentioned a prior agreement, he argued, "Myself I have never heard of it until you told me. Neither of the two Governments have sent it to me."<sup>6</sup>

The Italians chose, however, to disregard the subtleties of Ethiopian diplomacy and consistently offended Ethiopian sensibilities with their barely disguised imperial ambitions. Leopolda Traversi warned his countrymen not to interfere ignorantly in Ethiopia's internal affairs lest Italy be dragged into a war, "which will cost us millions and millions and many soldiers. Abyssinia will not be defeated with twenty or thirty thousand men."<sup>17</sup> A long-time Gennan resident of Adwa cautioned that in face of external threats, Ethiopia was able to mobilize men and resources to meet the challenge.<sup>18</sup> In agreement, Henry Morton Stanley advised against intervention in the interior, suggesting instead that Italy strengthen Eritrea economically and attract Ethiopia's trade to its markets and ports. Ultimately the inland empire would become dependent on the Italian economy and fall under Rome's hegemony.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, Menilek built a larger Ethiopian state and used the new revenues to strengthen its defenses. Even the Italians sold or gave him weapons, which astonished many of his compatriots. A post-Adwa ditty well sums up their feelings:

What kinds of fools are there in Europe?  
Why! do they make their instruments of death and give them to us?  
With guns which they have brought, with cartridges they have brought<sup>11</sup>

12 Charles Bourrit, "Concernant le Voyage d'exploration de M. J. Borelli dans le Choa at la region de rOmo," *Le Globe* 28 (1889): 158.

13 Jules Borelli, "Souvenirs d'un voyage dans les pays des Gallas du sud et Sidama," *Bulletin de Societe Khediviale de Geographie* 3 (1889): 150-151.<sup>14</sup>

14 Sebastiano Martini, "Terzo Viaggio de. Cap. S. Martini allo Scioa," *Cosmos* 6, 11 (1880-1881): 70.<sup>11</sup>

15 Harold G. Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik II*, 2nd ed. (Lawrenceville, NJ, 1994), pp. 128, 190.

16 Menilek to Rodd, Addis Abeba, 14 May 1897, FO 403/255.<sup>1</sup>

17 Leopolda Traversi, "Estratti di Lettere dallo Scioa," *Bollettino della Societa Geografica italiana* XXIV, 7 (July 1887): 497-498.

18 Kamili Russ, "Aufzeichnungen in Bezug auf den Aegyptisch-Abessinischen Krieg," *Petermann's Geographische Mitteilungen* 23 (1877): 157.<sup>19</sup>

19 Felice Schiber, "Giudizi di Stanley sull'Eritrea," *Revista Geografica Italiana* 4 (1894): 584-585.

Menilek has roasted and exploded the foreign barley!20

When Italian aims became obvious by 1894, a nation-wide revulsion against whitemen arose. It was said that "One recovers from the bite of a black snake, but never ...from the bite of a white snake." 21 Menilek exploited such primordialism in his mobilization proclamation of 1894, which was also calculated to strengthen the religious solidarity of Ethiopian orthodoxy in the face of Roman Catholicism:

Enemies have now come upon us to ruin the country and to change our religion ....Our enemies have begun the affair by advancing and digging into the country like moles. With the help of God I will not deliver up my country to them. Today, you who are strong, give me of your strength, and you who are weak, help me by prayer.<sup>22</sup> In response to his call, "every tukul and village in every far-off glen in Ethiopia was sending out its warrior."<sup>23</sup>

The emperor mobilized nearly 100,000 soldiers, composed of 80,000 riflemen, 8,600 cavalry, forty-two artillery and machine gun batteries, and about 20,000 lancers, spearmen, and swordsmen, who were ready to take over the rifles of those who might fall in action. On the Italian side were 20,000 men, about half European troops, the rest Eritrean ascaris, armed with obsolescent rifles, machine guns, and artillery. Notwithstanding his obvious superiority, Menilek wisely chose not to attack Italian fortified positions and repeat Yohannes's tactical mistake at Sahati in 1888. Instead, he camped near Adwa and hoped that the Italians would bring the war to him, allowing his superior numbers to envelop and overrun the smaller force. By late February 1896, as food and forage grew scarce, it seemed a failing strategy: Menilek shortly would have been compelled to retire southward and concede an important part of Tigray to the imperialists, who would have won an important psychological victory. The scenario could have repeated every year until, finally, the emperor would not have been able to resurrect his army for yet another campaign, and Ethiopia would have fallen to the Italians by default. Such a process was General Baratieri's strategy, and he was quite willing therefore to wait out the confrontation. He was, however, under pressure from the pathological premier Francesco Crispi, who believed that one Italian soldier was the measure of ten Ethiopians—no evidence to the contrary notwithstanding—and from his overconfident brigadiers, who believed that they could easily defeat the Ethiopian generals—no evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. And so, against his better judgment, Baratieri ordered a forced march on the night of 29 February: "the night was black and there was profound silence."

Menilek learned about the Italian troop movement between four and five a.m., when he and his generals were at Sunday mass. As one Ethiopian explained: the enemy "had marched all night, hoping to surprise us, when our soldiers worshipped God." He watched Menilek order his army to stand to arms, the soldiers dash to their units, and the priests administer communion. He heard the massed Ethiopian troops yell out, "for the Motherland! For the faith!" At six a.m., the Ethiopians attacked before the Italians had fortified their positions in the heights above Menilek's encampment. By mid-day, the emperor's army had enveloped and overwhelmed the smaller Italian force. Our Ethiopian source commented simply that "The machine guns of the Negus, the Remingtons, the Gras did their work of death." The Ethiopian success at Adwa revealed conclusively that an African power could overcome the challenge of modern European imperialism, and five days later the Italians recognized the fact by suing for peace.<sup>24,29</sup>

20 Enrico Cerulli, "La Poesia Popolare Amara," *L'Africa Italiana* XXXV, VIII (August 1917): 175. 21

21 Baratieri, *Memoires d'Afrique* (1892-1896) (Paris, 1899), p. 75.

22 As quoted in George F.M. Berkeley, *The Campaign of Adowa and the Rise of Menelik* (Westminster, 1902), p. 126.

23 Ibid.

24 The last two paragraphs were based on "la Bataille d'Adowa d'apres un regit Abyssin," *Revue Francaise de l'Etranger et des Explorations*, XXI, 215 (Nov. 1896): 656-658; Sven Rubenson, "Adwa 1896: The

Now Europeans had to rationalize Menilek's victory, and they turned inevitably to the alternate discourse without abandoning notions of racism, since such an admission would conflict with the teleology of modern European imperialism. Instead, they characterized Ethiopians as white, and they found several convenient observations upon which to build a new Ethiopian typology. Writing in 1884-85, Denis de Rivoire had written that Ethiopians "were men of quick intelligence with pure traits, *although bronze* [italics mine], with an elegant appearance, with a graceful carriage, [and with] civilized customs. From this evidence, he concluded that Ethiopians were members of "the great Caucasian family."<sup>25</sup> In 1890, a German traveler suggested that caucasian admixture was responsible for the generally light Ethiopian skin color.<sup>26</sup> Another German commented that the Ethiopian had great reservoirs of energy and considerable quickness of mind, "which I have never witnessed among Arabs, Egyptians, Nubians, and Negroes."<sup>27</sup> The meaning could not have been clearer.

Following these precedents, post-Adwa discourse characterized Menilek and Ethiopia in positive terminology. A French author found that the emperor had excellent personal habits: he rose early, worked hard, was disciplined, all characteristics which Europeans considered their own.<sup>28</sup> No longer a semi-barbarian, he was found to be a dignified and energetic man "of intelligence and ...character."<sup>29</sup> Many characterized him in superlatives: his activity was "superhuman"; he was "extraordinarily" well acquainted with world affairs, engineering, and science; he was a "prophet...a mystic ...a modern man ...a military genius."<sup>30</sup> A U.S. diplomat described him in terms generally reserved for great Americans: "Menelik," he wrote, "has created the United State of Abyssiniana work for which he was endowed by Nature with the constructive intelligence of a Bismark, and the faculty of handling men...[with the] sheer amiability of a McKinley."<sup>31</sup> In this discourse, basically racist observers viewed phenomena within the terms of their own experience and proved unable to grant ordinariness to black people. If usually inferior people accomplished anything, they necessarily had to be superhuman, extraordinary, and astonishing; and they had to embody the elements of a genius, a prophet, and a McKinley.

The Ethiopian military and nobility were similarly transformed. The latter became valorous in war, magnanimous in victory, and enjoyed "all of the qualities which distinguished ancient chivalry."<sup>32</sup> Such men led the now magnificent Ethiopian soldier, who was hardy, strong, durable, disciplined, indefatigable, happy, and courageous. He could march hundreds of kilometers without any noticeable exertion, was an excellent marksman, and apparently could subsist on minimum rations

Resounding Protest," in *Power and Protest in Black Africa*, edited by Robert Rotberg and Ali Mazrui (New York, 1970); Berkeley, Adowa.

<sup>25</sup> Denis de Rivoire, "L'Abyssinie pittoresque et commerciale," *Annales de l'Extreme Orient et de l'Afrique* 7 (1885-1885): 65.

<sup>26</sup> Karl Dove, "Kulturzonen von Nord-Abessinien," *Petermanns Geographische Mitteilungen, Ergänzungsband XXI* (1889-1890): 16.

<sup>27</sup> Georg Schweinfurth, "Einige Mitteilungen über seinen diesjährigen Besuch in der colonia Eritrea (Nord-Abessinien, 2 Juli 1892)," *Verhandlungen der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin* 19 (1892): 343.

<sup>28</sup> E.M., "Abyssinie: À la cour de Menelik," *Revue Française* 21, 210 (1896): 345.

<sup>29</sup> James Rennell Rodd, *Social and Diplomatic Memories, 1884-1901*, 2nd series (London, 1923). pp. 162-163.

<sup>30</sup> Count Gleichen, *With the Mission to Menelik* (London, 1896), p. 152; Michel Morphy, *Le Commandant Marchand*, Vol. III (Paris, 1900), p. 1628.

<sup>31</sup> Robert P. Skinner, *Abyssinia of Today* (London, 1906), p. 14.

<sup>32</sup> Sylvain Vigneras, "La Mission Lagarde en Abyssinie, Impressions de Voyage," *Le Tour du Monde*, n.s. 3, 2 (1897): 244.

without any appreciable drop in efficiency.<sup>33</sup> In 1901, Augustus Wylde summed up the post-Adwa discourse about the Ethiopian army: "...Now that they are armed with modern rifles and modern artillery [and using] tactics admirably suited to the country they inhabit, they will prove a foe that will tax the resources of any first-class power ..."<sup>34</sup>

Many Westerners searched out characteristics in common with Ethiopia. They found them, of course. Prince Henri d'Orleans suggested that pride and love of country, those twin Gallic virtues, accounted for Ethiopian success.<sup>35</sup> Hughes Le Raux was impressed by the depth of Ethiopian nationality, which made ~ impossible for most Ethiopians to conceive of living elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> Two British officers, who had fought alongside Ethiopians in the Ogaden, reported that Ethiopian soldiers had "a very profound sense of nationality."<sup>37</sup> After Adwa, most Europeans willingly agreed that Ethiopia constituted "A civilized nation of an immense intelligence, the only one that is civilized without wearing trousers and shoes."<sup>38</sup>

Yet, Ethiopia was not accepted without reservations. Herbert Vivian railed that the Ethiopians went too far when they presumed to arrogate to themselves a superiority over civilized countries.<sup>39</sup> Most westerners, even the more positive, regarded Ethiopia as a country half-way between savagery and civilization. As the Austrian Baron Kulmer explained, Greek and Armenian businessmen were invariably successful in Ethiopia because they were closer to the Ethiopians in mentality than were western Europeans.<sup>40</sup> An American Presbyterian missionary posited that his church should quickly convert and educate Ethiopians, who then would be despatched "from the lofty plateau and go into all the distant parts of Africa ....[they] would not have to bridge the distance that separates the white man from the black."<sup>41</sup> So, even in its hour of greatest triumph, Ethiopia was not afforded full equality. The discourse of anti-Ethiopian racism would reach its apogee in 1935-36, when Mussolini's attack revealed his "profound hatred and contempt for the Abyssinians," whom he could not bring himself to treat "on an equal footing."<sup>42</sup> But I shall have to return in 2035, for another centenary, to analyze the discourse surrounding that war.

33 Albert Hans, "L'Armee de Menelik, *Revue des Deux Mondes* 135 (June 15, 1896): 871; A.E. Pease, *Travel and Sport in Africa* (London, 1902), Vol. III (London, 1902), p. 3; A. Donaldson Smith, "Expedition through Somaliland to Lake Rudolf," *The Geographical Journal*, VIII, 2 (August 1896): 127.

34 Wylde, *Modern Abyssinia*, p. 421.

35 Henri d'Orleans, "Le Transvaal et l'Abyssinie," *Bulletin de la Societe de Geographie de Marseille* 24 (1900): 43-44.

36 Hughes le Roux, "L'Abyssinie," *Bulletin de la Societe de Geographie Commerciale de Bourdeaux* 28, 3 (3 Fev. 1902): 151,

37 James Willes Jennings and Christopher Addison, *With the Abyssinians in Somaliland* (London, 1905), p. 189.

38 Friedrich J. Bieber, "Reise durch .Athiopien und den Sudan," *Mitteilungen der K.K. Geographischen Gesellschaft in Wien* 53 (1910): 338.

39 Herbert Vivian, *Abyssinia* (London, 1901), p. 248

40 "Kleine Nachrichten," *Globus* 94 (1908): 292.

41 Statement by Dr. Lambie, 21 Feb. 1924, from *Minutes of the First Annual Meeting of the Abyssinian Association of the United Presbyterian Church of Nonh Africa*, Archives of the United Presbyterian Church, New York City. This racist view was also present in the 1980s. See Georgi Galperin, *Ethiopia: Population, Resources, Economy* (Moscow, 1981), p.29.

42 Drummond to FO, Rome, 3 Jan. 1935, PRO, FO 371/19000; Ivone Kirkpatrick, *Mussolini; A Study in Power* (New York, 1968), p. 310.