

Boundaries of Blackness – The Racialization of Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Somalis Over Time

Between 1878 and 1952, the United States struggled to define race and whiteness/non-whiteness, with skin color, geography, religion, and political considerations all playing a role in legal decisions. By asking to be considered white in their petitions for naturalization, European- and Arab-Americans played an active role in their racialization. Though missing from these legal determinations of race, people from the Horn of Africa also participated in their racialization in the United States. Their path to doing so, however, was not as straightforward as making arguments in U.S. courts. Researchers and politicians largely ignore or disregard the region's role in defining their own identity because European and American historiography traditionally described Ethiopia as geographically and culturally isolated for centuries (Skinner, 1906a, Binyam and Krebs, 2024d). However, due to their proximity to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, people in the Horn of Africa have consistently engaged in trade and cultural exchange with the Middle East and Europe for millennia. Through these interactions, kingdoms in the region understood the historical, mythological, and religious presentations of Ethiopia¹. As such, people in the Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Somalis were not racialized through requests to be recognized as white in the United States. Instead, their racialization was based on several factors: (1) origin stories which highlighted interaction with the Middle East, (2) religion, and (3) Ethiopians using their knowledge of other countries and foreign politics to frame themselves in politically expedient and positive lights as early as the fourth century. However, their active role in these processes is rarely acknowledged and is the focus of my exploration here.

This chapter traces the history of racialization of people in the Horn of Africa and the ways in which they contributed to how they were viewed. Racialization – an ongoing process of giving racial meaning to a particular group (Omi and Winant, 2014) – is often discussed as a top-down process. That is, a group's racialization is considered an external process. However, Ethiopians have historically been politically strategic in their presentations of self in ways that Eritreans and Somalis were not. Responding to shifting geopolitical power dynamics, regional leaders leveraged a shared religion (Christianity), their written language (Ge'ez), and their knowledge of European beliefs about the region to frame themselves. In doing so, Ethiopians were able to frame themselves as a “Christian island surrounded by a hostile Muslim [or pagan] sea” (Henze, 1981, Lewis, 2002b, Sorenson, 1992) which included Eritrea and Somalia. This politically savvy framing allowed Ethiopians to define not only themselves, but their regional

¹ Following (Binyam & Krebs 2024), in other chapters I put “Ethiopia” in quotation marks when not referring to present-day Ethiopia and its boundaries to acknowledge that – while the word Ethiopia now has very specific geographic definitions, much of the history referring to Ethiopia takes place well beyond the current borders of Ethiopia (and possibly also beyond the borders of Somalia, and Eritrea). However, because I am solely discussing historical “Ethiopia” in this chapter, I do not put it in quotation marks. When I refer to modern-day Ethiopia and its boundaries, I note that in the text. BINYAM, Y. & KREBS, V. 2024d. Introduction. In: HENG, G., NOAKES, S. J. & RAMEY, L. (eds.) *“Ethiopia” and the World, 330-1500 CE*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

counterparts. As such, rather than focusing solely on American or European perceptions of the population, this chapter also traces many of the prevailing beliefs about the Horn of Africa to their primary source – Ethiopians.

I begin with portrayals of the Horn of Africa by the ancient Greeks and in religious texts and move through their portrayals in European arts and literature. These texts are important for two reasons. First, from the Middle Ages through the 19th century, classics and religious knowledge were common frames of reference for educated individuals around the world. Early Americans were no exception (Howe, 2011). In American public and political writings published between 1760 and 1805, 34% of authors cited the Bible and over 10% of writing cited classical literature or authors (Lutz, 1984). Greek and Roman sources were also used to illustrate points in political (Zvesper, 1989) and legal writing, with classical references found in nearly 1/5 of cases heard by the Supreme Court between 1790 and 1800 (Hoffman, 1978). Because the classics and the Bible were foundational texts, early American politicians and judges would have been familiar with their many references to “Ethiopia”. These references may have played a vital role in later American racialization of Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Somalis.

Second, Ethiopians influenced – and at times transformed – Biblical portrayals and utilized them to their advantage in the region and internationally. As such, the second section of this chapter addresses Ethiopians’ self-presentation. In this section, I discuss early Ge’ez translations of the Bible and the influence it had on European ideas of the region. Because Ethiopian religious pilgrims and government representatives traveled throughout the Middle East and Europe during this period, it is not the text alone that guided European thinking. Ethiopians functioned as peers, teaching Europeans Ge’ez and broadening their understanding of the geography, politics, and religion in the Horn of Africa. They also served as translators and editors of prominent work about Ethiopia during that period (Daniels III, 2024). In the process, Ethiopians in Europe also learned local discourse about the Horn and co-opted it to their own purposes. They confirmed European legends about Ethiopia including the size and power of the kingdom (subsuming Eritrea, Somalia, and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa in these stories) and the origins of their ruler who Europeans believed to be the legendary Prester John. They also contributed to the mythology surrounding Ethiopia by introducing the origin story of Ethiopia’s Solomonic dynasty which traces their ancestry to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (Salvadore, 2017f) in the *Kebra Nagast* (Glory of the Kings). By placing themselves *within* Bible stories and legends, Ethiopians solidified their status as an ancient Christian country, justifying their supremacy relative to their majority Muslim neighbors. As such, Ethiopia (not Eritrea or Somalia) was considered an important ally to Europe. This set a standard for later popular racialization of the three populations and the creation of national borders in the region post-WWII.

Scientific definitions of race developed in the 1700s and 1800s closely resembled the descriptions in ancient and Biblical texts as well as later European writing about the region, despite efforts to ground “scientific” definitions of race in methodology used in natural animal and plant sciences. These definitions were used in political and legal discussions of groups, therefore the third section of this chapter explores the scientific definitions of race for Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Somalis. I then utilize first-person travel accounts written during the late 1800s and early 1900s along with New York Times articles from the late 1800s to mid-1900s describing Eritrean, Ethiopian, and Somali populations in the same section to examine the patterns of U.S. racialization for these three groups. I do so to highlight how these descriptions reflect Ethiopian representations of the region, despite similar categorizations within the “scientific” definitions of race and show that news and other media utilized the same four factors used by courts to determine race :skin color, geographic proximity to Europe, religion, and – I argue – U.S. military and security interests in the region. I will end the chapter by discussing the long-term implications of the combination of self-presentation and racialization. For example, by calling the entire region Ethiopia, rulers of the Aksumite kingdom were able to erase the importance of a diverse population including parts of present-day Eritrea. The Solomonic empire used the same reasoning to justify their claims to areas inhabited by Somali populations. This had long-standing impacts on foreign perceptions of the region which had important political implications.

“Blameless Ethiopians”: The Horn of Africa in Classical and Religious Texts

*And the deep-purple holy waters
of the Erythraean Sea, and the bronze-thundering all-nourishing
pool of the Ethiopians
where the all-seeking Sun ever renews
his immortal skin and his weary steeds
in the warm outpourings of soft water*

- Translation of excerpt from Prometheus Unbound – 5th Century B.C.E. (MacLachlan, 1992)

To the ancient Greeks “Ethiopia” and “Erythraea” were utopias. As can be seen in the passage above, poets wrote that the “Erythraean Sea” and the “pool of the Ethiopians” were where the sun rejuvenated itself. Because it was the place where the sun began and ended its journey each day, Diodorus contended it was reasonable to believe that the region was also where humanity began: “those who dwell beneath the noon-day sun were, in all likelihood, the first to be generated by the earth . . . it is reasonable to suppose that the region which was nearest the sun was the first to bring forth living creatures” (Diodorus Siculus, 1967). As the origin of mankind, Diodorus noted that they were the first taught to honor the gods and – because of their piety – were favored by them as Ethiopia was seemingly protected from attack as no foreign invader was successful in disturbing their freedom and peace (Diodorus Siculus, 1967). Although Greeks had regular contact with Ethiopians as early as the first century, Homer (who lived in the 8th

century) wrote that the gods went to Ethiopia to feast and bathe (MacLachlan, 1992) and considered them a virtuous people who lived outside of humanity with no dealings with other men (West, 2003).

Associations with the sun and the gods was not limited to the region's geographic location; in Greek mythology, the Ethiopian king, Memnon, was the son of Dawn/Eos (the goddess of dawn) and the nephew of Helios (the god of the Sun) (Gordon, 2024). Described as the handsomest of men (Green, 2018), so were the Ethiopians themselves: "Ethiopians bathed like the gods and were therefore renewed and beautified by this bath" (MacLachlan, 1992). Later Greek writers such as Herodotus described Ethiopians as the tallest and best-looking people in the world (Johnson, 2006). Their dark skin was attributed to their proximity to the sun and considered a mark of privilege in early Greek literature (MacLachlan, 1992). Therefore, their beauty was noted along with – not despite – the color of their skin.

Due to their proximity to the gods, Homer even referred to Ethiopians in the *Iliad* as "blameless" (Johnson, 2006), and Islamic texts echoed Homer's conclusions. After learning about Ethiopia from his grandfather (who traveled to Ethiopia for business) and from his Ethiopian nanny, the Prophet Muhammad reportedly told his followers to seek refuge there when they were being persecuted in the Middle East because it was "a country where no one is wronged" (Pankhurst, 2014). The king is said to have welcomed (Chkroun and Hirsch, 2020) two groups that fled to Axum including the Prophet's own daughter and her husband as well as one of the Prophet's cousins (Henze, 2000). As such, the idea of Ethiopia as a place of peace and refuge continued beyond the Greek period.

While early Americans may not have been familiar with the biography of the Prophet, they would have been extremely familiar with Biblical references to Ethiopia and its people. In the New Testament, a minister to the Ethiopian Queen Candace is one of the earliest converts to Christianity, baptized by Philip at the behest of an angel of the Lord in Acts 8:26-39. Ethiopia is also mentioned geographically multiple times throughout the Bible, but it is the Ethiopians mentioned in the Old Testament who are most storied. Moses's wife (Numbers 12:1) and another woman named as the Queen of the South (Matthew 12:42) who came from the ends of the earth (Luke 11:31) to visit King Solomon are both widely considered to be Ethiopian. Though these women are only mentioned in passing and not directly identified as Ethiopian in the Bible, their stories would have been well known to Americans in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Flavius Josephus is likely the reason that these women and their stories became widely known and attributed to Ethiopia. In the first century AD, Josephus wrote "Jewish Antiquities" which told biblical stories. His work was not simply a reproduction of biblical texts, instead it was part of a widespread practice of reframing and retelling biblical stories (Gruen, 2024). Josephus's insertion of Ethiopians into biblical stories began with Genesis. The Bible recounts the sons of Noah and their nations without naming Ethiopia. Josephus, however, does so twice. In naming Ham's descendants he identifies Judadas who "settled the Judadeans, a nation of the western Ethiopians" and states that Chus (Cush), the son of Ham,

reigned over Ethiopians who are “by themselves and by all men in Asia, called Chusites” (Whiston, 1829a). In the latter quote Josephus identifies Ethiopia’s heritage while also noting that Ethiopians call *themselves* Cushites. In doing so, he shows that Ethiopians are not passive recipients but are active participants in that identification.

Not only did Josephus expand on Bible verses, but he also inserted stories that did not appear in the Bible, including that of Moses’s Ethiopian wife. There is only one verse in the scriptures hinting at her existence (Numbers 12:1) but that mention was expanded into a tale of Moses’s expedition into Ethiopia by Josephus². In Josephus’s work, Moses battled Ethiopia as a general appointed by the Egyptians. During his expedition, he and his army were delayed due to the difficulty of conquering the Ethiopian city of Saba. During this delay, Tharbis, the daughter of the Ethiopian king, saw Moses, fell in love, and sent her servants to “discourse with him about their marriage” (Whiston, 1829b). He accepted her offer on the condition that her city surrendered and, when they did, he gave thanks to God and married her, taking her back to Egypt. Here again, we see the Ethiopian in question in control of their own destiny. It was Tharbis, not Moses, who proposed and – while he set a condition for their marriage – she already knew that her city would not be able to recover their liberty, making this concession inconsequential.

Just as Tharbis sought out her future with Moses, so too did the Queen of Sheba initiate her relationship with King Solomon. Named only as the Queen of the south in the Bible, Josephus calls her the queen of Egypt and Ethiopia, describing her as inquisitive with a great mind who would not be satisfied by hearing about Solomon’s wisdom second-hand. During her trip to Jerusalem, the Queen was indeed amazed at his wisdom. When she tells Solomon how much she had affected her, Solomon “repaid her with many good things, and principally by bestowing upon her what she chose to her own inclination” (Whiston, 1829c). Here again, we see that the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba is in control. *She* decides to visit Solomon, and it is *her* inclination which determines the gifts she is given.

Josephus’s interpretations of the Bible fell in and out of fashion, but his work was translated from the original Greek and spread through Europe. By the mid-17th century it was a widely known supplement to Old Testament narratives in western Europe (McGrath, 2007). Consequently, European artwork of both Moses’s wife and The Queen of Sheba depicted both women as Black from the Middle Ages onwards. A 12th century enameled plaque depicting the Queen of Sheba’s visit to Solomon shows the Queen with Black skin, but features indistinguishable from the iconography used for European faces – while her attendants were not (Heng, 2018). Moses’s wife was presented in the 17th century in Jacob Jordaen’s painting of Moses and a Black woman – his Ethiopian wife (McGrath, 2007).

² Another writer (Aartapanus) also wrote a rendition of the same story and some authors suggest that Josephus used Aartapanus as a source, relied on a different unknown source, or both authors drew on this no longer extant work GRUEN, E. S. 2024. Josephus and the Bible. In: BAY, C., AVIOZ, M. & VAN HENTEN, J. W. (eds.) *From Josephus to Yosippon and Beyond: Text - Re-interpretations - Afterlives*. Boston: Brill.

Together, European classical and religious texts portrayed Ethiopians as integral parts of early civilization. While the Greeks highlighted their skin color as a positive attribute, later texts took pains to erase or minimize their Blackness to justify their important roles in religious history. In the Middle Ages, Memnon was transformed from Black to being described as Asian or even white in artistic representations (Dean, 2024). All of the early imported translations of Josephus's *Antiquities* as well as early American publications (e.g. (Maynard LL.D., 1792-1794)) described Moses's wife and the Queen of Sheba as Ethiopian, however later translations added a footnote saying that the author felt there was general agreement that the Queen of Sheba was from South Arabia, not Ethiopia as Josephus asserted (Whiston, 1829c). Later archaeological research also made this claim (Legrain, 1934), but the idea that they were Ethiopian was already widespread at this point allowing for Ethiopians to draw on these works when asserting their own racial identity.

Self-Presentation in the Horn of Africa: Religion and Racialization

“Many things generally spoken of the Ethiopians, were more particularly attributed to the Abbessines. Neither were they wanting to their own honor, while they appropriated to themselves whatever was said either in Scripture or elsewhere to their advantage” Ludolphus (1684)

Often the process of racialization is discussed as a one-sided process where one group names or describes another. This is the way racialization of the Horn of Africa is generally discussed, and their descriptions in ancient and religious texts are examples of how out-groups perceived and defined them. Even widely known country names in the region have foreign origins. The name of the Abyssinian empire comes from the Arabic word “Habash” which Middle Eastern populations used to refer to people in the Horn of Africa. The word translates to mixture of races, reflecting how the Arab world viewed the racial origin of the people in the region (Bekerie, 2004). The modern names of Eritrea and Ethiopia reference Greek designations of the region. Homer is credited as the one to coin the term Ethiopia to describe this land of “burnt faces” or dark-skinned people (Bekerie, 2004). The origin of the word Eritrea stems from the word erythrean, the Greek word for red. One of the earliest references to Eritrea as the name for the region is from the first century AD (*The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*) (McKenzie and Williams, 2016).

It is only in the last century that the countries of Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia took their present forms or names. Historically, present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia were comprised of diverse array of kingdoms and ethnic groups that were flattened by the broad terms of Habash, Ethiopia, and Abyssinia that were applied to some, or all, of the population. While the foreign origins of these country names could suggest a fully external definition of the people in the region, as Ludolphus wrote in his 17th century book *A New History of Ethiopia* quoted above, Ethiopians played active roles in their racialization. As early as the fourth century AD, Ethiopians used the imposed place names to their advantage. In a victory inscription, the Aksumite kingdom (which spanned modern-day northern Ethiopia, southern Eritrea, and,

for a brief period, part of Yemen) identified themselves as rulers of *Ethiopia* rather than rulers of the Aksumite kingdom, appropriating the Greek term in a politically strategic move (Binyam and Krebs, 2024b). As Binyam and Krebs note, their inscriptions were broadcasting their reign as a new, modern era which they felt unified a wide range of territories in the Horn of Africa and across the Red Sea in South Arabia. It is also an early example of people in the Horn of Africa using their knowledge of European languages and traditions to position themselves within the region and abroad.

Christianity in the Horn and Translating the Bible into Ge'ez

Because historical definitions of race were often, at least in part, based on religion (Husain, 2017), Ethiopia's Christianity was an integral part of their racialization over time through their translations of religious texts and transmission of their origin stories to define their own racial identity. While oral traditions may lose (or gain) nuance, context, or detail with each re-telling, written texts remain a resource available for centuries. The areas constituting present day Eritrea and Ethiopia have an ancient written language unique to the region – Ge'ez – which is the language from which modern Tigrinya and Tigre (languages of modern-day Eritrea and northern Ethiopia) derive. The origins of Ge'ez are unclear with some claiming that it developed from a 'proto-Ethiopic' language brought to present-day Ethiopia from south-eastern Eritrea as early as 2000 BC (Munro-Hay, 1991a) and that its name is related to the southern Eritrean province of Akele Guzay (Henze, 2000). Others argue that Agazian immigrants came from the Middle East in the first millennium BC, bringing the fundamentals of Ge'ez with them (Erlich, 2024). Regardless of its origins, all agree that Ge'ez is a Semitic language and, by the fourth century AD, the Aksumite kingdom developed their own alphabet and vowel system. Ge'ez is no longer spoken by the population, but it is still used as the liturgical language in both Eritrea and Ethiopia today, and the alphabet is still used for modern languages in both countries.

With a written language utilized by early kingdoms, people of the region were able to define themselves and participate in their racialization in important ways. Besides political inscriptions of the period, one of the most important ways that empires from the Aksumite to the Solomonic defined themselves were through translations and re-tellings of Bible stories. Christianity came to the Horn of Africa before it reached most of the world. The Bible tells of the conversion of an Ethiopian minister in the first century (Acts 8:26-39), but scholars trace the introduction of Christianity to the arrival of two Syrian brothers (Frumentius and Aedesius) in the early fourth century. Although they came to the region as refugees and were held as prisoners, the brothers eventually gained positions of prominence (Kaplan, 1982). Frumentius was consecrated by the Patriarch of Alexandria (Egypt), became the first bishop in Eritrea/Ethiopia, and was given the name Abuna Selama Kesate Berhan (Father of Peace, Revealer of Light) in the region (Henze, 2000).

Evidence of official conversion to Christianity is found in the Aksumite king Ezana's inscriptions and coins. Ezana became the first ruler in any country to use the cross in their currency when he replaced the disc and crescent which represented the "pagan" religion with a cross in the fourth century (Munro-Hay, 1991b). The conversion of the Aksumite king may have been genuine, but placing the cross on the currency also served a diplomatic purpose. As a form of religious statecraft, he used this new monotheistic religion to legitimize his rule and unify the diverse population over whom he ruled while also using a shared religious language to align the kingdom more closely with the Greco-Roman world (Binyam and Krebs, 2024a).

Conversion of the king was followed by translating the Bible into Ge'ez. Using Hebrew, Syriac, Greek, and Coptic sources (Selden, 2013), the first Ge'ez language Bible was complete in the second half of the sixth century (Mikre-Selassie, 2000). However, translations into Ge'ez were rarely, if ever, direct. Translations of the tables, text, and even illuminations of one of the oldest surviving illustrated gospels in the world (the Garima Gospels, dated between 330 and 650 AD) vary, sometimes substantially, from their sources. In most cases, these variations allowed Ethiopians to insert themselves into the Bible itself. An illustration of the Jerusalem Temple is portrayed with distinct "Ethiopian" architectural features (McKenzie, 2016) and illuminations featured bird species specific to the region (McKenzie and Additional Note by Linda Macaulay, 2016). While both illustrations could be explained away by lack of knowledge of the Holy Land, Ethiopians travelled there since at least the fourth century and, importantly, monks visited Jerusalem and fourth-century Aksumite coins have been found in Jerusalem and several other cities in the region (McKenzie and Williams, 2016). As such, the monks would have first-hand information about the region and adding these architectural features and wildlife were likely deliberate choices to insert aspects of Ethiopia into these religious texts.

The table and texts of the Garima Gospels also reflect changes that inserted aspects of Ethiopia into the Bible. Due either to specific intent, misunderstanding the structure of the tables, or editing to fit tables within the illuminations, the canon tables in the first version of the Garima Gospels are unusable as a reference system. Instead, it is simply an illustration of the harmony between the gospels and this is reflected in the textual translations as well (Watson, 2016a). The translators ignored the table's purpose of highlighting gospels' parallels *and* aspects unique to each gospel in the preface and instead focused *only* on characterizing agreement between the gospels as miraculous and indicative of being the work of the Holy Spirit (Watson, 2016b). This unity reflects the interpretation of the Ethiopian church at the time, but it may also reflect aspects of religious statecraft. The same unity emphasized in the gospels could be an example of an attempt to unify a diverse population under the Aksumite kingdom. As one of the oldest versions of the Bible, these translations were later considered foundational texts in European Christianity

(Daniels III, 2024) and inserting aspects of themselves and their government in these relatively subtle ways helped legitimize more direct changes to Bible stories.

*“Black am I and **more**³ beautiful than the daughters of Jerusalem”*
Translation of the Song of Songs 1:5 in the Ge’ez Bible (Selden, 2013)

–
*“I am very dark, **but**⁴ comely, O daughters of Jerusalem”*
Revision of the American Standard Version of the Bible, published in 1901

One example of a direct change is the translation above which was completed in 525 AD and drew on several versions of the Talmud (in Hebrew, but also Syriac, Coptic, and Greek) to form a unique translation (Selden, 2013). The title of the book is “Song of Songs”, but the Ge’ez title is “Song of Songs, which are Solomon’s”, highlighting that this is a dialogue between King Solomon and the Queen of Saba (Sheba). While translations of the text describe the Queen as saying she is dark, *but* beautiful, in the Ge’ez translation she says she is Black and *more* beautiful, ignoring contemporaneous commentary describing blackness as subordinate to whiteness (Selden, 2013). This translation is an example of Ethiopians defining themselves. In this case, they assert that blackness and beauty are not mutually exclusive – mirroring their representation in ancient Greek poetry.

Ethiopian Christians and the Ge’ez Bible Outside of the Horn

Ethiopia’s long history of Christianity with its own Biblical texts coincided with Ethiopian presence in Jerusalem where European Christians also made pilgrimages. These Ethiopian monks were visible there – not because of their skin color – but because they founded a religious community in Jerusalem in the 9th and 10th centuries. These Ethiopian monks were thought to be in charge of the continuous flame at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (Heng, 2018) and representatives of the Church took part in major religious discussions of the period (1896c) into the 15th century (Salvadore, 2017f). Together, their physical and textual presence in Christian religious life put Ethiopia in a unique position. Ethiopians were accepted in Europe based on a common religious identity and – as one of the oldest Christian populations in the world – were considered sources of knowledge (Salvadore, 2011). For example, in the 1440s, Father Mauro Camaldolese’s Mappamundi (Map of the World) was heavily influenced by Ethiopian monks in Venice who Camaldolese said drew provinces, cities, rivers, and mountains for him and provided their names (Salvadore, 2017d). The monks’ input provided more detail on sub-Saharan Africa than any other map of its time, however rather than representing the kingdom’s true boundaries, Camaldolese’s map represented Abassia [Abyssinia] as an empire covering much of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Ethiopians were also very involved in religious life in Italy. The Church of Santo Stefano Maggiore in Rome became the home of “the largest Ethiopian community in Europe” (Salvadore, 2017f) and the

³ Emphasis mine

⁴ Emphasis mine

community was so ensconced that Pope Paul III gave the church to an Ethiopian monk (Tasfa Seyon) for his lifetime (Kennerly, 2020). During the 15th and 16th century, this church was the site of many collaborations between European and Ethiopian intellectuals. A resident of this church – Ethiopian Orthodox priest Tomas Walda Samu’el – co-supervised and co-edited the first book printed in Ge’ez (an Ethiopian book of Psalms) which helped launch the fields of Ethiopic and African studies in Europe (Daniels III, 2024). However, in the preface and afterword written by his German co-editor Johannes Potken, Ge’ez was misidentified as Chaldean. Potken wrote that his Ethiopian language instructors “believe that these letters . . . are Chaldean, and affirm, with a constancy from which they could not be shaken by me, that Abraham and Heber and their ancestors as far back as their parents used this Chaldean language” (Translation of (1513)). However, this may not have been entirely true. As Kelly (2015) wrote in her influential paper, Ethiopians likely learned the idea that Ge’ez was considered Chaldean from Potken himself, and “perhaps, like not a few Ethiopian visitors before and after them, the Roman Ethiopians were happy to promote the glories of their culture in terms they understood . . . European[s] . . . would welcome.” Accepting (and promoting) this view of Ge’ez meant that the Ge’ez Bible was thought to be written in the first language of humanity, increasing its status and authority (and that of Ethiopia) within larger debates about humanity and race (Daniels III, 2023).

It was easy for Europeans to believe that Ge’ez was the first human language because of other legends about Ethiopia. As noted in the first section of the chapter, the ancient Greeks believed that Ethiopians were the first of mankind. In this period, the most prominent legend circulating Europe was the legend of Prester John. The myth of Prester John was first recorded in the 12th century by Otto of Freising (Salvadore, 2017e) who wrote about a rumor that there was a king and priest named John who was a descendant of the Magi and lived in the east, beyond Persia and Armenia (Otto Bishop of Freising, 1966). Many medieval Europeans initially associated the mythical Prester John with Asia, but after traders and missionaries came back from Asia with reports refuting the presence of Prester John in Asia (Salvadore and De Lorenzi, 2021), Europeans looked elsewhere. By the 1430s, Prester John was no longer a myth, and some Europeans identified Prester John as the Ethiopian monarch (Salvadore, 2011). An itinerary of a trip between Venice and Ethiopia identifies the kingdom’s ruler as “Presto Johannes” with the given name of David and included an unprecedented amount of detail (Salvadore, 2011). But what was likely the most important factor in solidifying the idea that the land of Prester John was Ethiopia is the Portuguese expedition to the region. Father Francisco Alvarez wrote a narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia with a description of the people, the government structure, and – importantly – the Prester himself. Noting his youth (“they said that he was twenty-three years of age”) and his complexion (“not very dark in color . . . his complexion might be chestnut or bay”), Father Alvarez called the Prester “elegant” and said that “in his presence and state he fully looks like the great

lord that he is” (Alvarez, 1881a). Echoing an earlier Venetian itinerary (Salvadore, 2011), the Prester, as he writes in another chapter (Alvarez, 1881b) is King Dawit (or David as he was called by Europeans) of Ethiopia.

Placing the land of Prester John in Ethiopia did more than just locate an ancient, lost Christian kingdom, it linked Ethiopia to the Bible in a new way. Prester John was believed to be a descendant of one of the Magi, therefore by concluding that Ethiopia is the land of Prester John, this magus became Black both in religious spaces and in art (Kelly, 2015). Combined with having the one of the oldest written Bibles in the world and the presumption that Ge’ez was the first language spoken by humanity, Ethiopia gained prestige and importance in religious discussions. This new status also allowed them to contribute to European understandings of the Bible. Ethiopians provide the names for unnamed Biblical figures and added to Christian origin stories (Daniels III, 2023) by relating the story of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon in the *Kebra Nagast*.

Ethiopia’s Ge’ez translation of the Kebra Nagast

Like the Bible, the *Kebra Nagast* did not originate in the region but was translated into Ge’ez. Rather than accepting these (or other) texts as they were written, translators “regularly added to, or supplemented the texts, sometimes with distortions, at other with the direct insertion of new material . . . whenever they wished to turn the texts to other purposes” (Selden, 2013). In this case, the purpose was to legitimize the power of the ruling dynasty through their Biblical origins and lend credence to their claims on neighboring lands and peoples including Eritrea and Somalia. While this book recounting the story of the Queen of Sheba’s encounter with King Solomon was originally written for the local population, the story eventually played a crucial role in the racialization of Ethiopians relative to other populations in the Horn as it was widely discussed in early European descriptions of the region (e.g. (Ludolphus, 1684, Burton, 1856)).

When the Solomonic empire took control of the region in 1270 AD, they erased all records of the preceding Zagwe dynasty, and the *Kebra Nagast* became a way to legitimize their claim to the throne. The book claimed that this dynasty were the rightful leaders of the region because they were the descendants of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (Binyam and Krebs, 2024c). A foreign work translated into Ge’ez around 100 years after the Solomonic empire took power, the Colophon states that the *Kebra Nagast* was translated to Ge’ez from Arabic which was itself a translation of a Coptic manuscript they claimed belonged to “the throne of Mark the Evangelist, the teacher, the Father of us all” (1932a). This connection to Mark the Evangelist is one important way that this book legitimized the ruling dynasty. The other was by noting that the preceding Zagwe dynasty knew of this text, but refused to translate it because they were pretenders to the throne and “had they been of the kingdom of Israel [a descendant of King Solomon] they would have edited (or, translated) it” (1932a).

The preface written for the 1932 English translation of the *Kebra Nagast* highlights the Arabic texts the translator believed form the basis of the Ge'ez version. One stated that when the Queen of Sheba's mother was pregnant with her, she saw a good looking goat, commented on how handsome its feet were and longed to eat it with the strength of a pregnant woman's cravings (Budge, 1932a). The cravings led the Queen to develop one foot of a goat in the womb. The goat foot remained through adulthood and – having heard from spies that one foot was that of a goat – King Solomon schemed to see the foot without asking her to show him. He required her to walk through a courtyard that he filled with water so she would have to lift her skirts to step through. However, when she stepped into the water, her foot touched wood that was brought by an eagle from below Paradise and turned it into a human foot. This Arabic text mirrors other versions in the Koran, Arabic literature and Jewish texts but – in most cases – these other versions had even more negative depictions of the Queen. These texts all describe the Queen's hairy legs as a representation of the danger she poses to Solomon because the hair suggests that she is unclean or unholy (Lassner, 1993a) or that she is the offspring of a human and a jinni who is unwilling to be confined either to a jinni's life of servitude or a woman's life under the authority of a man (Lassner, 1993e). Both the Jewish and Muslim texts describe the Queen of Sheba as a political striver, making an unsuccessful attempt to assert her power (Lassner, 1993d) and subvert gender roles, thereby undermining God's design (Lassner, 1993b).

These stories must have posed a problem for the Ge'ez translators. The Queen of Sheba was a link to Ethiopia and, though Jewish and Muslim texts described her as beautiful, they also portrayed her as unclean, sub-human, and a danger to the future of mankind. To present the Solomonic dynasty as descendants of Solomon who, like Christ himself, descended from Abraham and early patriarchs making Ethiopia's king “a kingsman of Christ [and] a son of God . . . [who] was therefore both God and king to his people” (Budge, 1932a), Ethiopian translators made several changes to the story. Called the Queen of the South in the Bible, the *Kebra Nagast* asserts that the Queen of the South was the Queen of Ethiopia and describes her as “very beautiful in face” with “superb” stature and “exceedingly rich” (1932d), but with no mention of hairy legs. With this small change in her description, the Queen is transformed from unholy to admirable. The translators are then able to create a book that could unify the people of Ethiopia with the belief that their country was chosen by God to be “the new home of the spiritual and heavenly Zion” (Budge, 1932a). In fact, the text begins by describing the world as split in two: the Roman Empire and the Ethiopian Empire (1932c). This division of the earth assigns a much wider range of territory to Ethiopia than even very early literature. The Persian prophet Mani wrote in the third century AD that the Aksumites were one of four kingdoms on earth, with the other being the kingdoms of Babylon and Persia, Rome, and of the Chinese (Henze, 2000). Even at the time the *Kebra Nagast* was circulated, their territory was much smaller than its claims; during the 14th century, the kingdom only stretched from Tigray

(present-day northern Ethiopia) south to Gojjam (in present day Ethiopia's Amhara Regional State) (Ayenachew, 2020). Rather than accurately defining the boundaries of the kingdom, the Kebra Nagast attempts to legitimize the Solomonic Empire's territorial ambitions of stretching to the Red Sea and beyond.

The Roman and Ethiopian empires were considered legitimate because they both descended from Noah's son Shem, and each of their emperors are sons of King Solomon (1932c). Ethiopia's relationship to King Solomon stems from the Queen of Sheba's trip to Jerusalem. As in Josephus' (Whiston, 1829c) and Middle Eastern accounts of the story, she went to Jerusalem to observe the wisdom of King Solomon for herself. However, the Kebra Nagast differs in several ways, the most important of which is the description of her son and his conception. The Jewish Ben Sira text states that King Solomon has an encounter with a foreign queen resulting in Nebuchadnezzar – the Babylonian king who destroyed Jerusalem (Lassner, 1993a). Some Muslim texts by contrast, portray the Queen as only part human and – though Solomon is tempted by her – they do not have a son together and he marries her off to someone else who then is established as the ruler of her kingdom (Lassner, 1993c).

Both the Jewish and Muslim texts present the Queen of Sheba as a danger and any offspring as “perverse”, interpretations that would not support the Solomonic empire's claims to Biblical origins or the kingdom. Rather than following these texts, the Kebra Nagast is most similar to Josephus' version of the story, but rather than alluding to their son as a gift bestowed upon her by her own inclination, the Kebra Nagast describes their encounter as the Queen acquiescing as a result of Solomon's plan to trick her into agreement. Afterwards, the King had a dream that the sun shone with “great splendour” over Israel, but suddenly flew away to Ethiopia where it shone forever because it chose to dwell there (1932b). While the Sun returned, Israel was no longer at peace with the sun. Like the Greek myths, this portion of the Kebra Nagast equates Ethiopia as the land where the sun chooses to dwell and depicts Ethiopians as God's chosen people. In doing so, it refutes the Jewish and Muslim versions of the text. In the Kebra Nagast, even King Solomon interprets his vision as God blessing Ethiopia through the Queen of Sheba and their potential child (1932e).

The Kebra Nagast also allays the fears expressed in the Jewish and Muslim texts that the Queen of Sheba aimed to overturn gender roles. When her son becomes an adult, he went to Israel to meet his father (King Solomon), but, before he leaves, the Queen overturns the law of the kingdom that says only women could reign. Instead, only he and his male descendants would rule the kingdom and she even goes so far as to say that he should have her decree inscribed in the Book of Prophets in Israel (1932f). By making this change (and removing the Queen of Sheba's hairy legs), the Ge'ez Kebra Nagast reshaped the perception of the Queen and allowed the book to serve three purposes: First is legitimization of the Solomonic Empire and its territorial ambitions. The Axumite Empire unified their empire under

Christianity, and in doing so, they were able to frame themselves internally as the true rulers of the region. The Solomonic line took this one step further, by linking themselves to biblical figures and used this framing locally *and* internationally. After the Ethiopian defeat by the British in the 1868 Battle of Maqdala in Ethiopia (which ended in the suicide of King Tewedros), the British looted the region, taking everything from animals to manuscripts. Tewedros' successor Yohannes wrote two letters to the British Foreign Secretary in 1872 requesting the return of the Kebra Nagast and an icon – stating that the book “contains the Law of the whole of Ethiopia . . . I pray you find out who has got this book, and send it to me, for in my country my people will not obey my orders without it” (Budge, 1932b). The British museum found two copies of the Kebra Nagast in their possession and agreed to return the less interesting version (Parliament, 2000). By portraying this book as a legal document, the Solomonic line turned an origin story into fact and solidified their relationship to ancient Biblical texts. Second, by saying that Ethiopia encompassed half the world, the Kebra Nagast serves to legitimize the Ethiopian Empire and its later claims to Eritrea and Somalia. Finally, by linking themselves to King Solomon and his advisors, the Kebra Nagast frames the heritage of the Solomonic line – and the ruling class – not as African, but as Middle Eastern.

White, Black, or In-Between? How the Factors Determining Whiteness Determined Racial Identification in the Horn of Africa

The classical and religious texts' descriptions of Ethiopia presented a group of people that were favored by God both before and after Christianity. These texts – in combination with Ethiopia's presence in the Holy Land and Europe – informed their racial identification in Europe and the United States.

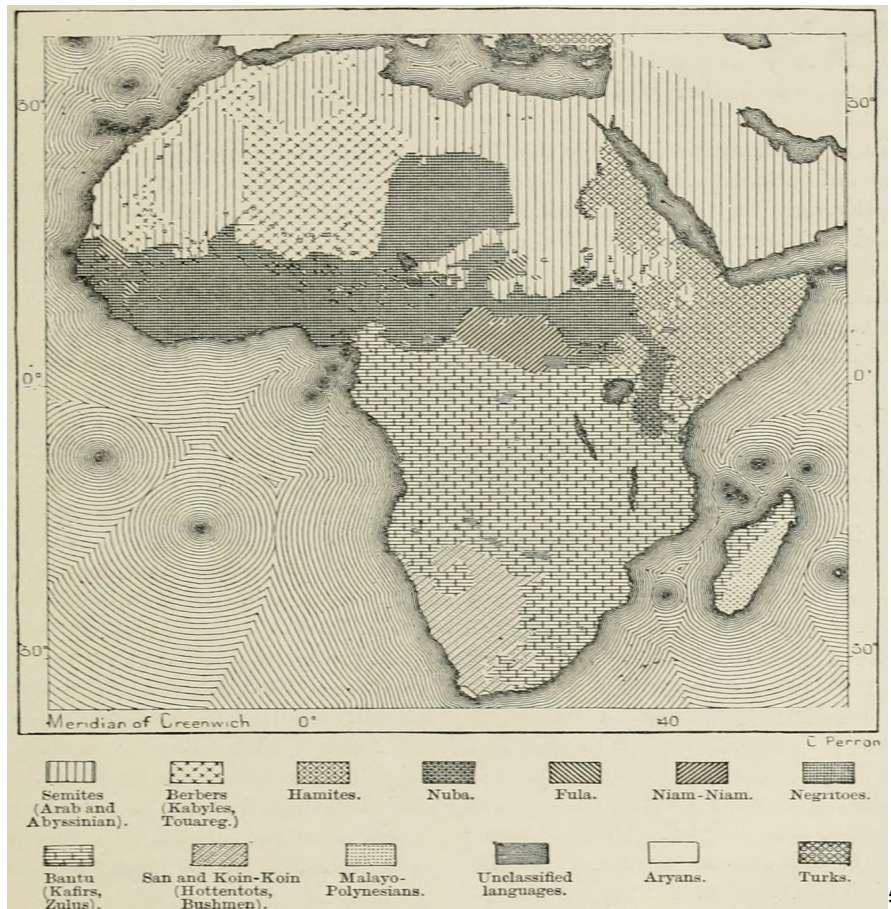
“Scientific” Definitions of Race in the Horn of Africa

Scientific definitions of race developed by Europeans were widespread with the most widely cited definition of race dividing the world into five principal races, one of which was called Ethiopian – a term used during several time periods to refer to Black people broadly. Yet inhabitants of the Horn of Africa were never included in the same racial category as other sub-Saharan Africans. Blumenbach defined Caucasians as “Europeans, with the exception of the Lapps, and the rest of the true Finns, and the western Asiatics this side of the Obi, the Caspian Sea, and the Ganges along with the people of North Africa” but does not define the boundaries of North Africa (Blumenbach, 1865). While Blumenbach himself did not specifically identify the Horn of Africa, his successors did. John Hunter defines Abyssinians as “light brown” along with southern Europeans, Sicilians, Spaniards, Turks, and others (Hunter, 1865) and Keane explicitly places many of the inhabitants of the Horn of Africa in the White Division (Keane, 1908). Calling Somalis and [Oromos] (an ethnic group incorporated into the legal boundaries of Ethiopia during the reign of Emperor Menelik) “altogether true Caucasians despite their generally dark colour” and described Abyssinians as “South Arabians” rather than African. Keane makes a clear distinction between

people in the Horn of Africa and inhabitants of the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa while still differentiating between Abyssinians and their neighbors.

“Scientific” definitions of whiteness included Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Somalis in the Caucasian or white category due to (1) their linguistic heritage and (2) beliefs about their origins. Eastern Africa was divided into three “races”: Hamites (or aborigines), the “almost pure Caucasian of the northern regions, west of Egypt”, and the “half-castes in Eastern Africa represented principally by the Abyssinians, [Oromos], Somalis, and Kafirs” (Burton, 1856). Although Burton specifically identifies Abyssinians’ descent from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and therefore Semitic, he states that their features make it evident that they also have Hamitic origins.

Semitic as a racial term was used in two different ways: people speaking a Semitic language or people from one of the nations mentioned in the tenth chapter of Genesis as descendants of Shem (Noah’s son) (Toy, 1881). In the map below from Reclus’ *The Universal Geography: Earth and Its Inhabitants*, the Horn of Africa is illustrated as comprised of Semitic (Arabic, Ge’ez, and the linguistic descendants of Ge’ez) (Werner, 1915b) and Hamitic languages (such as Somali and Orominya) (Werner, 1915a). The appendix of Reclus’ work specifies the ethnic groups in each category, with most of present-day Ethiopia and all but one Somali group identified as Hamitic. Somalis receive their own sub-category within the Hamitic branch, but Horn of Africa Semites are all called the “Abyssinian” branch of the Semitic language group in Reclus’ definition (Reclus, 1876-94). Although labelled as Abyssinian (then the name Ethiopia used internationally), much of this population is Eritrean in origin: of the 18 ethnic groups listed, 15 are Eritrean.



The Semitic-Hamitic population is one of four chief divisions of the Caucasian race as defined in the Dictionary of Races or Peoples. Written to define the populations of the world – and part of a larger effort to develop recommendations for immigration and citizenship policy in the United States – this document was one of the earliest American attempts at defining race. In a table describing the Semitic-Hamitic family, Eritrean and Ethiopian ethnic groups are placed in both Hamitic and Semitic groups (Immigration Commission, 1911). Four of the Hamitic groups listed in the table (Afar, Bedja, Bilin, and Danakil) are found in both present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia. Somalis are found both in Somalia and in the Somali Regional State within Ethiopia. Finally, the Khamir are a Hamitic group found in present-day Ethiopia. The dictionary notes that “many Hamites would be taken by travelers to be Negroes; yet because of the regularity of their features and certain other characteristics, they are felt to be Caucasian rather than Negro” but make no such observation about Semitic groups in the Horn despite the color of their skin.

The Semitic population in the Horn was classified as Abyssinian and – like Reclus’ earlier work – many of the identified ethnic groups (Tigris⁶, Tigrinas, and Gheez) are found in Eritrea. Hararas are the

⁵ RECLUS, É. 1876-1894. *The Universal Geography: The Earth and its Inhabitants*, London, J.S. Virtue & Co.

⁶ Tigris may also include Tigrayans of northern Ethiopia

inhabitants of Harar which Emperor Menelik had only recently annexed when the Dictionary was published in 1911 (1896d). This labelling of the East African Semitic group as Abyssinian when the majority were non-Ethiopian ethnic groups illustrates the supremacy given to Ethiopian populations in this definition of whiteness. I argue it is labelled the Abyssinian branch due to Ethiopians' shared Christianity and self-definition in translated texts and origin stories. The Aksumite Empire was the first to use the term Ethiopia or Habesh to describe themselves – utilizing the language of the outside world to identify their empire in politically strategic moves (Binyam and Krebs, 2024b, Woldetsadik, 2020). Ethiopians' historic independence also placed them at an advantage relative to their neighbors. Because Eritreans outside of the Aksumite Empire and Somalis did not re-name themselves in international communications and were colonized by European powers, they are largely erased from common definitions of the term Semitic at the time.

The Common Man's Definition of Race – Reconciling “Science” and Skin Color

“The negro should be uplifted. I applaud your theory, and I wish you the greatest possible success. But in coming to me to take the leadership, you are knocking at the wrong door, so to speak. You know, I am not a negro at all: I am a Caucasian.”

- Emperor Menelik (1906b)

Just five years before the Dictionary of Races or Peoples was published by the U.S. Immigration Commission, Robert Skinner published his accounts of the first U.S. Mission to Ethiopia of 1903. In his extensive written account of this trip, he recounted a story he said he was told several times while in Ethiopia about the visit of a Haitian man to Emperor Menelik's court. Benito Sylvain – who Skinner described as a highly-educated, young, “full-blooded negro” of wealthy parentage – had come to the court to ask Emperor Menelik to become the honorary president of a society to uplift Black people worldwide. After listening to Mr. Sylvain, Menelik was said to have responded with the quote above, stating that – while it was an excellent idea – he was Caucasian and therefore inappropriate for the role. Given Menelik's skin color – one news account of the period called him “black as a coal” (1907) – one might expect that Skinner included this story as a confirmation of earlier reports of the Menelik's “pretensions” (1896b). However, it was just the opposite. Skinner not only accepted Menelik's statement but described the entire population as “people of Caucasian ancestry” (Skinner, 1906c).

Skinner's description of the population mirrored “scientific” definitions of race defining most inhabitants of the Horn of Africa as Caucasian. However, portrayals of the population in the media (an example of the common man's definition) varied widely. Like the judges in court cases determining eligibility for U.S. citizenship, four factors were important in defining Ethiopians as white (or close to whiteness) in popular discourse: military and security interests, proximity to Europe, religion, and physical characteristics. Specifically, military and security interests in the region and religion were often

used to compensate for physical characteristics (i.e. skin color) in political and public discourse surrounding their race.

In the period following the crusades, military and security interests intersected with religion. During the late Middle Ages, Europeans initiated the search for Prester John to gain a Christian ally in Africa (Yates, 2018). Europeans believed Prester John ruled over a vast Christian kingdom and could control the waters of the Nile (Salvadore, 2017f). As such, they believed that he would assist them in their fight against the Muslim world. Ethiopians used this to their advantage by responding to this interest when they *themselves* felt they needed an anti-Muslim alliance for protection from their neighbors. In the 15th century, the Sultan of Ifāt engaged in full-scale war with Ethiopia with Christian territory invaded and churches destroyed (Lewis, 1960). Although Ethiopia was the eventual victor, the invasion led the king to propose an anti-Mamluk alliance with Europe and – to seal the pact – a double marriage between members of the Ethiopian royal family and that of King Alfonso V who welcomed that proposal (Salvadore, 2017b). This proposal came to nothing because Alfonso’s letter never reached Ethiopia (58 in (Salvadore, 2011)), but he still pursued relations with Ethiopia’s next Emperor (Zara Yaqob) sending a letter that he would send artisans that Zara Yaqob requested with the hope that he would stop the flow of the Nile River (Salvadore, 2017b), reflecting the widespread belief that the Ethiopian King (Prester John) was able to control the waters of the Nile (Pankhurst, 2014). In the 16th century, Ethiopia reached out for help again, this time due to a successful invasion led by Ahmad Gran of Harar. With the support of the Turkish Empire (Sorenson, 1992), Ahmad Gran’s armies eventually made deep inroads into Ethiopia (Lewis, 2002a). At this time of need, Ethiopia sought diplomatic ties with Portugal, sending gifts including a fragment of the True Cross and, again, proposing a marriage pact. The Portuguese responded positively to this request, sending troops to take Massawa and handing it over to the Prester to bolster a much larger alliance (Salvadore, 2017a). This relationship with European countries affected how Ethiopia was portrayed in later descriptions of the region. Later accounts framed Ethiopia as a Christian country that “preferred death to the abnegation of Christianity” who received assistance reclaiming “their country from the infidel invaders, since which times they have remained in undisturbed possession of their Christian faith” (Speedy, 1898).

The idea of Ethiopia as an equal and a partner by Christian European countries in the Middle Ages and the Reformation was followed by a reconsideration of Ethiopia’s status by Europe. Stereotypes of Ethiopia were unstable and varied based on political or military events in the region. Over the years following the Portuguese intervention in the region, the myth of the land of Prester John was replaced by a belief that Ethiopians did not have the same faith and were in need of conversion (Salvadore, 2017c) – just like the rest of Africa. By the 17th century, Job Ludolphus called the idea that Prester John was

Ethiopian “erroneous and very confused” and claimed that the Portuguese were told that the Prester was Ethiopian by “two ignorant Habessine Ambassadors” (Ludolphus, 1684).

With a turn away from religious wars and towards exploration of the new world and colonization, Ethiopia was of little importance until the 19th century. As Pankhurst (2014) noted, Emperor Tewodros’ mid-19th century defeat by the British and his subsequent suicide created the perception that Ethiopia was weak. After the British victory, Ethiopians were described as having “the virtues and vices of the average barbarian – a brave, cruel, hospitable, thievish, simple, dirty savage” (Ker, 1888) and dealings with (or about) Ethiopia and its leaders reflected these opinions. In 1889, Italy signed the Treaty of Ucciali which recognized Italy as a friend and ally to Menelik (J.E.B., 1896). However, the Italian version of the treaty also stated that Ethiopia was an Italian protectorate. The U.S. news media reported the treaty as opening “a new era of civilization to a great part of mysterious Africa, spread[ing] the light of civil and Christian education where formerly reigned ignorance and barbarism” (1889). While Menelik refused to recognize the Italian version of the treaty and demanded Italians leave Abyssinia and revise the treaty (1896b), Italy refused to do so, leading to the Battle of Adwa where Ethiopia defeated Italy.

Menelik’s victory in the 1896 Battle of Adwa led to a significant change in depictions of the country and its population. Authors of the time noted that “since their success at Adowa it has become the fashion in certain quarters to speak of them as almost European in organization” (Berkeley, 1969). Some limited the positive attributes to Ethiopia’s leaders noting that Menelik he was a “gentleman of lofty lineage. . . classified by his European cousins as their peer – a potentate of . . . longer descent and loftier lineage” than European royalty (1896a). While this article alludes to the story of the Kebra Nagast which Ethiopians introduced to Europe in the 15th century, others discussed it outright. Stating that their link to the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon makes other royal families “flat and modern” (1904), a professor was quoted declaring that the visit between the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon would historically be considered “the most natural thing in the world” (1896c). As such, Menelik was considered “far superior to his subjects or any of his predecessor (1901).

The positive attributes initially ascribed only to Menelik and the royal family later trickled down to the ethnic group composing the majority of the ruling class (Amharas) and – in some cases – the population as a whole. Echoing Menelik’s quote at the beginning of the section, several writers noted that Amharas were the only “pure blooded Abyssinians” and they were “trigger-quick . . . to deny kinship with the Negro races, whom they have, in the past, relentlessly conquered and enslaved” (Singer, 1930b). “Whatever his shade or color, [an Amhara] hotly resents being considered a negro and proclaims himself an Ethiopia” (1924) and writers concluded that “a Caucasian origin is welcomed [by Amharas] as an apt explanation for Amharic domination” (Singer, 1930a).

Next Steps - Conclusion

Ethiopians were eventually considered “decidedly a superior race to the other people of the Dark Continent with whom the Europeans have come in contact in their colonization and partition schemes” stating that “they are not black, but are of Caucasian descent as pure as the Anglo-Saxon or the Celt” (1896c). This conclusion placed Ethiopians outside the racial binary that was so common in the United States at that time. Not because their skin color was any lighter than Black people in the United States but based on the links Ethiopians made between themselves and Europeans over millennia. That is, Ethiopia’s eventual racialization in the United States reflected their own historical positioning of themselves as the most ancient Christian kingdom in the world. They placed themselves within Bible stories which the Solomonic dynasty used to legitimize their rule in Ethiopia and internationally.

Ethiopia’s contributions to their racialization became particularly important in more modern times after Italy’s defeat in the Battle of Adwa. Europeans considered Ethiopia’s victory as confirmation of their scientific definitions of race that did not consider Ethiopians as Black (Kaplan, 2018). As Yates (2022) argued, travelers and scholars used a colorist conception of the country to describe Ethiopian rulers as lighter skinned to highlight the differences between Ethiopians and Black Americans so as not to upset the U.S. racial hierarchy. Essentially, it became important for Europeans to define Ethiopians as similar to Europeans (and very different from other Black populations) so that Ethiopia would not be an example of a Black country defeating a European country (Marcus, 1971).

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