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TOWARDS A GLOBAL INTELLECTUAL HISTORY OF AN
UNEQUAL WORLD



An Unequal Ethiopia in an Unequal World: Global and Domestic Hierarchies in Afäwäṛḳ Gäbrä-Iyyäsus's and Käbbädä Mikael's Political Thought (1908 and 1949)

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ABSTRACT

The Ethiopian empire retained its political independence through the European Scramble for Africa. The imperial elites oversaw the transformation of the empire into a territorially-bounded state, part of an international system of states regulated by international law and by international institutions such as the League of Nations, and later the UN. Ethiopian intellectuals were keenly aware that Ethiopia had joined this international system from a subordinated position and that its sovereignty remained at risk. The struggle for sovereignty was fought not only at a diplomatic level, but also at a narrative level. Afäwäṛḳ Gäbrä-Iyyäsus's 1908 *Traveller's Guide to Abyssinia* and Käbbädä Mikael's 1949 *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation* pushed back against the European depiction of Ethiopia as intrinsically inferior and intrinsically unable to develop. Both Afäwäṛḳ and Käbbädä rejected the rigid determinism of stagist models of development, and argued that Ethiopia and Europe were natural allies by virtue of their shared Christian heritage. Global power hierarchies rigidified Ethiopia's domestic power hierarchies. The article shows how the way in which Afäwäṛḳ and Käbbädä defended Ethiopia's place in an unequal world had important consequences on their vision of domestic nation building, resulting in hierarchical assimilationist policies that marginalised Ethiopia's non-Christian citizens.

KEYWORDS

Ethiopia; Ethiopian political thought; global intellectual history; Ethiopian nationalism; anticolonial thought; global inequality

1. Introduction

Ethiopia entered the twentieth century as a formally independent country, having defeated an Italian invasion attempt at Adwa in 1896. Its sovereignty, though, remained under threat. Europe's economic and military hegemony kept the Ethiopian elites on their toes, as they witnessed the consolidation of European colonial rule all around Ethiopia's territory. For Ethiopian intellectuals, confronting the ideology that ostensibly underpinned those colonial conquests was a matter of national urgency. Ethiopia's sovereignty was at risk, and the European colonial narrative, buttressing as it did European

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territorial expansionism, was for the Ethiopians part of the threat. This was a narrative that made Ethiopia into a racial, cultural and political ‘other’. The Ethiopian elites saw clearly that this otherising discourse could be mobilised to sideline Ethiopia in international relations, or worse, to legitimise the European erosion of Ethiopia’s economic and political sovereignty. Ethiopian intellectuals saw it upon themselves to launch an ideological counter-offensive able to partly compensate for Ethiopia’s political and economic weakness vis-à-vis Europe.

This paper compares two texts that try to make sense of the network of unequal international relations in which Ethiopia was caught: Afäwäṛḳ Gäbrä-Iyyäsus’s 1908 *Traveler’s Guide to Abyssinia* and Käbbädä Mikael’s 1949 *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation*.¹ In choosing two texts separated by four decades, I want to show the elements of continuity and discontinuity in the way Ethiopian intellectuals appraised global inequalities and Ethiopia’s place in the world in the first half of the twentieth century. Afäwäṛḳ and Käbbädä represent the mainstream trend of Ethiopian political thought. This trend would remain hegemonic in the country until the late 1960s, and while it maintained a strong internal coherence, it predictably underwent some periodic adjustments. Käbbädä, for example, writes when the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1936–1941) had considerably weakened the Ethiopian elite’s confidence in Ethiopia’s national self-actualisation and international recognition. His view of the international system is therefore much more critical and pessimist than Afäwäṛḳ’s forty years before.

An intellectual history of global inequality should look at inequality not only as a theme or content of intellectual debates, but as a structuring dimension of knowledge production. Global socio-political and economic asymmetries produced epistemological asymmetries as well, and an intellectual history of global inequality should interrogate the unequal premises under which knowledge production took place in the modern world. Afäwäṛḳ and Käbbädä offer two useful case studies to think through these methodological problems. Both thinkers were keenly (even painfully) conscious of their restricted worldmaking agency in global spaces dominated, politically, economically, but also epistemologically, by Western Europe and the United States. Afäwäṛḳ and Käbbädä wrote at the height of European colonialism, when Ethiopia was trying to assert its political subjectivity as an independent state in an international environment that ranged from unsupportive to straight-up hostile. Afäwäṛḳ and Käbbädä were conscious that their country’s global peripherality limited their ideological options. Only certain ways of conceptualising political power, citizenry, and history would have been received as legitimate in the European elite circles responsible for deciding Ethiopia’s political fate. These constraints, however, were not at all insuperable for the two Ethiopian thinkers. On the contrary, Afäwäṛḳ and Käbbädä found a distinctive ideological agency precisely *within* the limitations of globally hegemonic epistemologies. They both accepted the European terms of the debate, and (albeit with varying degrees of pessimism) used them to claim Ethiopia’s right to sit at the table of the ‘great nations’. Their thought is not derivative – it was instead an inventive and cunning turning of European ideas *against* European hegemony. Their example shows that the engagement with European epistemologies on the part of ostensibly ‘peripheral’ thinkers should not be interpreted as a sign of ideological subordination, but on the contrary can be seen as a calculated strategy to assert a degree of ideological agency, and thus turn the centre-periphery dynamic on its head. The ‘peripheral’ positionality of the two Ethiopian intellectuals

did not in any way imply a ‘peripheral’, subordinated or passively imitative, intellectual engagement with the global.

Secondly, an intellectual history of global inequality should look at inequality in an intersectional way. Egalitarian ideologies might only address some structural asymmetries while ignoring others, and deeply unequal processes of power accumulation might be operative under the guise of emancipatory discourses. Afäwärķ and Käbbädä are good examples of this. The way in which Afäwärķ and Käbbädä envisioned Ethiopia’s global positioning had a direct bearing on their ideas about Ethiopian nationalism and domestic nation-building. In pushing back against European colonial and racist narratives, as we shall see, both Afäwärķ and Käbbädä ended up reinforcing domestic power hierarchies between Ethiopia’s many cultural and religious groups. Their intellectual militancy against European hegemony at the international level led them to defend *habäša* hegemony at home. This tension is not an exception; it is rather constitutive of the history of the nation-state form.² An intellectual history of global inequality, in this sense, should interrogate how the political units in which knowledge production took place in the twentieth century themselves favoured or enabled the reproduction of specific sets of hierarchies – ultimately pushing us to decouple projects of liberation from projects of *national* liberation.

2. *Traveller’s Guide to Abyssinia* by Afäwärķ Gäbrä-Iyyäsus (1908)

Afäwärķ Gäbrä-Iyyäsus (1868–1947) published his *Traveller’s Guide to Abyssinia* in 1908, while working as an Amharic language instructor at the Orientale University in Naples. The years 1908–1909 were the peak of his intellectual production: alongside the *Guide*, he also published an important history of Emperor Mənilək’s reign and what is considered the first Amharic novel.³ He had been living in Europe since the 1890s, after falling out with Emperor Mənilək and his wife Ṭaytu, and he would only return to Ethiopia after Ras Täfäri came to power in 1916. He was one of the first Ethiopians to receive a modern education in Europe, at a time when the only educational institutions available in Ethiopia were church and Quranic schools. As such, Afäwärķ represents a new type of intellectual: one who had travelled internationally, learnt European languages, and who operated within modern educational institutions. The *Traveller’s Guide to Abyssinia* shows the extent to which he had learnt how to interface between Ethiopians and Europeans.⁴ There were very few Ethiopian intellectuals with this profile in the 1900s and 1910s, and all of them invariably complained in their works of feeling intellectually and socially isolated in their home country, if not outright marginalised by more conservative and traditionalist sectors of Ethiopian society. This also meant that the ‘modern’ intellectuals that shared Afäwärķ’s intellectual profile all knew one another, cross-referenced one another in their works, and engaged with one another’s ideas. Not that they all had the same ideological orientation, of course: Gäbrä-Həywät Baykädañ (1886–1919), for example, framed the issue of Ethiopia’s global belonging through a political economy lens that was completely foreign to Afäwärķ. Yet, Gäbrä-Həywät did not hesitate to acknowledge his intellectual debt to Afäwärķ, even when he partially disagreed with him.⁵ From this point of view, Afäwärķ set the terms of future intellectual debates, and not only in terms of the questions he asked, but also in terms of the answers he gave. As we shall see, the way in which Afäwärķ theorised ‘an unequal

Ethiopia in an unequal world' would end up becoming official state policy and would be endorsed by the Ethiopian government as official state nationalism.⁶

The *Traveller's Guide to Abyssinia* is dazzling in the way it experiments with genre. The title presents it as a tourist guide, but the *Guide* also functions as language manual, theatre script, political treatise, and travel diary. Open the book, and the reader is confronted with a long dialogue between two main characters, an Ethiopian guide and a European traveller. The European visitor and the Ethiopian guide meet on the coast of the Red Sea and travel together all the way to Addis Abäbä. It is only at the very end of the *Guide* that we discover that 'the European' (so he is described throughout the text) is French (242),⁷ and the fact that the discovery comes so late stresses the extent to which Afäwärķ wants his character to stand for *all* Europeans. The Frenchman is fluent in Amharic, and that is the language in which the two characters speak. into Amharic cue in the dialogue is then transliterated in Latin characters and translated into French. The text is therefore bilingual, with the Amharic available in two different scripts.

Of all the genres that the *Guide* could easily belong to, Afäwärķ presents it primarily as a language textbook. He envisions language as a central component of Ethiopia's bid to the global, and he makes it clear in the opening sentence of his introduction:

The awakening of Ethiopian politics through the relationship with the civilized world [*le monde civil*] and the resuming on the part of the Ethiopian empire of its march towards civilization, [previously] put to sleep (interrupted) for many centuries, gave me the opportunity to present to the general public [...] this Amharic manual. (1)⁸

Afäwärķ tells his readers that Ethiopia is forging closer diplomatic relations with the West and is becoming a player on the international scene. It is not yet fully part of *le monde civil*, but already a global actor. Amharic is the language of a rising power whose influence in international relations is growing, and that is why Europeans should learn the language. As Ethiopia keeps 'marching towards civilization', in Afäwärķ's words, contacts with Europe will increase, and European travellers and merchants will want to know the country better, whether out of curiosity or for lucrative business opportunities. With Ethiopia's growing influence, Amharic will become the language of commercial political networks centred in the Horn and extending transnationally to encompass Europe and beyond. On an immediate level, this opening is a powerful assertion of Ethiopia's rightful belonging to the international community. Yet, Afäwärķ knows this is a delicate pitch. If on the one hand he is indicating that Ethiopia will soon become a fully-fledged member of the international society, on the other hand he has to account for what he perceives to be, and what Europeans perceive to be, the country's present backwardness.

Afäwärķ's solution out of this conundrum is to disassociate cultural ranking and developmental status. Ethiopia may be economically and politically behind in the present, but this does not reflect any intrinsic cultural inferiority. On the contrary, Ethiopia has always been a great civilisation and should be considered one of the world's 'great nations' precisely by virtue of its past cultural and religious achievements. The Europeans want to explain Ethiopia's lacklustre economic and political present as evidence of cultural inferiority, but Afäwärķ resolutely pushes back against this interpretation. Ethiopia is lagging behind the other 'great nations'

because of accidental, contingent historical events. Its backwardness is merely circumstantial, and not at all natural, inevitable, or innate.

But what are these circumstantial factors that prevented Ethiopia from progressing as fast as the ‘great nations’? First to blame are Ethiopia’s own rulers. After clearing customs, the two protagonists of the *Guide* head towards Addis Abäbä, and the Frenchman observes that the land looks depopulated, deurbanized, and underdeveloped. There are only a few scattered people in sight, and the land, although fertile, is covered in wild weeds and thorny bushes. The guide explains that the peasants work hard, but the fruit of their labour is regularly pillaged by soldiers, incentivising the peasants to leave the land and join the army in turn. There is no law, punishments are completely arbitrary, and every king rules according to his preferences (*ändäwädäjäw*) and caprice (*ändäfäkädäw*). The landowners are a predatory class, complains the Ethiopian guide, getting fat at the peasants’ expense. The cause of Ethiopia’s underdevelopment has nothing to do with any intrinsic cultural inferiority, but is framed from the start as a problem of governance. The European himself comes up with this interpretation: ‘such a beautiful country and such a fertile land would not be as deserted and desolate unless there was a flaw on the part of those who govern them’ (214). He repeats the same assessment a bit later: ‘What unlucky (*yaltadälläč*) country Abyssinia is because of the kings that govern it!’ (218). Ethiopia’s present backwardness vis-à-vis European countries is due to the leadership failures of all the monarchs that ruled it before Mənilək; they are to blame, not the culture as a whole.

The second circumstantial reason why Ethiopia is lagging behind is geographical isolation. The characters are still discussing the problem of corrupt and tyrannical governments in Ethiopia, and the French merchant tries to reassure his Ethiopian companion that Europe, too, had its fair share of bad rulers in the past: ‘It was the same in Europe few centuries ago, and it is still the case in Russia’ (183). The guide gets incensed when he hears about Russia: ‘Oh, let’s not talk about Russia, whose kings are a thousand times guiltier, lazier and more merciless than Ethiopian kings towards their people!’ (184). The European asks why, and the Ethiopian explains:

because if the Ethiopian rulers oppressed their people, they had no contact with the countries who possessed order and wisdom (*sərat* and *bəlhat*), but the Russians did, and this is why the actions of its sovereigns are shameful and cruel (*yäminak yarämäni*). (184)

Sərat-na bəlhat (‘order and wisdom’) is the combination of Amharic terms through which Afäwärk renders the French *civilisation*. This passage, then, as short as it is, introduces important qualifications to the *Guide*’s theory of civilisation. Ethiopia is behind Europe not only because of its rulers, but also because it was geographically isolated from the European countries that first achieved ‘order and wisdom’. If exposed to European knowledge, it could have benefited from it, and Ethiopian rulers could have rethought their actions. Russia’s barbarity, instead, is unjustifiable, because the country had extensive contacts with European civilisation, and yet did not learn anything from it. The argument firmly identifies (Western) Europe as the region that first attained the ‘order and wisdom’ of civilisation, and from where such knowledge spread. Once again, however, this does not say anything about the intellectual and moral skills of Europeans on the one hand and Ethiopians on the other. Ethiopia was held back by accidental, contingent factors: geographical seclusion and bad governance.

The Frenchman's attempts at reassuring the Ethiopian that Europe took time to build democratic, enlightened systems of government alludes to a unilinear conception of historical progress. The merchant frequently uses the same line of argument to reassure the guide that Ethiopia, too, will eventually move past its current state of development. 'Is there a school of arts and architecture in Ethiopia?', he is curious to know, and the guide laments:

No, sir, we do not have any school of that kind. There are only builders, carpenters and painters that work by trial and error, so the work is executed without any precision and without any sense of proportion. You will see those works; they will make you laugh. (178)

The guide's comment invites the European to deride Ethiopia's backwardness, but the merchant has a different reaction, and comforts the Ethiopian instead: 'There is no point laughing at them, because, in ancient times, in Europe there were no art schools either, and everything was done without grace or proportion' (178). Even though the Frenchman tends to approach Ethiopia as a wild, dangerous and 'different' place, this answer denies any civilisational difference in kind. The Ethiopians have the same ability and intelligence of Europeans, they have just been dragged down by ruthless and rapacious leaders. The march of progress, though, is the same for every civilisation, and with the right leaders Ethiopia will follow in Europe's footsteps.

Other passages in the *Guide* add more complexity and nuance to such monodirectional idea of universal development stages. We can see this, for example, in the opening sentence of the introduction, where Afāwārḳ describes Ethiopia's recent 'awakening' after centuries of torpor. This formulation points to the existence of three types of societies: societies that are 'awake' and civilised, societies that are 'awake' and not-yet-civilised, and societies that are 'asleep' and not-yet-civilised. The metaphor of falling asleep and awakening implies an overall rejection of both historical determinism and cultural essentialism. Some societies could be at the vanguard of civilisation but could be subsequently slowed down by periods of lethargy. Such is the case of Ethiopia, initially at the forefront of the civilising process, then asleep for many centuries, and now again on the move. By contrast, Russia had all the geographical preconditions to progress towards 'order and wisdom' and this makes the reactionary and tyrannical choices of its rulers even more immoral. Progress may be unilinear, but Afāwārḳ argues that the pace of progress is different for different societies, and advanced societies can be stalled in their development by bad rulers or geographically unfavourable conditions.

These historical ups and downs do not necessarily reflect the greatness and civilisational standing of each of these countries or societies. Afāwārḳ does not contest the notion of a 'standard of civilisation', nor the way it is defined. He rather uses those existing parameters to claim that Ethiopia can and should sit at the table of 'civilised' nations. Afāwārḳ is not the only intellectual who tweaked Europe's civilisational argument in this way; there are many other cases of African or Asians intellectuals that refused to explain the perceived 'backwardness' of their societies on the grounds of some intrinsic cultural or racial inferiority.⁹ What makes Afāwārḳ (and the political thought he later inspired in Ethiopia) distinctive is the appeal to Christian ecumenism as a corrective to the European otherisation of non-white peoples. Christianity had always been a central source of political identity for the Ethiopian empire in previous centuries, and remained so when the

Ethiopian imperial elites oversaw the political transformation of the empire into a state between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Afäwäṛḳ saw that stressing the Christian identity Ethiopia could be strategically harnessed to claim that Ethiopia was a ‘Christian sister’ to the European nations, and hence perfectly qualified to join their family on religious grounds.

The very same way in which Afäwäṛḳ renders the French *civilisation* in Amharic through the alternative pairings of ‘knowledge’ (*awḳät*), ‘wisdom’ (*bälhat*), and ‘order’ (*sərat*) indicates that he understands progress through a Christian religious lens. The binary civilised/uncivilised is built on two dichotomies, knowledgeable/ignorant (*dänḳoro*) and orderly/wild (*arämäni*). *Sərat* is a very semantically rich term and translates as ‘order’, but also ‘principle’, ‘system’, ‘procedure’, ‘regulation’, ‘ceremony’, ‘formality’, ‘manners’ and ‘discipline’. It also has a crucial religious connotation of divine order vs. the chaos of sin. The link between civilisation and Christian morality is drawn in a passage of the *Guide* where the merchant jokes about the Orthodox Christian prohibition to enter churches wearing shoes. ‘Who commits the sin (*abäsa*), the person or the shoes? It must be the shoes, because the person can enter without them. Are the shoes made of leather? Then perhaps the sin is committed by the beasts’ (150–1). The guide replies: ‘You are right, the bestiality and ignorance that rule Ethiopia are the sin’ (151). He explicitly links *abäsa* to lack of civilisation via *dänḳurna* (ignorance) and a new term, *moñännät*, which is translated into French as *bêtise* (from *bête*, ‘beast’) to keep with the joke about cows and leather, but which also means ‘foolishness’, ‘stupidity’, ‘folly’. Although *abäsa* means more generally ‘misdeed, bad deed’, rather than the more theologically accurate *haṭiat* for ‘sin’, it still introduces a moral dimension to the definition of civilisation.

Modernity, from this point of view, is the modernity of Christianity, and Ethiopia, as an early Christian empire, spearheaded the march towards modern civilisation. We can find further evidence of this in another passage the *Guide*, when the merchant asks the guide if his Ethiopian countrymen agree with his ideas. If they are ignorant (*dänḳoro*) they do not understand his reformist views, says the guide,

but if they are wise (*bəhəl*) and admire European civilization they can only approve, and correctly blame the governments in power up until this day in Ethiopia, a country so renowned and distinguished for its old traditions as a big Christian empire. (219)

Here the point is clear: Ethiopia is a great civilisation because of its long imperial history and because of its long Christian history. It has existed as an empire for centuries, and this empire has been one of the engines of the worldwide diffusion of Christianity. This means that the developmental backwardness of twentieth-century Ethiopia is, all in all, irrelevant, being essentially just the product of a string of accidental misfortunes. If we look instead at Ethiopia’s ancient imperial and Christian glories, it is clear that Ethiopia deserves to be a member of the ‘big nations’, although it is temporarily just the ‘smallest’ of them.

Here Afäwäṛḳ is piecing together, unsystematically but unequivocally, a narrative that will be monumentally consequential for the future of Ethiopia. On the one hand, the claim that Ethiopia was, by virtue of its Christian and imperial history, Europe’s kith and kin was partly successful at securing the support of some key sectors of European society. Those like Sylvia Pankhurst who mobilised in favour of Ethiopia at the time of

the 1935 Fascist invasion were profoundly fascinated by the image of an ‘ancient’, ‘noble’, ‘biblical’ nation. This image was bound not to be enough to unseat the white supremacist underpinnings of international law and of the League of Nations. It did however energise a discursive tradition that reverberated up to the present day, over a century after the *Guide* was published. In the context of the ‘war on terror’, for instance, Western governments repeatedly referred to ‘Christian’ Ethiopia as their ‘natural’ ally in the otherwise ‘politically unstable’ and ‘terrorist-prone’ Horn of Africa.

The characterisation of Ethiopia as a great Christian civilisation had another far-reaching effect. Erecting Christianity as a pillar of civilisation and modernity enabled Christian Ethiopians to push back against European racism, but also constructed a civilisational rift between Christian Ethiopians and non-Christian Ethiopians. This triangulation is evident in the *Guide*, where the topics of progress and modernisation are often tackled with reference to a third party, Ethiopia’s internal ‘other’. The guide is a Christian *habäša* and answers the merchant’s questions on Ethiopia from a Christian standpoint, referring to Christian customs and traditions as ‘national’ customs and traditions. The Amharic-French glossary at the beginning of the *Guide* exclusively refers to Christian religious titles and festivities, although it acknowledges the presence, under the category ‘Human races, religions and nations’ of ‘Muslims’, ‘pagans’ and ‘barbarians’. The word Afäwärq translates as ‘pagans’, *ahzab*, also means ‘infidel’ or ‘barbarian’. The term for ‘barbarian’, *arämäni*, has a similar range of meanings: ‘infidel’, ‘unbeliever’ and ‘savage’, with an added connotation of ‘cruel’, ‘ferocious’, ‘wild’. In both cases, being non-Christian (‘infidel’, ‘pagan’) is closely associated to notions of barbarism and savagery. Whether Muslims are included in the definition of ‘pagans’ (*ahzab* or *arämäni*) is not completely clear. Tayae Assefa suggests that they are, pointing out that terms like *arämäni* have been used in Geez literature to refer to Muslims, and, even more persuasively, noticing that Afäwärq himself in his 1909 *Dagmawi Mäniläk* refers to the Dervishes as alternatively ‘Muslims’ and *arämäni*.¹⁰ Another way to designate the ‘uncivilised’, as we have seen, is *dänqoro*, meaning ‘deaf’, ‘ignorant’, ‘stupid’. On its own, *dänqoro* does not map onto a Christian/non-Christian dichotomy, but Afäwärq often uses it in conjunction with *ahzab* and *arämäni*, thus creating a further association of non-Christians as ‘ignorant’ as well as ‘savage’.

The internal ‘other’ against which degrees of civilisation are measured are the nomadic and pastoralist groups that live in the desert. Most of them are Muslims, like the cameleers that join the Frenchman’s caravan. The first time we encounter these ‘others’ is at the very beginning of the story, when the guide recruits the cameleers for the expedition from the Red Sea coast to Addis Abäba. To the Frenchman’s surprise, the cameleers do not speak Amharic, and one supposes the guide can somehow communicate in their language, but the plot does not address this point, and in fact, the cameleers remain a voiceless background presence. Before the caravan leaves the coast for the interior, the merchant gives the guide some money to throw a small departure party, and the guide happily complies, but also informs the merchant that the cameleers will not join, since their religion prohibits alcohol and non-*halal* meat. ‘What can I do, if they do not want it?’, the Frenchman shrugs, ‘You Christians eat and drink their portion!’ (128). The (Christian) escorts, too, remain voiceless throughout, but they are more closely integrated in the social structure of the expedition. They are considered equivalent to house servants and the French merchant, as leader of the expedition, has to provide for their

needs. The cameleers, on the other hand, carry their own food and feed themselves. When one escort and one cameleer fall sick, the guide makes sure that the escort (whom he calls ‘one of my friends’) is loaded onto a mule, but as for the sick cameleer, ‘his mates will take care of him’ (175). Here alterity is made use of, tolerated, but ultimately it is negligible, if not outright invisible, both from the external point of view of the author, since the cameleers are voiceless characters, and from the internal point of view of the two protagonists, who do not show much interest in their Muslim companions.

Outside of the business structure of the caravan, these ‘other’ presences take another meaning. When crossing the desert, the Frenchman sees some herds, and asks if they belong to ‘those pagans’ (*ahzabočč*, translated in French as *sauvages*, ‘savages’, 169). It is possible that these desert dwellers belong to the same ethnic background as the cameleers, but the connection is not explicitly made. The guide gives information about them in the same way in which he had answered questions about flora and fauna. They are nomads (*zālan*), pastoralists, and they would trade their cattle for small pieces of textile, which are in high demand since there are no marketplaces in the desert. The Frenchman is shocked that they would trade so much for so little, and the lack of regulated markets is deplorable for someone that has made commerce his profession. His judgement is not kind: ‘They are so ignorant (*dənqorowočč*)!’ And since the arid land cannot be cultivated and the nomads have no way to buy flour in the desert, the guide goes on explaining, they do not eat any starches and their main source of food is their livestock: ‘Do you see how thin they are?’, the *habäša* says, with a note of derision (170), and the European joins in: ‘I see it, they are depleted (*däkaqawočč*) and look like they will fall at the puff of an infant’ (170). They are agile and strong though, the guide points out, and they make formidable warriors, even if they do not use firearms, and ‘this is what gave an advantage to the *habäša*. [If they had had firearms] these pagans (*ahzbočč*) would have been a great obstacle for the Ethiopian empire, like they were already at the time of Mohammed Grañ, towards the mid-fifteenth century’ (171). The reference is to the Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, the Muslim military commander of the Sultanate of Adal that almost managed to conquer the Ethiopian Empire in the sixteenth century.¹¹ This line makes it evident that, as Taye argues, Muslims are included in the definitions of *ahzab* and *arämäni*.

The otherness of the *ahzab* and *arämäni* is used to make a politically crucial point. After hearing the guide’s explanations on the nomads, the merchant is prompted to ask: ‘And the population of central Abyssinia, do they possess knowledge (*awqät*) and order (*sərat*)?’ (173). Together with ‘wisdom’ (*bəlhat*), as we have seen, these are the two terms that Afäwärk translates as ‘civilisation’, so his French translation reads: ‘And the population of central Abyssinia, is it well civilised?’ (173). The answer of the guide requires careful analysis: ‘In comparison with those pagans, the Christian population of Abyssinia possesses a lot of knowledge and order. But compared to the Europeans we are still in darkness’ (173). The same argument is repeated a bit later, when the European is indignant at the flimsy huts where the nomadic populations live: ‘What miserable lives these ignorant (*dənqorowočč*) people live! On the other side, they are not afraid of being crushed under the weight of their huts in case of an earthquake. Are there big houses in central Abyssinia?’ (176). ‘Yes, there are big houses. I say ‘big’, but not like European houses, which are made with lime and stones and

have several floors; but the houses in [central] Abyssinia are big and even very big if compared to the huts we are looking at now' (176).

The association of non-Christians with various ideologies of alterity is not new in *habäša* history, and it is here recontextualized within a larger power hierarchy that includes Ethiopia's 'external other', i.e. Europe. For Afäwärķ, this is a way to dodge European racism, but without challenging its core assumptions and rationales. By distancing himself from the nomadic Muslim pastoralists of the lowlands, he is validating both European civilisational hierarchies and the European scorn towards the 'uncivilised'. The values of Christian ecumenism allow Afäwärķ to position Ethiopia as the 'smallest' of the world's 'big' nations. If religion and not race is the determining indicator of the greatness of world nations, then Ethiopia could present itself as a natural ally of Europe. Preserving this alliance was pivotal for Ethiopia at the time, since its economy depended on foreign capital, and European colonial ambitions in the Horn were far from quashed. But this pitch could only be made by denying the Ethiopianness of non-Christians.

We can pause here to reflect about the significance of the *Guide* for later Ethiopian political thought. The problem of how to explain Ethiopia's underdevelopment will indeed become a, perhaps the, central dilemma for many intellectuals writing in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. These were years in which, for the first time, we see the rise of a new intellectual class. In the 1900s, Afäwärķ had felt lonely and isolated as a 'modern' intellectual in a predominantly traditionalist society, but in the 1920s there were enough globally-oriented intellectuals to form a cohesive political bloc. All of them gravitated around the imperial government, who patronised them and financed the newspapers in which they publicly debated their ideas.

The answers given in these decades to the problem of underdevelopment, as we shall see, will not be much different from the answers that Afäwärķ gives in the *Guide*. Like Afäwärķ, subsequent Ethiopian intellectuals also read the developmental divergence between their country and Europe in terms of civilisational differences. 'Europe' was generally evoked as a single, internally homogeneous political and cultural entity, as opposed to 'Ethiopia'. Differences in development were interpreted in terms of more advanced and more backward stages, with 'Ethiopian civilisation' being positioned behind the more advanced 'European civilisation'. Ethiopia's backwardness was invariably lamented. And yet, Ethiopian intellectuals were firm in rejecting the premise that this was caused by something inescapably inferior about Ethiopia's culture, history or, even worse, biological make-up. This is something that Afäwärķ articulates clearly in the *Guide*, and it may well be the case that the *Guide* is the first Amharic text in which this explanation is articulated. From this point of view, Afäwärķ sets not only the terms of subsequent debates, but also lays out the ideological framework through which later solutions came to be articulated.

The hierarchy established by Afäwärķ between Christian and non-Christian Ethiopians would too remain ideologically mainstream among the intellectual elites of the interwar period. Again, narratives of religious otherisation are not new in Ge'ez or Amharic intellectual production (and of course, they are ubiquitous in world history), but in the twentieth century we see them systematically translated in state policy. The internal ethnic and religious diversity of the state was seen as an obstacle to state-building and a source of political weakness. In the interwar years, Ethiopian intellectuals and

politicians increasingly called for the implementation of assimilationist measures.¹² A more culturally homogeneous citizenry, it was argued, would guarantee the national unity that was needed to resist European economic pressures and expansionist ambitions. Some of the diplomatic frictions with bordering European colonies, after all, had to do with cross-border raids or cross-border skirmishes involving those very pastoralist groups that Afäwärq defined as *ahzab* and *arämäni* in the *Guide*. As a result, the pastoralist groups were seen as a problem that risked endangering Ethiopia's independence, as European powers could use those cross-border skirmishes as a pretext for a military intervention.¹³ The Ethiopian state struggled to contain these border disturbances, and the Amharic-speaking intellectuals based at the centre of the Ethiopian state feared that the limited reach of central state institutions would undermine Ethiopia's claim to sovereignty in the international arena.

This fear was not unfounded. When Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, the Fascists claimed that the Ethiopian government could not be trusted with the modernisation of the country. Italy's racist propaganda machine described Ethiopia as a despotic, backward country in which a tyrannical Christian elite enslaved and oppressed the non-Christian population.¹⁴ The Fascists cast themselves as the liberators of Ethiopia's oppressed minorities, and the attempt to exploit domestic inter-ethnic and inter-religious grievances was not unsuccessful. Some sectors of the Ethiopian population put up a formidable armed resistance against the Italians, but other groups and individuals did decide to side with the invaders, as a reaction against the centralising policies enacted by Haylä Səllase's in the previous decade.¹⁵ Afäwärq was among the latter. Disappointed by what he perceived as the Ethiopian government's inability to modernise the country, the author of the *Guide* would become the most high-profile collaborator of the Fascists.

The Italian occupation sent shockwaves through the Ethiopian establishment. Especially disheartening for Ethiopian elites was witnessing the League of Nation's timid and uncommitted response to the invasion, considering the efforts Ethiopia had made in the previous decade in complying with the demands of the organisation. The pitch that Ethiopia was the 'smallest' of the world's 'great nations' was also irremediably tarnished, leaving post-liberation intellectuals with the task of rethinking Ethiopia's global belonging.

3. Ethiopia and Western Civilisation by Käbbädä Mikael (1949)

When Käbbädä Mikael (1914–1998) published *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation* in 1949, he was as an up-and-coming civil servant who was slowly rising up in the ranks of Ethiopia's political apparatus. Initially educated in church school, he later studied at the Catholic Mission School in Addis Abäba and at the school of the Alliance Française. He was scheduled to study abroad in France, but the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1936–41) thwarted these plans. He remained in Ethiopia instead, and during the occupation was hired by the Italians to work on the radio. It is very likely that he crossed paths with Afäwärq in this role. Käbbädä's collaboration with Italian colonial authorities was followed by a political U-turn after the 1941 liberation, when he became one of the main supporters and propagandists of Emperor Haylä Səllase.¹⁶ When he published *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation*, he was a high-profile public figure who was quickly climbing the ranks of the civil service, and was making a name for himself in literary

circles too. A regular visitor at the imperial palace, he was well-known to foreign diplomats and visitors, and by 1949 he already had two major literary works published in his name, the play *Yätənbit Kätäro* ('Appointment with the Prophecy', 1945/46) and a collection of folktales and short stories for children titled *Tarikänna Məssale* ('Stories and Parables', 1942/1943).

The intellectual class of the post-liberation period maintained some of the characteristics it had in the interwar years: many of its members had studied abroad, spoke foreign languages, and were used to interfacing with foreigners. The intelligentsia was a small, but recognisable social group in Addis Abäba. They all knew one another and they were all close to Emperor Haylä Səllase, who tightly controlled cultural and educational institutions and systematically censored dissenting opinions. *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation* was written to counteract the Italian colonial propaganda on the persistence of slavery in Ethiopia, a colonial propaganda that, paradoxically, Käbbädä had himself been involved in promoting when he was younger. If Afäwärq moved from believing in the Ethiopian government's ability for self-directed development to concluding that only European occupiers could bring about development in his native country, Käbbädä's trajectory was the opposite, from collaborating with European occupiers to embracing a staunch imperial nationalism after the 1941 liberation. After his collaboration with the Italian occupying forces, Afäwärq fell out of Emperor Haylä Səllase's favour, and died in exile in 1947. This is maybe the reason why Käbbädä does not explicitly cite Afäwärq in his works. It would have been counterproductive to associate himself to a controversial figure, especially as Käbbädä had his own controversial track record during the occupation years. It is safe to assume, however, that like all other high-profile public figures of the time, Käbbädä was familiar with Afäwärq's oeuvre, although Afäwärq was not the only source of influence.

Despite the ambiguities of Käbbädä's professional past, the political line of *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation* is firm and unequivocal. The book is a carefully-crafted nationalist piece, published as a single volume in three languages: Amharic, French and English. Just like the *Guide*, *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation* is written for a double audience, domestic and international, showing Afäwärq's and Käbbädä's ability and willingness to act as mediatory figures between the local and the global. The Amharic section (*Ityopya-nna Məəhrabawi Sələttane*) comes first, followed by a French translation from the Amharic by Marcel Hassid (*L'Éthiopie et la Civilisation Occidentale*), and an English translation from the Amharic (*Ethiopia and Western Civilisation*). As evident from the title, the book takes a far-reaching perspective on the issue of slavery in Ethiopia, situating it within the history of *sələttane*, the key term that had increasingly become the preferred translation of 'civilisation'.

Käbbädä writes as the United Nations were deliberating the fate of the two former Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland, at the time both under provisional British military administration. Different solutions were being debated at the UN for the future of Eritrea and Somaliland, including returning the administration to the Italians. The Italian government was lobbying hard for this latter outcome, showing a clear continuity in colonial policies between the deposed Fascist regime and the democratic, republican government that came to power after the Second World War. The Ethiopian government did not refrain from lobbying in turn for Eritrea and Somaliland to be annexed to Ethiopia. *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation* should be seen as part of this

Ethiopian lobbying effort. The book aims at steering the UN proceedings towards Ethiopia's preferred solution, and, even more passionately, away from Italy's preferred solution.

Käbbädä's explicitly addresses the UN in his introductory chapters and in his conclusions, where he draws on a key argument to support his plea. The annexation of Eritrea and Somalia would be the only solution to favour Ethiopia's development. His reasoning is rather complex and it deserves to be analysed at length. Like Afäwäṛḳ before him, Käbbädä does not question that Ethiopia is 'behind' Western nations in terms of development, but he rejects explanations of this developmental lag based on essentialised notions of intrinsically superior and intrinsically inferior societies or races. Again, had rather been delayed by circumstantial, accidental factors beyond its agency. 'Two main obstacles', he tells his readers, 'have undercut and still undercut Ethiopia's progress and modernisation, one in the past and one in the present. In the past, one obstacle was the complete absence of neighbouring countries from where she could come into contact with Western civilisation. In the present, the other obstacle are the persistent rejections she faces every time she asks to get an access to the sea, which would let her breathe in unison with the rest of the world' (88).¹⁷

Let us start from the first obstacle. *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation* argues that Ethiopia is lagging behind because her geographical isolation prevented her from exchanging good and ideas with the countries of Western Europe. The argument here is almost identical to Afäwäṛḳ's. Käbbädä opens the book by immediately decrying his country's historical isolation:

Ethiopia, isolated from the world, to which the route was barred to her, existed for a long time in the impossibility of making contact with the modern world. It was only when the European states, thanks to the extension of their power and their civilisation, dug the Suez Canal [...] that Ethiopia could begin to contact other peoples of the world. (i)

Landlocked and surrounded by hostile polities, Ethiopia had remained for centuries excluded from the discoveries made in Europe from the seventeenth century onwards (83). This also makes the access to the sea an utmost necessity in the present moment, as a port would stably connect Ethiopia to the rest of the world. Käbbädä's appeal to the United Nations should be seen as part of his view of civilisation as the product of transnational interchanges and connectivity: 'it is obvious that a nation cannot modernise by its own means, without the assistance of other nations' (88). Käbbädä's counter-example is Russia, who historically developed more quickly than Ethiopia because it was geographically more connected with the centres of modern innovation in Western Europe: 'it was obvious that lying at the doors of Europe as it did, [Russia] would in the end achieve its modernisation, sooner or later' (85). Here again Käbbädä's argument is directly in line with Afäwäṛḳ's, except that the *Guide* is more pessimistic on whether Russia had achieved 'civilisation', while Käbbädä writes at a time when the Soviet Union was a global superpower.

The parallels with Afäwäṛḳ do not end here. We have seen how Afäwäṛḳ embraces a stagist conception of unilinear development, but introduces complexity and nuance to account for apparent deviations from the model. Käbbädä employs a similar framework. At a first glance, he has in mind a model of societal evolution based on universal stages: 'Ethiopia, in her present march towards a greater civilisation, [...] has not yet reached

that evolutionary stage which produces the men of genius (*tallalak säwočč*), he despairs in a passage (103). Here the reasoning is quite rigid and mechanical. All societies evolve through subsequent stages, one of which coincides with the emergence of uniquely talented individuals. The West has already reached this stage, and throughout the book Käbbädä mentions the ‘geniuses’ he admires the most: Socrates, Homer, Aeschylus, Virgil, Horace, Shakespeare, Milton, Michelangelo, Tasso, Corneille, Racine, Moliere, Chopin, Spinoza, Newton, Beethoven, Mozart, Goethe, Schiller, Nietzsche, Pushkin, Galileo, Columbus, Leopardi. Ethiopia, instead, has not yet reached this stage; Həruy Wäldä-Səlasse is the only Ethiopian intellectual that could possibly come close to a ‘man of genius’, but that is all.

The rigidity of this stagist framework, though, is mitigated by the many non-linear stories Käbbädä tells of individual nations. Käbbädä envisions a general directionality to human history, but the outcome is far from being pre-determined. Countries can actualise civilisation in ways that are flawed, dangerous or unjust, for example. The orientation of history towards modernity, furthermore, is not at all straight-lined. Like Afäwärk, Käbbädä has a vision of history in which nations rise and fall all the time: the weak become powerful, the powerful decline, new nations ascend to the forefront of history, old empires are resurrected. There is not, in other words, a single story, although the historical ups and downs can still be classified according to stages of development. But from more advanced stages, a nation can slip down to less advanced ones, or rush forward overtaking its rivals, or slow down due to bad leadership or an unfavourable geographical position.

These ups and downs are described through the metaphor of sleeping and awakening, again another point of contact with the *Guide*. Käbbädä stretches the metaphor in an even more extravagant direction. A country’s populace, Käbbädä explains, is like an egg. Just like an egg gives life only when hatched, the masses will remain in a state of stagnation and apathy until monarchs and the ‘men of genius’ (*tallalak säwočč*) hatch the egg, awakening the people’s spirit. Only then will people open their eyes and come to life. The parent/offspring metaphor is further expanded in the following paragraph, when Käbbädä states that ‘a child’s character is formed according to the good or the bad education that he receives. In the same way, a nation behaves according to the principles inculcated by those who roused it up from its torpor’ (84). This is a top-down view of historical change, in which the masses have no agency of their own, and it is up to enlightened politicians or the ‘men of genius’ to awaken the people from their passivity. The general implication of the metaphor is clear: if lagging behind is equated to being asleep, developmental backwardness is not an essence but a completely reversible attribute. All in all, Käbbädä reads history through the gradual spreading of civilisation, but he avoids rigid forms of determinism. There are always different factors at play, generating different outcomes; civilisation is not the only defining element of a people, and setbacks are frequent. After the Second World War, for example, ‘the world is sliding towards an alarming destiny, though its civilisation is in full bloom’ (84). The West may be advanced, but its progress has been halted by the horrors of war – of which the Italian invasion of Ethiopia is an example.

We can now go back to the quote in which Käbbädä listed the two obstacles to Ethiopia’s progress. If the first obstacle to Ethiopia’s progress was geographical isolation, the second obstacle is precisely the supremacist attitudes of Western powers. Far from

assisting Ethiopia, European countries have instead proactively sabotaged its efforts at development. They are the ones who occupied the coastal areas of the Horn of Africa, preventing Ethiopia from having a port, with the precise objective ‘to thwart [Ethiopia’s] progress’ (88). Here Kābbādā’s argument starts to depart from Afāwārḳ’s. For the author of the *Guide*, the world was a hierarchical space, with more advanced and less advanced civilisations, but Afāwārḳ had been confident that Ethiopia would be able not only to fit, but also to thrive in this hierarchical space. The *Guide* does not seem to question the view of a meritocratic international arena, in which each society has equal chances to succeed and will be proportionally rewarded for its political, economic and cultural achievements. Kābbādā, on the contrary, is adamant that behind the hypocritical façade of universalism put up by international institutions, the world of the twentieth century is profoundly unequal and inequitable.

Only the nations that are already powerful are granted rights, while the smaller nations, who do not have the political, economic or military means to secure their rights by force, are considered undeserving of them. This creates an impossible situation for small nations, who are told they must modernise quickly in order to be considered equal partners, but are not given the time or the assistance they need to modernise. Even worse, the small nations are intentionally destabilised and undermined by the big nations. The world-system is designed to make progress unachievable for small nations. The demands placed on small nations are unrealistic and unachievable: ‘a country that stayed backwards in the field of modernisation and that willing to maintain its independence is under the obligation to attain in few years the standard of modernisation attained by its neighbours after four centuries of efforts’. The system is rigged against small nations, to the point that the ‘great European nations seem to want to say that non-modernised people have no right to exist’ (78).

Ethiopia is a perfect example of this. Under Haylā Səllase, the country made a sincere effort to abide by international law and fit into international society. Haylā Səllase believed in the values of peace and sovereign equality that the League of Nations ostensibly aimed to protect. ‘Anxious to add the contribution of his people to an organisation with such a lofty ideals’, the Emperor ‘tried energetically and got Ethiopia admitted among the members of the League’ (76). Like most of the intellectuals of the time, Kābbādā considers the admittance to the League of Nations one of Haylā Səllase’s foremost foreign policy achievements. However, the very same fact of having to ask for membership shows the power differential between big and small nations. At the end of the day, it is the big nations who make the rules, and the small nations must abide by them if they want their sovereignty to be recognised.

The Ethiopian elites were keenly aware that the political legitimacy of the Ethiopian government depended on complying with the principles of international law: ‘Emperor Haylā Səllase knows that Ethiopia must participate into all the activities of civilisation undertaken by other nations’ (58). Kābbādā underlines the discipline with which Ethiopia strived to meet the expectations of the other nations so as to be able to participate in international relations. For instance, Haylā Səllase promptly understood that the 1928 ‘General Treaty for Renunciation of War as an Instrument of National Policy’ (also remembered as the Kellogg–Briand Pact) was ‘the very word of civilisation’ and eagerly ‘wrote Ethiopia’s name among the signatories as a peace-loving nation’ (77). The decrees issued by the Ethiopian government to abolish slavery should also be understood as part

of the political and diplomatic efforts to achieve international recognition. They were politically and economically significant on a domestic level, but their significance also lay in increasing 'the esteem for Ethiopia among the people of the world' (64).

The international system, however, does not reward compliance, but only brute force. Ethiopia strove to honour all the principles of the League of Nations charter, and what good did it do? 'Since Italy took a hold of Eritrea, Ethiopia never lived peacefully' (105). The League of Nations 'granted unrighteous impunity to the Fascist aggressor' and failed at curbing the armaments race (76). The League's inability to prevent wars of aggression ultimately 'voided' the hopes of the very same people that had founded it (77). The reality of the Italian occupation could not be farther from the claims of Italian propaganda. The Fascists broadcast they would civilise Ethiopia, but instead they 'hampered and destroyed everything that Ethiopia had achieved' (80), exterminating the Ethiopian intelligentsia, banning books, closing schools in order to maintain all Ethiopians 'in the night of ignorance' (105). In other words, small nations and big nations do not have equal rights in the international arena. 'It seems that in the present world', Kābbādā denounces, 'there exists an implicit principle of action that says: let any nation that demands its rights obtain them by strength if it is able to. And if it is not able to, let it remain silent' (89).

The second obstacle to Ethiopia's development is therefore the systemic inequality of the international system. Afāwārḳ saw modern civilisation as an overall meritocratic affair, and thought that it was possible for Ethiopia to succeed in becoming one of the world's 'big nations' through hard work and good political leadership. Kābbādā develops a sharper sense that Western nations did not only develop out of their own hard work, but at the expense of the 'small nations'. He establishes a direct connection, for example, between the abolition of slavery and the colonial scramble of the second half of the nineteenth century. While it is important not to deny the 'valiant fights which the champions of anti-slavery put on' (95), Kābbādā explains, the decisive change that led to abolition was the mechanisation of labour. The new machines made the work of a large number of men 'superfluous', offering a key economic incentive for the abolition of slavery (93). The mechanisation of labour led in turn to the expansion of industrialisation, and the expansion of industrialisation increased the need for raw materials essential for industrial production, such as cotton and metals (94–5). This, in turn, triggered a new wave of colonial conquests 'to deprive the people of the colonies of the product of the soil and of all the riches of the underground' (95). In this sense, 'it would not be stupid to assert that the colonies took the place of slavery' (95). This strong statement allows Kābbādā to show that global power asymmetries are constitutive of the modern world, and persisted way past the official abolition of slavery.

While embracing some aspects of modernisation theory, Kābbādā forcefully rejects others. Most notably, he questions the universalist and transhistorical claims of social evolutionism. The countries that first achieved civilisation are now actively trying to prevent the 'small nations' from reaching their same level of development. Therefore, small nations now face obstacles that the great nations who civilised first did not have to face. 'Some countries achieved their modernisation in times favourable to them', Kābbādā reasons, 'but Ethiopia came into contact with the modern world only recently, in an era of confusion, and her difficulties have been hence increased and made more complicated' (83). When Western European nations civilised, they could do it in an

international environment in which no one with a superior civilisation attempted to conquer them. For Ethiopia and other small countries, the situation is different. On the one hand, the great powers are ‘blaming us for not having modernised’, and at the same time, they are ‘hampering our advance towards progress and trying to make us stumble’ (78). This reasoning comes close to dependency theory, and adds complexity to Kābbādā’s more stagist assertions, for example the one we saw earlier on Ethiopia not having yet reached the evolutionary stage that produces ‘men of genius’.

If the big nations think they can get away with their tyrannical schemes, though, they are misguided. ‘Some people think that powerful nations can have their own way and are not afraid that they might themselves suffer acts of injustice’ (89), and for Kābbādā this is a big mistake:

The mighty are not better for relying on their strength. God [...] has managed it so that every time men deviate from the path of truth to enter that of force, fearful consequences a thousand times more disastrous for the mighty than for the weak ensue. (89)

This passage makes it clear that Kābbādā interprets the inequality of international relations through a Christian lens. Abandoning Christianity meant that Western civilisation used its scientific and technological progress for immoral ends – to conquer and exploit the rest of the world. Ethiopia should emulate the material advancements of Western civilisation, but without abandoning its Christian morals.

And precisely because Ethiopia will keep nurturing its ‘spiritual civilisation’, once Haylä Səllase completes his programme of modernising reforms Ethiopia will achieve an even more advanced civilisation compared to the spiritually-flawed Western one.¹⁸ Here the argument is again in line with Afāwārḳ’s. For both authors, the long history of Christianity in Ethiopia is a testament to Ethiopia’s civilisational credentials not only in the past, but also in the future. Christianity gave Ethiopia a central role in world history, and will enable Ethiopia to reassert centrality in the world ahead. The Ethiopian empire committed for centuries to the protection and spreading of Christianity, evidencing how morally and ethically advanced the Ethiopians are, and disproving Western racist narratives about Ethiopia’s cultural backwardness. Christianity is therefore a key tassel of the two intellectuals’ defence of Ethiopian sovereignty and global prominence.

The domestic implications of this argument are as problematic for Kābbādā as they had been for Afāwārḳ. If Ethiopia’s claim to sovereignty rests on the Christian character of its political institutions, how are those institutions to represent Ethiopia’s religiously diverse population? Isn’t this internal religious diversity bound to undermine Ethiopia’s claim to sovereignty? These questions had become more urgent after the Italian occupation. The Fascists had heavily relied on a divide and rule policy in Ethiopia, exploiting the political grievances of those groups that resented Addis Abāba’s government and Haylä Səllase’s centralising policies. Fascist propaganda cast the Amharic-speaking elites as despotic oppressors of the country’s religious and cultural minorities. Albeit with exceptions, it seems that this policy was at least in part effective, leaving the post-liberation political class with the dilemma of how to forge national unity out of the many social fractures intentionally widened by the colonisers.¹⁹ The solution adopted by Haylä Səllase was a rigid assimilationist policy, and a further push towards cultural and political centralisation.²⁰

The apprehension about Ethiopia's nation-building process nevertheless remained, and Kābbädä betrays a certain hesitation when talking about national unity. While he seems confident that Ethiopia will have a prominent role to play in the world of the future, he is instead quite apprehensive about the domestic pre-conditions of this global prominence. The Italian propaganda about the oppressive rule of *habäša* elites, and the accusation that they condoned or favoured the enslavement of non-*habäša* groups in the state peripheries was evidently still insidious and difficult to disprove. Kābbädä duly omits to account for the ethno-cultural and religious patterns that defined the practice of slavery in Ethiopian history. The resulting argument entirely glosses over the existing grievances of Ethiopia's peripheral groups instead of addressing them. While he has an arsenal of counter-arguments to invalidate the Italian claims that Haylä Səllase did not do enough to curb slavery in the country, he does not even mention the other central claim of the Italian propaganda on the existence of ethno-cultural power hierarchies in the country.

He instead insists on the need for unity regardless of differences or grievances. He warns his (in this case Ethiopian) readers through some historical examples: when the Persians invaded, Athens and Sparta joined forces despite their historic rivalry. What ruined Rome were internecine wars and rivalries between generals that had acquired too much power. Kābbädä's long digression on the role of the Amharic language in Ethiopia (89–90) has to be interpreted in this same context. Ever the humanist, Kābbädä considers the national language as a key tool of national unification: 'How will Ethiopia, where several languages are spoken, be able to complete her unity if she does not improve her own language first?' (90). The development of Amharic is for Kābbädä the only way for 'Ethiopia, a vast Empire, an amalgama of people having various religions' to 'fulfil the great civilising mission that destiny has assigned her' (90).

The argument comes full circle: for Ethiopia to be able to pave the way for an even more advanced *sələttane*, it needs a unity internally predicated on assimilationism. Although Kābbädä refuses to mention them explicitly, the reasoning implies that socio-cultural fractures did exist – the same socio-cultural fractures that the Fascists manipulated to legitimise their colonial occupation. Kābbädä's allegation, though, is that domestic political grievances are selfish, because they undermine the authority of Haylä Səllase in the eyes of the international community and therefore expose the country to the risk of another colonial invasion. These fixtures had already been exploited by Italy and the other big nations in order to attempt to 'dismember' Ethiopia (79). Hence, only a national unity predicated on sameness, in which differences are gradually eliminated, could guarantee the preservation of national independence in the future. In my reading of *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation*, this remains Kābbädä's main concern throughout the book – that in a globalised world in which Ethiopia already occupied a subordinate position, internal diversity had already been a liability and would always remain a source of vulnerability.

4. Conclusions

This article has shown two examples of how Ethiopian political thinkers understood global inequality in the first half of the twentieth century. Both Afäwärq and Kābbädä tried to make sense of a world in which, they were painfully aware, 'small nations'

such as Ethiopia do not make the rules. While Afäwärķ attempted to push back against the European colonial narrative from within its premises, with Käbbädä we start seeing a discursive shift towards a structural criticism of the world-system and its attendant ideologies. Both Afäwärķ and Käbbädä write from a defensive position, conscious of the ‘peripheral’ position occupied by their country in the world-system of the twentieth century. But departing from a defensive position, both Afäwärķ and Käbbädä came up with politically persuasive and strategically astute rewritings of European stagist and supremacist ideologies. Their arguments about Ethiopia’s centrality in world history and Ethiopia’s ability to incarnate a more advanced modernity point at the creative agency of ‘peripheral’ intellectuals in rewriting coeval notions of the ‘world’, if only by decrying the exclusions enacted by ostensibly universalist narratives of progress and civilisation.

Käbbädä is much less optimistic than Afäwärķ about Ethiopia’s development in a world whose rules are stacked against the ‘small nations’ and only work to the benefit of the nations that are already ‘great’. The lack of international support for Ethiopia at the time of the Italian occupation had considerably undermined the viability of positioning Ethiopia as the ‘smallest’ sister of the family of ‘great nations’. Käbbädä’s criticism of European colonialism is sporadic and unsystematic, and does not offset his exceptionalist claim that Italy’s colonial invasion was wrong because Ethiopia is an old Christian Empire, and thus perfectly able to modernise on its own. Yet, Käbbädä’s frustration at the racist hierarchies of the international system is the first sign of what would be a massive ideological shift in the 1960s. In that decade, a new generation of intellectuals would articulate a powerful critique of Western colonialism and racism, pushing for a new global identification for Ethiopia: not anymore the ‘smallest’ of the ‘big nations’, but the ‘biggest’ of the ‘small nations’. Although the promotion of Black liberation and Pan-Africanist ideas would be partial and again mired in contradiction, the 1960s mark a time in which Eurocentrism was not anymore criticised from within its premises, but antagonised as a whole as a supremacist ideology.

Even in the context of Pan-Africanism, however, the Ethiopian intellectual class acted primarily to boost the international reputation and sovereign credentials of the Ethiopian nation-state. Independence and liberation were almost always qualified as national independence and national liberation. Both Afäwärķ and Käbbädä had erected Christianity as a pillar of Ethiopian identity, a discursive move that legitimised the adoption of assimilationist policies on the part of the Ethiopian state. These policies effectively de-nationalised non-Christian Ethiopians and marginalised them on a material and symbolic level. In Ethiopian historiography, the Ethiopian government’s adoption of assimilationist policies is generally explained as evidence of the cultural chauvinism of Ethiopian Christian elites, who looked down upon non-Christian as class B citizens. While this is not devoid of truth, looking at global dynamics allows us to suggest an additional explanation. Stressing Ethiopia’s Christian credentials was ultimately aimed at protecting Ethiopia against European colonialism. In Afäwärķ’s and Käbbädä’s reading of the international system, linguistic and cultural sameness was a pre-requirement for sovereign statehood. Assimilationist policies were therefore seen as a necessary step to demonstrate Ethiopia’s autonomous ability for self-directed progress, thus invalidating the legitimacy of Western ‘civilising’ interventions. Neither Afäwärķ nor Käbbädä seem to mind that the effort to make Ethiopia fit within the perceived pre-requirements of the nation-state form created coercive systems of cultural and political exclusion at home. We can nevertheless frame this outcome as a product of the straitjacket in which Ethiopian intellectuals found

themselves in the struggle to self-actualise in a world that was not (and continues not to be) theirs.

Notes

1. Afäwärk's *Traveller's Guide to Abyssinia* is a bilingual French-Amharic text and was published under the French title *Guide du Voyageur en Abyssinie*. Käbbädä's *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation* is a trilingual French-Amharic-English book; the French section is titled *L'Éthiopie et la Civilisation Occidentale* and the Amharic section is titled *Ityopyanna Məəhrabawi Səlättane*.
2. Of the extensive scholarship on this point see, for example, Luxemburg, *The National Question*; Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*.
3. The Amharic novel was published in Rome in 1908 under the title *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* ('Story from the Heart'), the history book was similarly published in Rome in 1909 under the title *Dagmawi Mənilək Nəgusä Nəgäst Zältyopya* ('Emperor Mənilək of Ethiopia').
4. For more information on Afäwärk Gäbrä-Iyyäsus, see Fusella, "Le premier romancier éthiopien"; Rouaud, *Afä-Wärq 1868-1947*; Stella, "Un personaggio amletico"; and the two chapters by Taye Assefa and Yonas Admassu in Tadesse Adera and Ali Jimale Ahmed (eds), *Silence is not golden: a critical anthology of Ethiopian literature*, Lawrenceville (NJ): Red Sea Press, pp. 61–92 and 93–112.
5. Gäbrä-Həywät Baykädañ, *Aṭe Məniləkənnə Ityopya*, 6.
6. I am suggesting correlation, not causation.
7. Page numbers refer to the original 1908 edition.
8. The translations from French and Amharic are mine unless otherwise specified.
9. Cemil Aydin, for example, argues that 'Beyond proving the equality of the colored races and Oriental People's, the Japanese [1905] success [against the Russians] helped Asian intellectuals to assert that the existing backwardness of Asian societies was not a result of deterministic factors, conditioned by race, culture, geography, climate, and religion. They emphasized that this underdevelopment was just a temporary delay in progress that could be altered by a set of reforms, such as the ones Meiji Japan had implemented in just three decades', *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 10.
10. Taye Assefa, "Form and Content of the First Amharic Novel", 90 (footnote 2).
11. The French translation gives a wrong name (Mohammed) and a wrong century (fifteenth). The Amharic version just refers to the military leader as 'Gragñ', the nickname (meaning 'the left-handed') by which Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi was known.
12. The most glaring example of this (explicit since its title) is Tedla Haile's 1930 '*Purquoi et comment pratiquer une politique d'assimilation en Ethiopie*', MA thesis, Université Coloniale d'Anvers.
13. See for example Thompson, "Border Crimes, Extraterritorial Jurisdiction".
14. For more details, see Satta, "Roman Civilization and Abyssinian Barbarity".
15. Braukämper, "Indigenous Views on the Italian Occupation in Southern Ethiopia"; McClellan, "Observations on the Ethiopian nation".
16. For an English-language biography of Käbbädä, see Molvaer, *Black Lions*. In Amharic, see the piece written by another famous intellectual and playwright from the period, Täsfaye Gässäsä, "Yamarəñña Tiyatər Därasiya". I have published another piece on Käbbädä Mikael, "Ethiopian Intellectual History and the Global".
17. Page numbers are from the English section of the 1949 edition, however in some cases the English translation has been readapted based on the Amharic original.
18. The separation between 'material' and 'spiritual' civilisation was a common one among anticolonial movements, see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*.
19. See McClellan, 'Observations' and Braukämper, 'Indigenous views' for more details.
20. John Markakis, *Ethiopia*.

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