“The Mysterious Appeals of Race”:
The Haitian Noiriste Intelligentsia and the Italo-Ethiopian War

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Abstract

In 1935, when the forces of fascist Italy readied to invade Ethiopia, which they finally did in October of that year, there was a tremendous reaction throughout the African diaspora. Not only was this the sacred Ethiopia, a beacon for centuries in the consciousness of those considering themselves its exiles. But contemporary Ethiopia was indeed an unconquered outpost on a continent in colonial bondage, where the emperor Haile Selassie whose coronation just five short years earlier — where he assumed the title “King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah” — attracted a host of European dignitaries and was for many evidence of biblical prophesy come to pass. The conflict that involved the diplomatic machinations of the European and North American powers and, eventually, their military involvement as the war bled into World War II, became interpreted by diaspora blacks as a “racial” one, but not simply that. Many blacks in the Caribbean, as in North America and in Europe, were strong anti-imperialists and saw the war as another European colonizing project. The war on the other side of the world became a metaphor, a way to speak to local conditions and the status of those defined as black. It became seen in terms of all that black-white “race relations” were seen to lead to — domination, displacement, degradation, and death. In Haiti, the noiriste intelligentsia used the war to argue that there were three races in the world, and that Ethiopians were part of the black race, the Cushite and Hamitic branch. François Duvalier and Lorimer Denis used their ethnological authority to weigh in on the subject, affirming that “Ethiopians belong to the great black race,” and, therefore, “our sympathy for the actual Ethiopians is not a case of geographical sentimentalism, but moreover one of the mysterious appeals of Race.” In Port-au-Prince, the Ligue Haïtienne pour la Défense du Peuple Ethiopien was formed. This paper documents this response, and then locates it within Haitian ethnic categories, and identifies it with the dualist view of Haitian society so roundly critiqued by Michel-Rolph Trouillot.

Introduction

In 1935, when the forces of fascist Italy readied to invade Ethiopia, which they finally did in October of that year, there was a tremendous reaction throughout the African diaspora. Not only
was this the sacred Ethiopia, a beacon for centuries in the consciousness of those considering themselves its exiles. But contemporary Ethiopia was indeed an unconquered outpost on a continent in colonial bondage, where the emperor Haile Selassie whose coronation just five short years earlier — where he assumed the title “King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah” — attracted a host of European dignitaries and was for many evidence of biblical prophesy come to pass. The conflict that involved the diplomatic machinations of the European and North American powers and, eventually, their military involvement as the war bled into World War II, became interpreted by diaspora blacks as a “racial” one, but not simply that. Many blacks in the Caribbean, as in North America and in Europe, were strong anti-imperialists and saw the war as another European colonizing project. The war on the other side of the world became a metaphor, a way to speak to local conditions and the status of those defined as black. It became seen in terms of all that black-white “race relations” were seen to lead to — domination, displacement, degradation, and death.

So, in Harlem, blacks signed petitions to be allowed to enlist in Ethiopia’s armed services, as did blacks in Kingston, Jamaica, in Cuba’s sugar provinces, on the plantations of Central America, and on the tiny island of Grenada. When Harlem blacks were denied the opportunity to fight Italians in the Ethiopian highlands, they clashed with their Italian neighbors on the streets of New York and New Jersey. Trinidadians turned on their radios and cheered Joe Louis to victory over the Italian Primo Carnera. In the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Nigeria, newspapers molded pro-Ethiopian opinion and saw their circulation skyrocket. In Trinidad the headlines of the radical and pro-labor newspapers screamed “West Indian Blacks Rally to the Fatherland!,” “Members of the Black Race Show Your Sympathy with Abyssinia,” referring to
Ethiopia’s ancient name, and “Race Consciousness is not Race Hatred: Ethiopians Our Kith and Kin.” A series of articles in the Afro-Cuban magazine *Adelante* compared Cuba’s neo-colonialism to the enforced colonialism in the name of progress as was occurring in the Italian invasion. Besides rhetorical exhortations, Caribbean blacks formed a number of organizations to support Ethiopia. In Port of Spain, Trinidad, organizations such as the Afro-West Indian League, the West Indian Youth Welfare League, the Negro Welfare Cultural and Social Association, and the National Association of the African Progeny were formed, held mass meetings, and collected money from Depression-strapped followers for ambulances and medical supplies for Ethiopia. In Georgetown, British Guiana, the Afro-American Association and the League of Coloured Races, formed some years earlier, took the lead in organizing protests. In Fort-de-France, Martinique, the Groupe Jean Jaurès, named for the martyred French socialist historian and politician, and the Front Communist held meetings to discuss the war’s implications for workers. In Paris, reactions were led by the Ligue de la Défense de la Race Nègre. African and Antillian students in Paris such as Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire joined pro-Ethiopian action committees and it was reported that North Africans, Africans, and Antillians resident there had volunteered to fight on Ethiopia’s behalf. In London, leading black anti-colonial intellectuals and radicals such as George Padmore, C.L.R. James, Amy Ashwood Garvey, and Jomo Kenyatta and their white allies formed International African Service Bureau and the International Friends of Abyssinia to raise not only consciousness but money in support of Ethiopia. In Castries, St. Lucia, branches of these organizations passed resolution after resolution, and petitioned the British Government to be allowed to go to Ethiopia and fight. Sixty of Cuba’s best nurses volunteered to go to Ethiopia and provide their services.
It is in light of these historical events that I want to test three of Rolph’s propositions. First, that, as he wrote in a 1990 article “The Odd and the Ordinary: Haiti, the Caribbean and the World” in the journal *Cimarrón*, “Haitian Studies cannot proceed without making a theoretical leap... We need to drop the fiction that Haiti is unique — if by unique one means that it escapes analysis and comparison. Haiti is not that weird. It is the fiction of Haitian exceptionalism that is weird.”

Secondly, and this pertains to internal as well as external analysts of Haitian society, that a “dualist” view that Haiti consists of two parts, whether on the basis of color, or culture, or class, or countryside vs. the city, cannot be sustained.

And third, that in the history of Haitian cultural politics, the US occupation of 1915-1934 loomed large because it called into question the elites self-definition along many lines, and the cultural nationalism that flowered in the 1920s through the indigéniste movement that sought to positively evaluate what was constructed as Haiti’s African past and cultural survivals in the present (through folklore, studies of peasant culture, etc.) and chide Haiti’s elite for their political failures which, the indigénistes said, were in part due to their contempt for Haitian popular culture. For Rolph, indigénisme could be distinguished from noirisme, which in *Haiti: State Against Nation* he identified as “a strictly political ideology rooted in claims of ‘natural’ legitimacy and calling for a color quota within the state apparatus.” Noirisme and indigénisme were related to but distinct from négritude. For Rolph, indigénisme overlaps with négritude but the scope of négritude is much wider, and noirisme is much more narrow. “Whereas the range of noirisme is limited to relations of state power (and thus essentially to the urban area), and indigénisme aims for the national arena, négritude theoretically aims for the world space in
which the unequal evaluation of peoples, religions, and cultures originates.”

**Ethiopianism and African Diaspora Identity**

The effects of the Italo-Ethiopian war on the Caribbean must be seen in light of an African diaspora-wide religious and political phenomenon known as “Ethiopianism,” which in general was a social and religious movement that sought to identify personages and events in the Bible as “African,” and regarded the teachings of established Christian religious sects as distortions effected as tools of dominance over blacks. Biblical references were taken as prophesy. Especially Psalm 68, verse 31: “Princes come out of Egypt, Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.” In many ways Ethiopianism represented a reversal of biblical myths of the “Sons of Ham” and the “Curse of Noah” long used to justify the subjugation of blacks.

In the Caribbean, African American preacher George Liele founded the first Baptist church in Jamaica in 1784, calling it the Ethiopian Baptist Church. In the nineteenth century, Edward Wilmot Blyden, born in the Danish West Indies, an early Caribbean pan-Africanist, made Ethiopianism intellectually respectable.

The 1930 coronation of Ras Tafari Makonnen, who became known as Haile Selassie I, was followed with much interest in the Caribbean. Selassie traced his own lineage to the David, Solomon, and Queen Sheba of the Bible. The coronation, seen against the backdrop of Ethiopianism, led to the creation of the Rastafarian religion in Jamaica.

Ethiopia was also a prominent theme in the pan-African movement led by the Jamaican Marcus Garvey. Many of the Universal Negro Improvement Association’s (UNIA) catechisms drew upon the best known of the biblical passages that proved Ethiopia’s sacred place. Garvey himself wrote that “We, as Negroes, have found a new ideal. Whilst our God
has no color, yet it is human to see everything through one’s spectacles, and since the white people see their God through white spectacles, ...we shall worship Him through the spectacles of Ethiopia.” And there was the UNIA’s Universal Ethiopian Anthem which began “Ethiopia, thou land of our fathers, Thou land where the gods loved to be.” At its height in the 1920s, the UNIA boasted nearly 1,000 branches internationally. In the Caribbean area there were a number of chapters and the UNIA’s influence was felt in African and Europe. It is hard to minimize the effects of Garveyism on some members of the black middle class, including labor and nationalist leaders, and all the way down to the grassroots level.

It might seem that Ethiopianism was a phenomenon that pertained to the parts of the Caribbean that had Protestant religious legacies. And this is so. However, Ethiopianism was certainly adhered to among Haitian intellectuals. The anthropologist and statesman Anténor Firmin referred to the ancient Ethiopians and their cultural accomplishments as part of the heritage of black people. And Ethiopian emperor Menilek II’s incredible, inspiring victory over the Italian army at the Battle of Adwa in 1896 connected the glories of ancient Ethiopia with the modern world. The Haitian pan-Africanist Bénito Sylvain visited Menilek after his victory at Adwa, seeking his support for pan-African activities, and becoming part of his court.

**The War and the Caribbean**

Ethnic and class conflicts and challenges to the colonial and neo-colonial (in the case of Cuba and Haiti, especially, given US involvement) cultural and governing apparatus became overt during the 1930s in the Caribbean. The 1930s were years of crisis in the Caribbean characterized by poverty and unemployment. The severe dislocations felt as part of the Great Depression exposed the contradictions in colonial and neo-colonial economic, political, and
social policies. European colonialism was replaced by American neo-colonialism. The period saw the consolidation of protest movements with the establishment of a number of organizations whose general goals were self-government and social justice. These organizations included those whose avowed aims were to advance the interests of blacks, to advocate for the rights of workers, and those that called for the end of colonial rule. The Italo-Ethiopian war occurred in this context. It fueled anti-colonial mobilization, and a consideration of the war offered an analysis of congealed race/ethnic/class oppression for Caribbean blacks, the vast majority of whom were working class. Prominent in the wave of strikes in the British Caribbean were labor leaders who connected local conditions to the Italo-Ethiopian dispute, and who cultivated themes of black liberation and white oppression using the war as a metaphor. There were labor strikes in Cuba, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and nearly every other island during the 1930s. Official government reports documented the widespread poverty. At the same time, not coincidentally, there was a cultural flowering during this period as exemplified by the négritude and negrismo literary movements. Afro-Cubanism was political as well as artistic. It reflected influences from the Harlem Renaissance but even more importantly spoke in multiple ways to the status of blacks in Cuba. There were parallel, if smaller, movements elsewhere.

Despite the Caribbean’s vaunted cultural and linguistic diversity, there were remarkably similar reactions to the war across the region and among exile groups abroad. Two basic themes emerged. One was a more straightforward “racial” analysis. Blacks elsewhere sought to equate “Ethiopian” with “African” or “black” as the latter identities were understood as “racial” in the New World. The second, overlapping, theme was the use of the war to promote radical
working-class and anti-imperialist politics on the local level. Organizations emerged up that emphasized the worldwide oppression of black people, linking the war to imperialist exploitation and expansion, and that promoted an anti-colonial nationalism.

There were a number of newspaper editorials and letters to the editor on the question of the Ethiopians’ “racial” status. Letters to the editors of Caribbean newspapers affirmed Ethiopians’ status as “Negroes” (e.g., *The West Indian*, Aug. 16, 1935, pp. 4, 5), some stated that Ethiopia was the source of Egyptian civilization, itself the fount of European culture (e.g., *Daily Gleaner*, Sept. 25, 1935, p. 12), and still others engaged in heated dialogue with their fellow correspondents (e.g., *Dominica Tribune*, Sept. 14, 1935, p. 1, Sept. 28, 1935, pp. 3, 4, 7, Oct. 6, 1935, p. 3). The Jamaica *Daily Gleaner* opined that Selassie was “of Jewish and Negro descent” and while “most of the blacks of Ethiopia are not considered Negroes in the strict ethnological sense of the term,” the “dark strain” in the emperor was in “all other peoples of Africa” and “may for all practical purposes be spoken of as Negro” (Oct. 9, 1935, p. 12).

In Jamaica, the radical newspaper *Plain Talk*, after concluding that “geneologists [sic] have proven beyond all reasonable doubts” Selassie’s lineage to Sheba and Menilek, chose to look at the etymology of the word “Ethiopian.” The paper said it was taken from Greek, meaning “a negro or black race.” Thus, “it can be plainly seen that Ethiopia is a blackman’s country having been founded within the domains fate has destined for the Negroes of the world” (Sept. 21, 1935, p. 10). In Cuba, the great Afro-Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén wrote “Soldiers in Abyssinia.” Another poet wrote “La Litúrgia Etiópica” with Afro-Cuban music and religious allusions (*Adelante*, Nov. 1936, p. 8). In Suriname, a poet likened Italian leader
Benito Mussolini to a vampire (De West, Sept. 23, 1935, p. 2). In Trinidad, a representative of the Afro-West Indian League addressed a meeting, claiming that the interest was due to the fact that “we are in part of direct Nubian and Ethiopian descent” (Port-of-Spain Gazette, Aug. 1 1935, p. 6). Some middle class boys at the elite Queens Royal College there formed the Pan-African Order of the Shebisti, named for Sheba (Kevin A. Yelvington interview with Lloyd Braithwaite, Trinidad, March, 19, 1993). Calypsonians sang odes to Selassie.

In Haiti, it was argued that there were three races in the world, and that Ethiopians were part of the black race, the Cushite and Hamitic branch (Haïti-Journal, Aug. 1, 1935, p. 1). François Duvalier and Lorimer Denis used their ethnological authority to weigh in on the subject, affirming that “Ethiopians belong to the grand black race,” and, therefore, “our sympathy for the actual Ethiopians is not a case of geographical sentimentalism, but moreover one of the mysterious appeals of Race” (Le Nouvelliste, July 22, 1935, p. 6).

At the same time, white propagandists in North America and Europe emphasized that the Ethiopians did not consider themselves to be “Negroes,” and that the Ethiopians argued the term was a European invention (which it was). But these rhetorical attacks became known to Caribbean ideological activists and made them more determined. As well, the Ethiopians showed solidarity with New World blacks. Selassie sent his cousin to the United States as an emissary to black America to raise money and consciousness for the war cause.

Caribbean blacks tried to help Ethiopia in tangible ways through a tremendous organizational effort. In almost every island there was at least one organization that raised money for medicines and materiel. Poor blacks contributed significant sums — as did their North American counterparts — although it is not clear how much money actually made it to
Ethiopia. Women played an important role. They held “Ethiopian Flag Days” to raise money (e.g., Trinidad Guardian, Oct. 19, 1935, p. 3). Perhaps none was more influential than Elma François, the leader of the Negro Welfare Cultural and Social Association (NWCSA), a Marxist-oriented working-class advocacy group in Trinidad. The NWCSA held demonstrations, they registered the unemployed, and explicitly connected class exploitation to racial/ethnic exploitation. They distributed copies of the New Times and Ethiopia News, edited by the British socialist feminist Sylvia Pankhurst. Other progressives took a similar line. In Cuba, Afro-Cubans such as Salvador García Agüero, with the blessings of the Communist Party, started the Comité Nacional Pro Abisinia. They established a radio program entitled “La Voz de Etiopía.” In Port-au-Prince, Haiti, the Ligue Haïtienne pour la Défense du Peuple Ethiopien was formed. In Martinique, the Comité de Défense du Peuple Ethiopien, which included pro-labor and radical political activists, said that “The Ethiopians are our brothers in race, they are like us of the oppressed race, the black race” and that “we are in solidarity with white proletarians in the struggle against their imperialism proper” (Justice, November 21, 1935, p. 3). In Trinidad, stevedores boycotted Italian ships.

People in the Caribbean wanted desperately to be able to fight on Ethiopia’s behalf. The UNIA branch in Kingston, Jamaica submitted a long petition asking that, as “the descendants of the sons of Ham,” they be allowed to enlist (The National Archives, London, Colonial Office (C.O.) 318/418/4, 1935/1936). Similar petitions were submitted from other groups and individuals in and from the British Caribbean, including plantation workers abroad. One wrote from Honduras to the Colonial Secretary in Jamaica asking for permission to fight: “Be quick with your reply for we are ready to jump. We don’t want the last Italian to die before
we get there” (Jamaica Archives, 1B/5/77/232/6869/35, Oct. 14, 1935). British colonial governors were instructed to remind petitioners of Section 4 of the Foreign Enlistment Act of 1870 that prohibited British subjects from fighting countries not at war with Great Britain.

Undaunted, in St. Lucia, large crowds gathered at public meetings and resolutions were passed for waiving the Act (e.g., Voice of St. Lucia, Oct. 10, 1935, p. 3, Oct. 12, 1935, p. 4). And it was reported that 2,000 “native Cubans” had mobilized to help the Emperor (The West Indian, Oct. 9, 1935, p. 4). One who did get to go to Ethiopia was the Trinidad-born aviator Hubert Julian, the “Black Eagle.” But he fell out of grace with Selassie after a public fistfight with the African American aviator John C. Robinson, the “Brown Condor,” and he slunk home to Harlem.

These trends were mirrored in Caribbean groups abroad. In Paris, Césaire wrote a principal document of négritude, the Cahier d’un retour au pays natal (Notebook of a Return to the Native Land) in 1935, at the time the term négritude was coined. A number of pro-Ethiopia groups in Paris were active — often with ties to West Africa — and they showed solidarity with similar efforts in England (La Race Nègre, Jan.-Feb. 1936, p. 2). Jamaican-born Joel A. Rogers, a historian of the black experience and a columnist syndicated in major black newspapers in the United States, was a war correspondent in Ethiopia and wrote a pamphlet entitled The Real Facts About Ethiopia (1935) to prove the racial connections of the Ethiopians. In Harlem, the Rev. E. Ethelred Brown, a Jamaican immigrant, delivered a sermon immediately after the invasion entitled “Mussolini and Selassie,” where he affirmed Selassie’s lineage and ended with a quote from Rogers’s Real Facts (Brown Papers, Schomburg Center, MG 87, Box 4 Folder 2). The organizational and political experience of James and Padmore in London was instrumental in the development of their political thought and careers. In Paris, La Race Nègre published the names
of those volunteering to fight for Ethiopia (July 1935, p. 2). *Le Cri des Nègres* sought to show solidarity with “our Ethiopian brothers and black comrades” (Jan. 1936, p. 1). In Amsterdam, the Bond van Surinaamsche Arbeiders in Nederland (League of Surinamese Workers in the Netherlands) rallied Caribbean residents there, and their activities were publicized back home (e.g., *De West*, July 22, 1935, pp. 1, 2). The war led to a circulation of Caribbean intellectuals between the metropolis and the region. The Grenadian T. Albert Marryshow addressed meetings in London, New York, and toured the West Indies during the early days of the crisis.

The reaction to the war worried colonial officials and foreign diplomats, especially in the context of brewing labor unrest. The governor of Jamaica wrote “There is undoubtedly strong feeling in the Colony in support of the Abyssinians as against Italy. There is also a risk of this feeling being inflamed in racial grounds and being used as a pretext for demonstrations which have nothing to do with the War” (C.O. 318/418/4, Nov. 3, 1935, secret). The governor of the Windward Islands saw the labor unrest in St. Vincent as related to the conflict: “There is no doubt about it that this wretched Italy Abyssinia business has done enormous amount to cause bitter feeling amongst the West Indians of African descent in these islands. This feeling has been in some of the Islands fomented by unwise speeches made by well known local agitators” (C.O. 318/418/4, October 26, 1935). The US consul in Barbados reported that the possibility of a “race war” had blacks there deriving “a certain feeling of triumph and exultation from the prospect, as if an opportunity were going to be given to each one of them to lift off imagined oppression and the yoke of the white man’s authority” (United States National Archives, State Department, file 765.84/1481, Sept. 12, 1935). And in France, an agent worried that “the Comintern wants to take advantage of the Italo-Abyssinian conflict for its ‘anti-colonialist’ propaganda” (Archives

There was an incredible turn of events when the Italians reached Addis Ababa and Selassie was forced to flee to exile in England. According to Garvey, living in London at the time, Selassie ignored a delegation of prominent blacks gathered at Waterloo Station to receive him in June, 1936. These included Garvey who up to that point had been supportive of the Emperor (e.g. *The Black Man*, July-Aug., 1936). Contemporary British press reports dispute this claim as Selassie apparently did meet with black delegations (e.g., reports in the *Daily Herald*, June 4, 1936, p. 2 and *Daily Express*, June 4, 1936, p. 11). Soon after, Garvey began criticizing Selassie with such venom through *The Black Man* that he lost considerable respect in the West Indies and elsewhere. He blamed Selassie for Ethiopia’s ill-preparedness for war and its general state of backwardness. He also accused Selassie of an “anti-Negro” bias, questioning if the Emperor, as a member of the Amharic ethnic group, was really in fact a “Negro.” (The emperor’s overtures to African Americans and the experiences of the several Ethiopian emissaries to black Americans belie this claim). Garvey soon went from blaming Selassie’s blunders on his white advisers to blaming the situation of Ethiopia on Selassie’s “negligence” and questioning his “intellectual calibre” while, referring to slavery in Ethiopia, calling him a “great coward who ran away from his country to save his skin and left millions of his countrymen to struggle through a terrible war that he brought upon them because of his political ignorance and his racial disloyalty” and “a cringing, white slave hero worshiper, visionless and disloyal to his country” (*The Black Man*, Jan. 1937 and Mar.-Apr. 1937).
Conclusion

The 1935 Italian fascist invasion of Ethiopia informed the consciousness of the descendants of African slaves in a manner not seen before nor since as Caribbean blacks began to define themselves ethnically more and more in relation to a (what turned out to be) diffuse “African” identity and identify with the beleaguered Ethiopia. Yet, the reaction to the attack by white imperialists on the last bastion of African self-rule on the continent was not the “natural” identification of “actual” ancestors, literal or cultural, but the result of a complex process of social and cultural construction, the same way (albeit by somewhat different means), ethnicity is constructed everywhere. We must, therefore, dislocate the notion of diaspora, as a theoretical concept, from the naturalized notions of “race” or ethnicity, or to particular “homelands” or “fatherlands.” Diaspora is never as simple a phenomenon as it appears.

Let us consider these points in light of Rolph’s propositions.

First, regarding Haitian exceptionalism, it is apparent that Haitian intellectuals and others were involved in pan-Caribbean as well as diasporic social and intellectual relationships, where ideas such as Ethiopianism took hold and had currency. That Firmin could imbibe Ethiopianist thought, and Sylvain could seek to make actual Ethiopian connections based on Ethiopianist thought shows that both the ideological currents and the social conditions that gave rise to them were comparable, perhaps a difference of degree, even if not isomorphic.

Second, the critique of a dualist view of Haitian society is related to the third proposition about the competing ideological fields of noirisme, indigénisme, and négritude. Rather than a dualist perspective, this historical episode suggests that there are competing socio-economic sectors and competing discourses — and that they do not always map to each other. Indigénistes
such as Jean Price-Mars utilized ethnology as a source of authority and legitimacy. But so did noiristes such as Denis and Duvalier. And in the case of the reaction to the 1935 Italian invasion of Ethiopia, it might be said that Denis and Duvalier drew upon the tenets of noirisme, indigénisme, and négritude in positioning Haiti within the world and promulgating their particular cultural politics. So, rather than seeing noirisme, indigénisme, and négritude as separate ideological currents, perhaps it is better to see how they become salient as they are invoked in particular historical junctures. If so, this can only take place through a consideration of these junctures through a study of the historical materials available.

Thus, and in sum, the propositions developed by Michel-Rolph Trouillot can and should become hypotheses to be tested. What more fitting legacy can there be for such a great scholar?