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## **Who were the “Young Ethiopians” (or “Young Abyssinians”)?**

### **An Historical Enquiry**

By Richard Pankhurst

#### **Introduction**

The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries witnessed the beginnings of modern, or “western”, education in Ethiopia. This came about partly as a result of the dispatch of students abroad, and partly through the establishment of modern schools within the country itself. Both developments combined to create a small, but growing, class of foreign-orientated Ethiopians. This was a class entirely new in Ethiopian history: a class whose, means of employment, skills, values, and modes of thought, differed markedly from those of their traditionally-minded and more conservative contemporaries.

Members of this newly emerging “modernizing” class, were often referred to – though mainly by foreigners - as Young Ethiopians, or Young Abyssinians. The usage of both terms, as we shall see, varied considerably over time, for they were used in different contexts to refer to widely differing categories of individuals.

## **Background: Modern Education and Employment**

Government-sponsored education abroad was initiated, by Emperor Menilek, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when students were dispatched to Egypt, France, Italy, Switzerland, Russia and elsewhere.

Modern schooling within the country began shortly afterwards, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Menilek II Secondary School was opened in 1908, and “Western” educational establishments were also established around that time by the Alliance Française in Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, and by French and Italian Catholic and Swedish Lutheran missionaries in other parts of the country. The second Ethiopian Government school, the Täfäri Mäkonnen, called after the then Regent, was opened in 1925, and was followed by a further expansion of schooling in the provinces.

Both types of modern education, i.e. that provided within the country and that obtained abroad, were largely a function of the modernization process, for personnel trained in modern ways, and knowledgeable in a foreign language – in practice mainly French – were needed - both as a result of modernising economic activity in the country, and by the growth of a national – or imperial – bureaucracy.

It may further be noted that the coming of modern education coincided with the development and growth of Addis Ababa and the expansion of its foreign, largely commercial, population. The coming of modern education coincided also with the emergence of the “railway town” of Dire Dawa, in 1902 – and the employment of many Ethiopians in the two principal new institutions of the Menilek era: the Jibuti railway, which reached Dire Dawa in 1902, and the Bank of Abyssinia, founded in 1905.

On the side of government it was no less significant that when Menilek appointed his first Cabinet in 1908 (the year which witnessed the opening of the school bearing his name) the Ministers were largely composed of feudal lords, who conducted their official business in their own houses - and thus required only a minimum of bureaucratic staff.

Subsequently, in the 1920s, Ras Täfäri Mäkonnen began setting up Ministries (the establishment of which took place in the early years of the school he had founded). Ministerial staff needs at this time increased greatly - with the result that not a few modern-trained Ethiopians were recruited into modern government service. Many such employees, as we shall see, were to be dubbed Young Ethiopians (or Young Abyssinians).

It may be concluded that the demand for modern-educated Ethiopians in the economic/commercial and governmental sectors, and their supply in the form of local alumni and returnees from abroad thus expanded more or less simultaneously, and may thus have remained very loosely in equilibrium.

## The Changing Social Scene

The break-up of the traditional social scene, and the emergence of a class of governmental and related employees, coincided with a growing market economy. These twin developments found expression also in the establishment of Addis Ababa's Etégé Hotel, founded by Empress Taytu in 1907, and several smaller private hotels, as well as the growth in the ensuing decades of numerous restaurants and drinking houses.<sup>1</sup> Night-clubs, specifically aimed at attracting youth, soon also emerged.<sup>2</sup>

Such novel institutions were frequented by Young Ethiopians - and helped to differentiate them from the rest of the population, who lived as was traditional mainly at home.

## International Parallels and Terminology

The naming of a group of Ethiopians (or Abyssinians) as Young had significant parallels. Other traditionalist countries in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries likewise witnessed a great transformation characterized by the decay of old "feudal" relations and the emergence of a new modern-educated class, many of whose members aspired to modernism of one kind or another – and came to be referred to as Young whatever.

Parallels based on similar terminology may be seen in both the Young Egyptians and the Young Turks – perhaps even - whether we like it or not - with young Italian Fascists, whose hymn, it may be recalled, was *Giovanezza*, i.e. Youth.

This latter parallel is, however, difficult to apply in the Ethiopian context, in that Fascist Italy's expansionistic colonial ambitions conflicted with the nationalistic aspirations of the Young Ethiopians. During the Fascist occupation several pro-Italian- collaborators most notably Afäwärq Gäbrä Iyäsus, nevertheless claimed to see a modernizing element in Mussolini's so-called "civilizing mission" in Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup>

The term Young Ethiopian, or Young Abyssinian, was coined by some foreign observers early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to refer to modern-educated Ethiopians who, as we have seen, were then just emerging. and were sometimes criticized, or even ridiculed, by racially prejudiced Europeans. The term was, however, seldom used by Ethiopians.

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<sup>1</sup> Guebré Sellassié, *Chronique du règne de Menelik II*, Paris, 1930-1, II, 530; Richard K.P. Pankhurst, *History of Ethiopian Towns from the mid-Nineteenth Century to 1935*, Stuttgart, 1985, pp. 230-1.

<sup>2</sup> Carleton S. Coon, *Measuring Ethiopia and Flight into Arabia*, London 1936, pp. 138

<sup>3</sup> On whom see Bahru Zewde, "The Ethiopian Intelligentsia and the Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-1941)", reprinted in Bahru Zewde, *Society, State and History. Selected Essays*, Addis Ababa, 2009, pp. 224-5, 232.

## An Early Reference to a Young Abyssinian

One of the first foreign writers to refer to Young Abyssinians was as British traveler, Herbert Vivian, who encountered such an individual while on a visit to Harär. Writing as early as 1901 Vivian notes that he had met a member of a “young Abyssinia party”, whom he describes, sarcastically, as “a restless individual who had travelled much in Europe and brought back many ideas of what people are pleased to call progress. He told me that he desired to see a Parliament established in Ethiopia. All his ideas [Vivian critically adds] were equally ridiculous...”<sup>4</sup>

## Political Transformation

The decade which followed Vivian’s visit witnessed a significant geo-political transformation in Ethiopia. This began in 1909 when the old and ailing Emperor Menilek entrusted his succession to his young fourteen-year-old grandson Lij Iyasu. Menilek, though undoubtedly a notable modernizer, was an old man whose thinking dated back to an earlier age: he had never been abroad, and spoke no foreign language. Iyasu, on the other hand, was a young man of the twentieth century: he had attended the Menilek School where some of the instruction was in French, had travelled outside Ethiopia to the French controlled port of Jibuti, and had received some education in German. He was a child of the railway age.

Lij Iyasu’s principal adviser and friend, Negadras Täsämma Eshäté, was only a few years his senior. He had studied in Germany – and knew how to drive a car. His wife, Wäyzäro Sähay Wärq Därgé, was reportedly “one of the few” Ethiopian women of that time who could read and write, and was described by May Ydlibi as being “in favour of progress”,<sup>5</sup>

Lij Iyasu’s succession thus represented a potential generational shift in power – as evident from the attitude of the young prince, who openly criticized Menilek’s former Ministers as old men who had grown old and fat, while he for his own part preferred to spend most of his time with youngsters of his own age.

Lij Iyasu was deposed in September 1916, after a rule of only seven years. Power was thereupon shared between Menilek’s daughter, the forty-year-old Empress Zäwditu; and Menilek’s twenty-four year-old cousin, Ras Täfäri Mäkonnen, who held the position of Regent and Heir-to-the Throne.

Different by generation the two leaders also represented very different values. Zäwditu was a traditionalist, wedded to her country’s old values, and largely ignorant of the outside world. Täfäri by contrast was a modernizer, whose father, Ras Mäkonnen, had already travelled abroad. Täfäri for his part had studied with French missionaries, and spoke French. He brought Ethiopia into the League of Nations in 1923, and in the

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<sup>4</sup> Herbert Vivian, *Abyssinia*, London, 1901, p. 236.

<sup>5</sup> May Ydlibi, *With Ethiopian Rulers. A Biography of Hasib Ydlibi*, Addis Ababa, 2006, p. 293.

following year led several of the principal Ethiopian nobles on a visit to the most developed countries of Western Europe. On the educational front he sent students for study abroad, founded the school that bore his name, in 1925 – and thus contributed to the growth of what were beginning to be called Young Ethiopians.

## **Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Accounts of Young Ethiopians**

An early account of the Young Ethiopians, which dates back to approximately this period, was written by Charles Rey, a British businessman seeking to encourage Anglo-Ethiopian commercial relations. He declares that though Ethiopia was essentially conservative, “signs were not wanting” that “all [the people] were not satisfied with their lot, and that reform would not be so gradually resisted as might be thought”.

The “reactionary and oppressive policy of the Church and of its supporters and its manifest short-comings”, Rey concluded, were “quite strongly condemned”, and the impression he drew from his talks was that “support given to Ras Tafari to push on with his ideas would be welcomed by most of what is best in the country”.<sup>6</sup>

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The size and growing importance of the Young Ethiopians, as he termed them, was recognized a few years later by the French traveler Jean d’Esme, who – doubtless in part because of its French orientation, was likewise sympathetic to the Ethiopian educated class. Writing in 1928 he declares that in the millennial-old empire of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba a “Young Ethiopia movement” had “already been founded”.

Seeking to analyze its composition he declares that it was:

“What we have done business with in all official relations; it is what we always meet at the Customs, at the Post and Telegraph Office, at the Municipality, in the hospitals, the schools, and at the tobacco corporation”.

Elaborating on the character of these “new men”, Esme claimed that “the greater part of them” had “travelled in Europe, above all in France”, and adds:

“rare exceptions, have never crossed the frontiers of their country, but all, without exception, whether they have travelled or not, speak French, with a correctness, an elegance and an ease which left an agreeable surprise. All bear witness to a strangely comprehensive spirit, curious and assimilative of our administrative methods...”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Charles F. Rey, *Unconquered Abyssinia*, London, 1923, pp. 303-4.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Esme, *A travers l’Empire de Ménélik*, Paris, 1928, p. 122.

The manner in which Young Ethiopians were being produced by the recently established modern schools was described a year or so later – in somewhat patronizing terms - by Henri Rebeaud, a French teacher at the Täfäri Mäkonnen school. Recalling how a certain student at first came to school with his slave, and another with a pistol in his pocket. Rebeaud declares that the students, though as bright as any in Europe, were originally “disorderly and wayward” - but learnt to be “orderly and persevering in their daily duties” – and had become sensitive to ideas of “probity, loyalty, generosity, justice and clemency...: I saw them suffer on account of the flaws of their country. I saw them become enthusiastic for beautiful things and grand ideas. And I think one can give due credit to Ethiopia for the youth of its schools”. They were, he felt, determined to put what they had learnt at school into practice for the service of their country.<sup>8</sup>

One of those influenced by such teaching was none other than Abraha Deboch, who, as we shall see, was one of two Ethiopians from Eritrea to attempt the assassination of the Italian viceroy Rodolfo Graziani. Rebeaud quotes him as criticizing the system of *gubo*, whereby chiefs or other officials were bribed by gifts of money. “Monsieur”, the young man declared, *Gubo* is a great misfortune for our country”. And little Kasa, the son of a Däjazmach, intervened to say, “When we are grown up we will change all that!”<sup>9</sup>

It was characteristic of the students’ changing beliefs, and commitment to the new ideas imparted to them at school, Rebeaud concludes, that they should report to him as a matter of ridicule, that their Amharic teacher Mamru Ras Wärq had told them that the world was flat and stationary, and that it was the sun that moved.<sup>10</sup>

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Education abroad, if we can believe the gossip French traveler Henry de Monfreid, an essentially hostile observer, rendered Ethiopian student returnees “generally xenophobic”. This, he suggested, resulted largely from exposure to racism abroad, notably the legacy of slavery and the ensuing colour bar, in the United States, and the acute class and caste consciousness in the United Kingdom. In support of this origin he states that Menilek’s envoy Yuséf Zägälin when traveling on a British steamer was forbidden from dining at the captain’s table. As for American-induced racism, de Monfreid cites the case of Bāshaweräd Habtä Wäld, the young Ethiopian governor of Dire Dawa [referred to, as we shall see, by an American ambassador as a Young Ethiopian], who, on returning from the United States, tried to eliminate all French influence in the town’s administration, and allegedly spoke of *ces sales Français bons à rien* [“these dirty Frenchmen worth nothing”].<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Henri Rebeaud, *Chez le roi des rois*, Paris, n.d., pp.131-7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 151-4.

<sup>11</sup> Henry de Monfreid, *Vers les terres hostiles de l’Éthiopie*, Paris, 1933, pp. 220-4.

A further glimpse of the Young Abyssinians is afforded by Ladislav Farago, a Hungarian journalist who visited the country at the very beginning of the Italian invasion of 1935-6. He sees them as none other than the Emperor's instruments of progress; and personifies them in the character of Haile Selassie's private secretary Wäldä Giyorgis Wäldä Yohannes, who, he claims, worked "even harder than his master," starting at three in the morning and not stopping till midnight. Farago quotes him as confidently declaring; "At last we have reached the point when we have officials who have the ability to govern the country in the European method, instead of oligarchies. I am convinced that we shall now develop more quickly, but we must be left alone, for all our effort would be wasted if we fell back on the old ways... We of the younger generation are humanitarians"

That, Farago concludes, was a reason why the Young Abyssinians had decided to "shed their blood to the last drop" - for they were, he insists, "not only protecting their country, but also their work [of modernization], that they began less than ten years ago and have carried out with their own strength and initiative".<sup>12</sup>

A further appreciation of the Young Ethiopians was provided by the South African Anti-Fascist journalist George L. Steer. Writing at the time of the Italian invasion he noted that "many of the bright young men in the Emperor's Civil Service". Prominent among them, he asserts, were Blatta Kidanä Maryam Abärä and Dawit Ogbazgi, The former, who had been educated in France at the Emperor's expense, spoke French and Italian "perfectly". Steer describes him as "a Patriot", who had "organized the Young Ethiopia Society, and later a parallel organization among the Ethiopian women".<sup>13</sup>

The most notable figure described as a Young Ethiopian – and by Anthony Mockler as the "leader" of the Young Ethiopians - was, however, Kantiba, later Dajazmach Nasibu Zamanu'el, who had assisted Tāfāri's accession to the throne. A sometime Ethiopian consul in Asmara, he subsequently developed a "model province" in Balé, and was later appointed commander of the southern front, facing the Italian invasion from Somalia. Harold Marcus describes him as "unEthiopian because he was a mission-educated Catholic, spoke Italian and French, and wore modish European clothes and uniforms".<sup>14</sup>

## Anglo-Italian Attempts at Partitioning Ethiopia

The attempt by the British and Italian Governments in 1925 to partition Ethiopia between them into spheres of influence, against which the Regent Ras Tāfāri Mäkonnen protested,

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<sup>12</sup> Ladislav Farago, *Abyssinia on the Eve*, London, 1935, pp. 70-1.

<sup>13</sup> George L. Steer, *Caesar in Abyssinia*, London, 1936, p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *Haile Selassie I. The Formative Years, 1892-1936*, Berkeley, California, 1987, pp. 114; Anthony Mockler, *Haile Selassie's War*, London, 1984, pp. 395-6. See also pp. 136, 139; also Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa orientale. La conquista dell' Impero*, Rome, 1979, p. 97; Martha Nasibu, *Memorie di una principessa etiopica*, Vicenza, 2005 *passim*.

shocked and angered educated Ethiopian opinion. Occurring only two years after Ethiopia's entry League of Nations, it was generally considered, as Bahtu Zewde says, an "act of brazen violation of Ethiopian sovereignty", and one "most acutely felt among the educated elite".<sup>15</sup>

Charles Rey, quoted by Bahru Zewde, reports that Young Ethiopians, indignant at the proposed partition of their country, held "highly emotional meetings, often in tears" - and "foreigners were stopped in their cars and allowed to drive on only if they were certified to be neither British nor Italian".<sup>16</sup>

Such protests - by the Young Ethiopians or whoever - were, it will be perceived, fully in support of the Regent's position, and, though bitterly condemned by some European observers, were in no way subversive of the existing Ethiopian social order.

### **British Diplomatic Reports**

The growth of nationalistic feeling, thus intensified by the Anglo-Italian agreement of 1925, was described in two British diplomatic reports. The first, for the year 1927, was written by the then British Minister to Ethiopia, Charles Bentinck, a somewhat disgruntled observer, preoccupied with the international danger of Communism, who remarks:

"As in China and India, so in Abyssinia, there is a small section of the younger generation which has received a smattering of Western education. These young men are satisfied with having scratched the surface and think they know enough. In the town of Addis Ababa they consort in terms of equality with the riff-raff of Armenia and Greece, and in some cases France and Russia. They get the idea that they are not only the equal, but the superior of the white man, and they strive to show this in various forms: refusing to pay salaries due to Europeans for services rendered, and by throwing them penniless into the streets or using personal violence against their persons and properties, etc. Amongst such people bolshevism will doubtless make rapid headway under the guise of nationalism".<sup>17</sup>

In the subsequent report, for 1928-8 the next British Minister, Sir Sydney Barton, a slightly more understanding individual, observes:

"The last decade has witnessed the dawn of Western nationalism in many a neglected corner of the globe. Nowhere is its appearance more incongruous than in this primitive State. Nevertheless, it is here, having been introduced by European capital, and is now striving to accommodate itself to the primeval surroundings. Patriots the Ethiopians have

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<sup>15</sup> Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia*, London 2002, p. 195,

<sup>16</sup> F.O. 371/12343. Cited in Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers*, p. 195.

<sup>17</sup> F.O. 371/13111, *Ethiopia: Annual Report for 1927*, quoted in Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers*, p. 195.



always been, as can be seen by their successful resistance down the ages to alien invasion. But their patriotism has been of a conservative order...”

Now, he suggested, Ethiopian patriotism was motivated by what he chose to refer to somewhat darkly as Mammon.<sup>18</sup>

## United States Legation Reports

The American envoy, Addison Southard, was no less concerned than his British colleague by what he considered the growing strength of a Young Ethiopian movement. He reports, toward the end of 1930, that members of what he terms a “young Ethiopia group” were complaining of the employment of foreign advisers at salaries three or four times greater than their own. A case in point was that of a highly paid Cypriot accountant whom the Emperor dismissed, apparently in response to Young Ethiopian protests.<sup>19</sup>

Opposition to what the Young Ethiopians considered the racial arrogance of resident European foreigners flared up, a subsequent Legation report states, in the late summer of 1930 when a group of young Ethiopians were thrown out of a Greek café, the Tabaris Café, which they were prone to frequent. They returned six days later to break up the place. A fracas followed, after which the police intervened, and the Municipality closed it down.<sup>20</sup>

The Young Ethiopians involved in this demonstration of power are named in American reports as the afore-mentioned Kidanā Maryam Abārra, as well as Heruy Wäldä Sellasé – presumably Fäqädä Sellasé Heruy, also known as George, who will figure again later in this article. Also involved were Wäldä Giyorgis Wäldä Yohannes, and Mäkonnen Häbtä-Wäld, of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Finance respectively, and two other young men, Bāshahwerād Häbtä Wäld and Ayyälä Gäbrē.<sup>21</sup> The former, was referred to, as we have seen, by de Monfreid, while the latter, who had begun his career as a station-master for the Jibuti railway, differed from the others in that he was a Roman Catholic, whereas they belonged to the Ethiopian Orthodox faith.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> F.O. 371/14598, *Ethiopia: Annual Report for 1928-29*, quoted in Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers*, p. 195.

<sup>19</sup> U.S., 884. 01A/14, Southard to Secretary of State, 34.11.1930, 23.1.32 Cited in Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers*. p. 196.

<sup>20</sup> U.S., 884 4016/5, Southard to Secretary of State, 14.11,1933. Cited in Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers*, p. 196.

<sup>21</sup> U.S., 884 4016/5, Southard to Secretary of State, 14.11, 1933 884 4016/6, Southard to Secretary of State, 12.2.1934; and 884 00/299 Southard to Secretary of State, 17.7.1934.

<sup>22</sup> Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers*, p. 97.

## Catholic Young Ethiopians

Roman Catholics, as Mickaél Bethe-Selassié has recently argued, may be said to constitute a separate category of Young Ethiopians.

The Ethiopian Roman Catholic community, the first of whose members were converted in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Italian or French missionaries, such as Guglielmo Massaia and André Jarousseau, included Zāwgä Haylu, who attended the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900, and Märsha Nahu Sānay, who represented Menilek at the ceremony marking the completion of the Jibuti railway as far as the Ethiopian frontier in 1902. The community thus came into existence at the very same time as the emergence of the Young Ethiopians as a whole. The Catholic community was moreover influenced by the same factors – missionary education, travel to France or Italy, employment by foreigners, service on the railway, etc, -which gave birth, as we have seen, more generally to Young Ethiopianism.

Members of the Catholic Young Ethiopian community, which was infinitely smaller than that of the Ethiopian Orthodox faith, were however distinct, in that they were in many cases linked together by marriage, as well as by education, and generally spoke French as a second language - which afforded them opportunity of employment in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and on the Jibuti railway, etc.

The Catholic community included Tadässa Mäshäsha, a sometime private secretary to the Emperor; several officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, among them Täsfayé Tägägn and Ayällä Gäbré, and some members of the Ministry of Posts, Telephones and Telegraphs, most notably Berhanä Marqos Wäldä Sadeq, and Yoséf Gäbrä Mika'él, chief of the Addis Ababa railway station.<sup>23</sup>

The Catholic Young Ethiopians, because of their different religious faith, tended to be further removed from Ethiopian tradition than young members of the Orthodox faith, but, because of their minority status, were perhaps less able to challenge authority.

The principal scholarly account of the group is Mickaél Bethe-Selassié's still insufficiently known recent monograph: *La jeune Éthiopie. Un haute-fonctionnaire éthiopien, Berhanä-Marqos Wäldä-Tsadeq (1892-1943)*, Paris, 2004<sup>24</sup>.

## The Eruption of Baron Roman Procházka

The Young Ethiopians attracted the hostile attention in the late 1920s and early 1930s of Baron Roman Procházka, a racist Czech Nazi sympathiser, who practiced law in Addis Ababa, and was deported in 1934 on account of his virulently racist attitude. In the following year he gave his support to the Fascist invasion of Ethiopia- and wrote a

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<sup>23</sup> Mickaél Bethe-Selassié, *La jeune Éthiopie. Un haute-fonctionnaire éthiopien, Berhanä-Marqos Wäldä-Tsadeq (1892-1943)*, Paris, 2004, passim

<sup>24</sup> See also De Monfreid, *Terres hostiles*, pp. 220-1.

vitriolic attack on what he termed the Young Abyssinians. This assault was launched in a polemical monograph, published in German as *Abessinien: Die Schwartze Gefahr*, which appeared also in Italian translation as *Abissinia: Pericolo nero*, and in English as *Abyssinia: The Powder Barrel*. It bore the sub-title *A Book on the Most Burning Question of the Day*. Copies of all three editions were frequently reprinted and widely circulated.

Procházka, who described himself as strongly opposed to “Negro emancipation” throughout the world, conjured up the picture of an imaginary Ethiopian-Japanese alliance against the “white race”. He devoted his main attention, however, to what he termed the Young Abyssinian Movement. Unlike most foreign commentators, who differentiated between the Young Ethiopians and the Ethiopian Government – and in some cases even regarded the former as the critics of latter, or even potential rebels against it, Procházka presented the Young Abyssinians as no less than the tools or agents of a supposedly “anti-white” Abyssinian State.

Elaborating on this thesis he declared:

“The Young-Abyssinian movement, which is aided and abetted by the Government, is systematically working up and fostering hatred of the white peoples in all sections of the population, exploiting to the full the knowledge and skill which an indulgent attitude on the part of the European race has put in their heads”.

Writing specifically of Ethiopia he continued:

‘The application of European methods of education to the coloured peoples is bearing tragic and dangerous fruits. More particularly in the cases in which the natives are not under the rule and control of white people, but have a free hand to conceive and follow any fatal policy to which their position as a sovereign state entitles them’.<sup>25</sup>

Increasingly carried away by this theme Procházka declared that “the white people in Abyssinia” had been obliged “to put up with the barbarity of the natives for years past”<sup>26</sup> In support of this he claimed that Europeans were often assaulted by “Young-Abyssinians in European clothing”, always accompanied by “the usual crowd of natives”.<sup>27</sup>

Procházka soon afterwards turned his interest to his native Czechoslovakia – where he emerged during the German occupation as a fanatical Nazi collaborator. He was sentenced, at the end of World War II, to seven years’ imprisonment with hard labour, which he duly served.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Roman Procházka. *Abyssinia: The Powder Barrel*, London, 1935, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 57.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 30, 36.

<sup>28</sup> I am indebted for this information to Professor Rudolf Agstner, sometime Austrian Ambassador to Ethiopia.

## The Judgment of Historians

Historians and other subsequent authors, like the earlier writers above cited, saw the Young Ethiopians in widely differing light. Margery Perham, a post-World War II Oxford University authority on Africa, who based herself on the testimony of Frank de Halpert and other sometime British residents, was basically sympathetic. Describing their ideology and aspirations in the immediate pre-invasion years, she applied the term Young Ethiopian to more or less all returnees from study abroad - and asserts that they “felt a not unhealthy discontent with conditions in their own country”.

Elaborating on such “discontent”, she declared that the Young Ethiopians: “expected to be given salaries and positions of a kind to which they believed they were entitled” and adds:

“ While most of them found valuable employment in government departments and some in the railway and other European concerns, the positions and pay sometimes disappointed them since they found it difficult to maintain the European standard of living to which they had become accustomed. A few of them were unhappy and disheartened; most of them were naturally critical of the reactionary elements in the country. They looked to the Emperor to accelerate his reforms and to make greater use of their own services, while he, for his part, was not ready to offend the older men”.<sup>29</sup>

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Richard Greenfield, a sometime Professor at Haile Sellassie I University in Addis Ababa – and a keen supporter of far-reaching political change in Ethiopia - subsequently placed his emphasis on the Young Ethiopians’ potentially revolutionary character. Writing in 1965 of what he refers to in French as the *Jeunesse d’Ethiopie* - and basing himself on the recollections of our mutual friend Seyoum Sebhat, who had studied in England - he recalls that the group from the outset included persons with “military as well as university or college training”, and adds that “most of them” had been “educated to speak French”. They “congregated”, he says, “in a tin-roofed building in Addis Ababa and discussed the central government’s attempts at reform”. This or another meeting-place was elsewhere described as the house of Fäqädä Sellasé, aka George, Heruy, the earlier-mentioned son of the Ethiopian Foreign Minister, Blatta Heruy Wäldä Sellasé.<sup>30</sup>

The way in which the Young Ethiopians regarded themselves was “illustrated”, Greenfield contends, “by a remark by one of their number”, Yilma Deressa, an Oromo from Wälläga, who declared, “We Young Abyssinians are in duty bound to our country, we are the bridge that the Emperor has thrown across to European culture...”.

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<sup>29</sup> Margery Perham. *The Government of Ethiopia*, London, 1958, pp. 248-9.

<sup>30</sup> Roman Procházka, *Abyssinia: The Powder Barrel*, London, 1935, p. 36.

Speaking of the future, Yilma explained that the Emperor was “educating a number of clever young Abyssinians in Europe at his own cost... to complete the civilization of our country”.

It was “significant”, Greenfield concludes, “that the young progressives felt quite powerless without the Emperor”. On the same occasion Yilma explained an administrative delay by declaring: “His Majesty... lies in bed with a chill, until he authorizes us we can undertake nothing”.<sup>31</sup>

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The subsequent American historian Harold Marcus was also favourable to the Young Ethiopians. Writing in 1986, over fifty years after they had risen to prominence, he saw them, very simply, as intellectuals “who stared fixedly at a vision of a modern nation gleaned from Western textbooks”. The “several hundred young men” in this group, “among them many Eritreans”, he explains, constituted “Addis Ababa’s intelligentsia”. On their political role – and relationship to the Emperor, and government generally - he continues:

“As the emperor’s chosen instrument of change, its members were devoted to him and to his ideas about progress and politics. Haile Sellassie used them as a counterweight to the traditional men he so often named as ministers of government. The latter charged that their educated underlings were un-Ethiopian, their nationalism and patriotism flawed by exposure to modernity. In fact the young men were intensely proud of being Ethiopians and were outspokenly anti-foreign, if not truly xenophobic. They criticized what they considered the excessive profiteering by resident European shopkeepers and foreign concerns, and they were particularly acid about the extraordinary salaries paid to expatriates generally. They tended to view the emperor’s major European advisers, no matter how skilled or devoted, as impediments to their careers”.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Last Years of Peace – the Idea of Opening a Club or Pressure Group**

The last years of peace, prior to the Italian Fascist invasion, coincided with the gradual evolution of the Young Ethiopians in a more organized direction – which caused some Western observers to regard them as an embryonic political party or pressure group. The American Minister in Addis Ababa, James Loder Park, thus reported to Washington in May 1930 that the Young Ethiopians were planning to establish a “club”, which would be designed to provide “social recreation more in accord with their acquired foreign tastes”. He comments: “If this club movement persists the increasing educated youth may some day become a factor of some potency in Ethiopian affairs by the weight of organized group opinion”.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Greenfield, *Ethiopia. A New Political History*, London, 1965, p. 315.

<sup>32</sup> Marcus, *Haile Sellassie*, pp-137-8.

<sup>33</sup> U.S., 884.00/26, Park to Secretary of State, 20.5.1930 Quoted in Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers*, p. 196.

Margery Perham, probing into the matter a decade or so later, learnt from her informants that “just before the outbreak of the war the younger men were planning to form a Young Ethiopian Movement, and they drew up a programme of reform”.<sup>34</sup> Greenfield, relying largely on Seyoum Sebhat, reports a similar development, observing: “In the 1930s, before the war with Italy, there had been attempts on the part of the foreign-educated élite to organize themselves into a political pressure group”.<sup>35</sup>

### **Ethiopian Youth’s Society**

The term Young Ethiopian was, as we have seen, first coined by foreigners, who used it to refer very loosely to the modern-educated class, and was scarcely known to Ethiopians. There is, however, record, shortly prior to the war, of a small, apparently elite, group who sought to manifest a “youthful” identity. Meeting in Harar in 1935, the year of the opening of hostilities, they called their organization the *YäItyopya Wätatoch* Mahebär, i.e. Ethiopian Youth’s Society.

Its patron was the Emperor’s young son Mäkonnen, Duke of Harär, and its members, as attested by a contemporary document bearing their signatures, included the Emperor’s loyal representative in Harär province, Däjazmach Gäbrä Maryam Gari; a prominent nobleman, Lej Wärqu Gobäna, and two leading ecclesiastical figures, the reformist Aläqa Dästä Negewo, and the Emperor’s Father Confessor, Abba Hanna Jimma.<sup>36</sup>

### **Yagär Feqer Mahbär**

Another, much larger, patriotic organization which came into existence immediately prior to the invasion was the *Yagär Feqer Mahbär*, or Love of Country Society, which appealed to the modern-educated class, without however making any allusion to youth. Its leaders, who belonged, like the Young Ethiopians, to the educated class, consisted of the afore-mentioned Mäkonnen Habtä Wäld, a devoted supporter of the Emperor and Director-General in the Ministry of Commerce; the playwright Yoftahé Negusé; and a then popular author and journalist Wäldä Giyorgis Wäldä Yohannes.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Fascist Invasion and the Young Ethiopians**

The Italian invasion, which began on 3 October 1935, focused far from felicitous attention on the Young Ethiopians. Immediately after the occupation of Addis Ababa on 5 May of the following year Mussolini and his advisers (who may well have been familiar with Baron Roman Procházka’s book or at least shared its viewpoint), believed

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<sup>34</sup> Perham, *Government*, pp. 248-9.

<sup>35</sup> Greenfield, *Ethiopia*, p. 315.

<sup>36</sup> Ian Campbell, “An unpublished source for the history of the ‘Young Ethiopians’”, *PICES*, 17.

<sup>37</sup> Bahru Zewde, “Intelligentsia”, pp. 217-8.

that what they termed the “Young Ethiopians” constituted a serious focus of opposition. On 13 May, little over a week after the capture of the city, the Duce accordingly dispatched “peremptory orders” to Graziani, the Italian Viceroy of Ethiopia, “to shoot the so-called Young Ethiopians”.<sup>38</sup>

Graziani, though firmly committed to a policy of violence, on this occasion hesitated – and then delayed taking any action, whereupon Alessandro Lessona, the Italian Minister of the Colonies, telegraphed to him, on 8 July, ordering him to “conduct a policy of political terror and extermination”.<sup>39</sup> Two days later the Minister wired again, urging upon the Viceroy to take rigorous action against the “Young Ethiopians”, who, he declared, had a “false veneer of Europeanized culture”, and, being “at the head of every xenophobic movement”, were “particularly poisonous and dangerous”. Recalling Mussolini’s previous order that they should be shot, he declared that the then existing situation rendered it “necessary that such orders be totally executed” so that the Young Ethiopians be “eliminated, without mercy or pardon”.<sup>40</sup>

Graziani, however, questioned the need for quite so stringent a policy. He telegraphed back to Lessona on the same day, stating that fifteen Young Ethiopians had already been arrested, and that others were being “pursued” – though “there had not been anything particularly serious to charge them with”. Despite this admission he stated it was his intention to exile the young men to a concentration camp at Danane, near Mogadishu, on the coast of the then Italian colony of Somalia.<sup>41</sup>

This was however no great act of clemency, for conditions in the camp were exceedingly grim. One detainee, Blatta Bäqälä Habtä Mika’él, later stated on oath that “the food which the Italians gave us was very bad”, and consisted largely of “rotten biscuits with many worms in them”. Another detainee Mika’él Tässäma, a young Ethiopian from Adwa educated in Rome (where his University thesis was disallowed as ‘anti-white’), recalled that out of some 6,500 prisoners at Danane no fewer than 3,175 died during the occupation period.<sup>42</sup>

## **The Black Lions**

The Fascist occupation was meanwhile challenged by a group of some three hundred and fifty patriotic “Westernized” Ethiopian intellectuals, who called themselves the *Tegwur Ambäsooch*, or Black Lions – and were in a sense a re-incarnation of the Young Ethiopians as conceived of in Fascist propaganda. The group comprised ex-cadets of the

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<sup>38</sup> USA, The National Archives, Microcopy No. T. 821, 472/127.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 472/123.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*, 472/172.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 472/277; Ethiopia, Ministry of Justice, *Documents on Italian War Crimes*, Addis Ababa, 1950, I, 69.

<sup>42</sup> Ethiopia, Ministry of Justice, *Documents*, I, 21.

Holäta military college, alumni of the Täfäri Mäkonnen secondary school in Addis Ababa, and about fifty defectors from the Italian colony of Eritrea.<sup>43</sup>

Following the Emperor's departure from Addis Ababa at the beginning of May 1936, and his appointment of Ras Emru Haylä Sellase as Regent, based at Gore in the west of the country, the Black Lions proceeded to Wälläga, where they placed themselves under the Ras's nominal command. Operating on the basis of a "progressive" written constitution, they have been described by Bahru Zewde as "perhaps the most coherent, if short-lived", Ethiopian intellectuals' opposition to the Fascist occupation.<sup>44</sup>

Presided over by Dr Alämwärq Bāyänna, a British trained veterinarian, their leadership included Eritrean-born Lieutenant-Colonel Bälay Haylä-Ab, who was a graduate of the Holäta military academy; Lieutenant-Colonel Kefle Näsibu, another Holäta alumnus; the Foreign Minister's son Fäqädä Sellasé Heruy, aka George Heruy; Hakim Wärqnäh's two sons, Yuséf and Benyam; the Oromo nobleman Yelma Därässa; and the elderly Protestant-educated Kantiba Gäbru Dästa (whose daughter Senädu Gäbru was long afterwards to become modern Ethiopia's first woman Member of Parliament.)

Militarily the Black Lions' principal achievement was the attacking – and burning on the ground – of an Italian aeroplane at Bonäya near Laqämti. on 27 June 1936. In the fighting General Magliocco, second-in-command of the Royal Italian Air-Force in East Africa, Colonel Canderni, the former Italian military attaché in Addis Ababa, and ten other Italian officers were killed.<sup>45</sup>

The Italians retaliated by launching a heavy aerial bombardment of the Black Lions, after which the group, fearing reprisals, on the local population and the defectors from Eritrea as well as on themselves, withdrew westwards as far as the Gojjäb river. Their retreat was however blocked by far stronger enemy forces, which obliged the Black Lions to surrender late in December 1936 - after which, Bahru Zewde believes, they remained "closely watched" by the Fascist authorities.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Tāddāsā Mecca, *Tequr Ambäsa bä Merab Ityopya* ["The Black Lions in Western Ethiopia"], Asmara, n.d. ; Greenfield, pp. 231-2.

<sup>44</sup> Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers*, p. 203.

<sup>45</sup> Amsalu Temesgen, *Italian Occupation and Response in and around Naqemte, 1936-1941*, Addis Ababa University B.A. thesis, 1983; Mockler, *Haile Selassie's War*, pp. 164-8; Tesema Ta'a, "The Bonayya incident and the Italian occupation of Naqamtee, 1936-1941", PICES, 13, I, 263-85; Arthur J. Barker, *The Civilizing Mission*, London, 1968, pp. 280-2; Alberto Sbacchi, *Legacy of Bitterness, Ethiopia and Fascist Italy, 1935-41*, Trenton, New Jersey 1996, pp.167-8.

<sup>46</sup> Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers*, p. 171.



## The Attempted Assassination of Graziani - and the Massacre of February 1937

One of the most important events of the occupation period was the attempted assassination of Graziani, when hand-grenades were thrown at him in the course of a public gathering at the Addis Ababa palace on 19 February 1937. The “bombs” were hurled by Abraha Deboch (whose reformist views in relation to *gubo* have been noted above) and Moges Asgedom, two Eritrean alumni of the Täfäri Mäkonnen School in Addis Ababa, who had for several years been resident in the Ethiopian capital. Both would-be assassins could well be said to belong to the category of individuals often referred to as Young Ethiopians. Graziani, who took this view, expressly claimed that the plot against him had been carried out “by Young Ethiopians, at the instigation of the British Intelligence Service”.<sup>47</sup>

Graziani’s attempted assassination provoked the famous Addis Ababa Fascists to embark on a three-day Massacre, of 19-21 February 1937, which marks the last chapter in the history of the Young Ethiopians. Though the massacre itself was largely indiscriminate it bore particularly heavily on the “Westernized” intelligentsia, many of whom were apparently targeted as political suspects. This would seem confirmed by a subsequent Ethiopian Government publication on Italian war crimes, which reproduces the admittedly small sample of 24 photographs of captives snapped on or around the palace steps prior to their execution. No less than 17 are wearing European dress of one kind or another (as one might expect of the modern intelligentsia however defined), whereas only 7 are dressed in traditional Ethiopian clothing, the dress of the more traditional population.<sup>48</sup> One of those photographed, in European dress, was Bāshawerād Häbtä Wäld, earlier referred to as a Young Ethiopian, whom Italian intelligence thought a prime suspect for the assassination attempt.

Fascist wrath was especially launched on Ethiopian returnees from education abroad, such as Bāshaworād, who had studied in the supposedly Anti-Italian Anglo-American democracies, Britain and the United States. Margery Perham, emphasizing the high incidence of liquidation of the educated class, opines : “There seems to have been method in these murders ... As a result, very few of the 120 men who, it is estimated, had been trained abroad, survived...”<sup>49</sup>. The “method” behind the killings is further exemplified by Greenfield, who noticed that “those educated in the United States and Britain suffered a decimation greater than those who had pursued their studies in France – perhaps”, he believed, “because in Italian eyes the latter seemed more oriented towards the Roman Catholic Church”. The result, he estimates, was that “two to three hundred educated

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<sup>47</sup> E. Canevari, *Graziani mi ha detto* (Rome, 1947) p.21.

<sup>48</sup> Ethiopia, Departement de la Presse et de l’Information, *La Civilisation de l’Italie*

*Fasciste en Ethiopie* (Addis Ababa, 1944), II. 19-42.

<sup>49</sup> Perham, . p. 249.

young Ethiopians”, mainly those captured with Ras Imru, “perished together with the ordinary folk” killed in the indiscriminate massacre.<sup>50</sup>

No less revealing perhaps is the evidence of Abba Jérôme Gabrä Musé, an Ethiopian ex-cleric from Eritrea, who had acted as a guide-informant before the war for several visiting European scholars. A *Guirlande* in his honour published in 1983 states that he enjoyed the “protection” of the Italian vice-governor Enrico Cerulli, allegedly on account of the latter’s friendship for the French savant Marcel Cohen.<sup>51</sup> Abba Jérôme, we may suspect, himself owed his security to the fact that he had been enrolled in the Italian office of press and propaganda.<sup>52</sup> Later a close friend of ours he told the present writer in 1960 that the persecution of his compatriots fell considerably more heavily on the city’s Anglophone population than on the Francophone,<sup>53</sup> The latter, it may be noted, was by far the larger of the two.

Those killed in the massacre included the Foreign Minister’s son, Fäqädä Selassé, aka George, Heruy; two sons of Hakim Martin, Yuséf and Binyam. all three educated in Britain; the above-mentioned Bāshaweräd Habtä Wäld, educated in the United States; and three graduates of the Holota military academy, Lieutenant Kifle Näsibu, Lieutenant Mammo Gäbru, and Lieutenant Bälay Hayla-Ab; as well as one of the country’s first air-force pilots, Captain Bahru Kaba.<sup>54</sup>

## Summary and Conclusions

The evolution of the modern Ethiopian state and the growth of local capitalism, both in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, generated an increasing demand for persons with modern-style education. This demand was met by the dispatch of students abroad and by the establishment within the country of government and private schools. These developments led to the emergence of a small but growing modern educated class - sometimes referred to by foreigners as Young Ethiopians, whose existence helped in turn to fuel modernization in the governmental and commercial fields.

This modern-educated class, which over the years rose steadily in the government hierarchy – but never really accepted the designation of Young Ethiopian, was a new factor in Ethiopian society. It was a class whose members owed their importance to their foreign education at home or abroad as well as to their birth: a class which tended to speak a foreign language, in practice French; was to a greater or lesser extent imbued with new ideas and values; and was less committed to their ancestors’ modes of thought.

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<sup>50</sup> Greenfield, *Ethiopia*, pp. 240, 316-7.

<sup>51</sup> Joseph Tubiana, *Guirlande pour Abba Jérôme*, Paris, 1983, p. 304.

<sup>52</sup> Mickaël Bethe-Selassié, *Jeune Éthiopie*, p. 140,

<sup>53</sup> Bahru Zewde (“Intelligentsia”, p. 232) suggests that “resistance to Italian rule appears to have been more intense among those with an Anglo-Saxon and Protestant background than those of Latin and Catholic formation”.

<sup>54</sup> Greenfield, *Ethiopia*, pp. 240, 216.

Members of this class, because of their modern education, and foreign contacts, tended to have a wider outlook than most of their compatriots; and were particularly conscious of the discrepancy in wealth and power between their country and the industrialized West. They saw that Ethiopia – like other old and traditional countries outside Europe - was being inexorably outstripped by the Industrialized Powers of Europe.

The existence of this new modern-educated class did not pass unnoticed in foreign circles, the more so as it was with its members that foreigners came in closest contact, both in the governmental and commercial fields. Observers of the Ethiopian scene, for the most part foreigners, saw the emergence of this class as a significant new development, both in terms of its occupation and in its mode of thought. Seeing parallels with reformers in other countries, notably Egypt and Turkey, they termed members of the new class Young Ethiopians – or Young Abyssinians.

The Young Ethiopians were seen in two distinct but related guises: (1) as a cadre of personnel who because of their training and language expertise provided a valuable interface with the outside world; and (2) as a group of individuals with specific reformist attitudes, aspirations and beliefs. These two concepts tended to be interwoven – or used interchangeably, thereby producing an element of ambiguity.

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The first identified mention of a Young Abyssinia Party dates back to 1900 when the English traveler Vivian met a young Ethiopian who wanted an elected Ethiopian Parliament, and had, he says, other “equally ridiculous” ideas.

The growth of education, and the establishment of ministries and other government institutions in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was such that by the late 1920s a significant bureaucratic class - of supposedly Young Ethiopians - had come into existence. Jean d’Esme claimed that this class was by then so extensive that it was with them that visiting foreigners did business in most official relations: with the Customs, the Post and Telegraph Office, as well as with the Municipality, hospitals, schools, etc.

Young Ethiopians, it is suggested, were largely advocates of modernization as well as committed nationalists, opposed to colonialist pressures, and indignant at racial discrimination as practiced by the local European community in Addis Ababa and elsewhere. This at times earned them the opprobrium of European colonialists and racists, and most seriously that of Fascist Italy, whose invasion and occupation many of them vigorously opposed. Constituting the core of the Black Lion movement – and incurring the hatred of Mussolini, who ordered their total elimination – the Young Ethiopians, as the Italians called them - were accused of complicity in the attempt against Graziani, in February 1937, on which account many of them were sadly eliminated. With their liquidation the term Young Ethiopian, which had never really gained currency among the people so designated, fell into virtually total disuse.