

Contingencies, Contradictions and Struggles for Black Freedom and Emancipation: Adwa and Decolonisation Today

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Abstract

In this paper we reflect on and consider Adwa from the perspective of historical and continuing international Black movements and struggles for freedom in its aftermath. Adwa and, by extension, Ethiopia more broadly became a symbol and touchstone of African anti-colonial militancy, political independence and autonomy in an anti-black world. Adwa influenced the imaginations and real struggles of black people for freedom in a multitude of complex, often contradictory ways. However, while it punctured white supremacist narratives at the global stage, internally, in an age that marked the rise of the modern state form—with its fixed territorial borders—the memory of Adwa served as a foundational moment in the formation of modern Ethiopian nationalism. It also buttressed the making of a homogenizing and assimilationist tendency of Ethiopian nationalism in the 20th century and fed into its imperial project. Internationally, Haile Selassie, at the helm of the Ethiopian imperial project in the mid-twentieth century, was taken up as a symbol of Black freedom whilst he presided over an exploitative and oppressive empire at home. With some of the questions raised by current movements for decolonisation, we ask what is different about this contemporary moment when we think about Adwa in relation to international Black movements and struggles for freedom?; how do we remember it from today in relation to Ethiopia's nationalisms (pan Ethiopian and particular ones)?; how do we memorialize it in thinking about freedom in a country with a dominant imperial nationalist ethos?

Keywords: Adwa, decolonization, global/internationalist black consciousness, nationalism and the national question

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Introduction

I did not intend to spend the rest of my life in Abyssinia, but, all things considered, I thought, and still think, that two or three years there, given the fact that I am a Negro and am especially interested in the African revolution, was well worth the attempt (CLR James, 1936).

In 1510 a group of Khoi pastoralists, indigenous to the Cape in Southern Africa, militarily defeated a band of Portuguese soldiers and sailors in what has become remembered as the Battle of Salt River. The Portuguese, under the leadership of d'Almeida, on their way back home after pillaging, stealing and killing on the East coast of Africa, had stolen some cattle and attempted to kidnap some Khoi women and children. They were confronted at the beach and massacred by the locals.

Hearing about the death in Lisbon, King Manuel announced a day of mourning and forbade his ships from calling at the Cape, again, unless in dire necessity... At the time, Manuel I ruled over the first global empire and was then one of the most powerful men in the world. His decision against further landings along the Cape coast would ultimately delay European occupation for another 142 years (Vergunst, 2012).

This instance of military victory, which had wide-ranging impact on the nature and timing of the colonisation process in Southern Africa, forms part of a long tradition of anticolonial struggles whose impulse and orientation in the main has been to fight for and defend Black autonomy. The military victory of Adwa also forms part of this tradition.

The historical reconstruction and the commemoration of the victory of Adwa in Ethiopia has been largely given so far to what Yonas Ashine called “the search for the exceptional”. The treatment of Ethiopia as an exception in the field of Ethiopian studies, so far projected the victory of Adwa largely, not in the context of other African anti-colonial struggles but as an isolate, an anomaly. Such treatment both mystifies that victory, and ultimately succumbs to the orientalist assumption that “Ethiopia became victorious because Ethiopia was less African”. Rather than allowing the commemoration of Adwa to continue to solidify Ethiopia’s self-consciousness as an “exception” in the

broader African story, it is important, we argue, to situate Adwa within broader struggles for freedom in Africa and the African diaspora.

Our intention is to reflect on and consider Adwa in its relation to various romantic imaginations, political inspirations, solidarity expressions and complex and oppressive realities of 'Ethiopia', from the perspective of historical and continuing international Black movements and struggles for freedom in the battle's aftermath. In short, we wish to use Adwa as a window to look at black struggles for freedom and emancipation in the world at large. We hope to explore instances of "the democratic practices and revolutionary thought of black people living under conditions of racial capitalism" (Johnson, 2018, p. 20) in different locations, which is to say the black radical tradition, through the prism of Adwa and its multitude of proliferating legacies, divergent as they may be. This approach, hopefully, helps us chart a fresh perspective on how to understand Adwa in relation to other black struggles for emancipation. We seek to understand not the exceptionality and uniqueness of Adwa, but its affinities with other struggles of black people.

In order to achieve this re-situating of Adwa, we structure our thoughts in three related sections. Firstly, as an attempt to exit the exceptionality, we look at some legacies and aftermaths of Adwa outside of Ethiopia. Through looking at the spread of Ethiopianism, Black responses to the Italian invasion in the 1930s and the complex relationship between romanticism and resistance in Rastafari, this section reveals the profound influence and impact that Adwa had on the political and cultural consciousness and the self-activity of Black people in various parts of the world. The third section (yes, not everything is linear) presents an engagement with some of the complexities of the meanings of Adwa 'at home.' Adwa is not remembered as a glorious victory by everyone. The problematic ways in which its legacy historically was mobilised as part of the imperial state project's designs and the contemporary crisis in the national question, concerning the current conflict in northern Ethiopia, suggest that there is an urgent political need to rethink the process of memorializing Adwa, today. The second section acts as a bridge between the first and the third, more substantive sections. It raises the question of the fragility of political independence under white supremacy, western imperialism and racial capitalism. In the case of Ethiopia, the nation state form was simultaneously the beacon and symbol of Black 'political independence', the means of repression and oppression of many Black people, and the expression of the subordinate position of African states within an anti-black world with a hegemonic political taxonomy.

Moreover, in this paper by presenting two parts of Adwa's legacy – one, as part of a Black internationalist agenda, the other intimately connected to “the national question” in Ethiopia – we hope we are able to suggest a synthesis of a question that might provide us with a different perspective on the present and thus different political options. How might a Black internationalist approach help us find another way out of the current crisis concerning the national question?

Adwa and the world: The process of emergence of an internationalist Black consciousness

Adwa, the anti-colonial victory over the Italians happened in the wake of the Berlin Conference, when the nature and form of European imperialism and the productive base of capitalism were shifting. Changes in racial capitalism on a global scale, in large part due to the legal abolition of slavery which was both preceded and initiated by struggles to abolish slavery led by enslaved people themselves, was one of the key factors that led to a new phase of colonial domination and exploitation. West European powers were fighting amongst themselves for the resources, markets, land and labour of the African continent. This fighting reached somewhat of a temporary resolution through the agreements of the Berlin Conference. Each of the major powers got a share of the African continent, as if they have a natural right to take, colonise, ‘civilise’ and exploit. What ensued was decades of almost continent-wide wars of what have liberally been termed ‘pacification’ but in reality amounted to military and political destruction and even extermination and genocide of African people in certain instances. The purpose of these wars was to destroy the social fabric of African life and eradicate any forms of political and economic autonomy to make African people subordinate and dependent on the colonial economy.

From the military resistance of indigenous forces led by figures like Nehanda in current day Zimbabwe, Jakob Marengo in current day Namibia in Southern Africa, to the campaigns against the British and French colonisers in West Africa, to the protracted and decades long anti- colonial resistance by the Somali (led by the iconic Mohammed Abdullah Hassan) against European colonial powers, the Sudanese Mahdiya movement to Adwa and many others, this phase of colonial violence and encroachment was fiercely resisted by African people the continent over. It is within this context, itself preceded by numerous chapters and expressions of anti-colonial resistance across the continent, and indeed the world, over the previous 400 years, that the Adwa victory is situated. Its significance notwithstanding, its legacy is complex

internal to Ethiopia and the political developments in its wake in the region. When we look further, beyond Ethiopia to the Black world more broadly, Adwa's meanings proliferate in multiple, often divergent directions. At a time when most parts of the continent were under severe colonial repression the traveling image of the Ethiopian victory at Adwa was a major source of hope to many Black people. The memory and meaning of this event and the associated imagination that it allowed – of an independent African country in the context of a violent white supremacist world – was picked up and appropriated as a symbol of Black autonomy as well as becoming a site around which real political solidarity and organising took place.

On the one hand, as one of the beacons of African anti-colonial militancy, and political independence in an anti-black, colonising world, the victory of Adwa influenced the imaginations and struggles for freedom in a multitude of ways. On another hand, the image of Ethiopia and the process of its state formation appeared to have further solidified the belief among black struggles that political independence and political freedom are materialized through a strong hierarchical, even imperial, state form. The association of Ethiopia with a long history of 'civilization' and its status as 'uncolonised' was celebrated by black struggles on the continent and the African diaspora. In this section we unpack some of these dynamics. We attempt to show how Adwa and its aftermaths, its importance and its meanings for Black folks across the world became part of an expansive process of anti-colonial resistance in the emergence of a global sense of Black consciousness.

Nadia Nurhussein argued in *Black Land: Imperial Ethiopianism in African America*, that Ethiopianism in the US, as a set of disparate movements at least since the 18th century, was inspired by an idea of Ethiopia which gradually incorporated in their cosmology the hierarchical Ethiopian imperial model as a way of thinking about black emancipation and political freedom (Nurhussein, 2019, p. 1). Ethiopianism, Nurhussein shows, was a response to the white supremacist imperial hegemony of the west that adopts an "alternative imperial force" that it associated with the "antiquity of Ethiopian culture" and state that flipped the racist claims of the west as the privileged abode of civilization (Nurhussein, 2019, p. 5). As we will explore later, this same "commitment to the imperial" can also be found in Rastafari, whose emergence as a form of black radicalism, as Anthony Bogues notes in *Black Heretics*, is linked to "the emergence of late nineteenth century Ethiopianism" in Africa and the African diaspora, especially in the Caribbean (Bogues, 2003, p. 153).

The victory of Adwa in the late 19th century seems to have coincided with Ethiopianism in the US that was becoming “increasingly grounded in knowledge both historical and contemporary, and [was] more explicitly engaged with the politics of” imperial Ethiopia (Nurhussein, 2019, p. 6). Ethiopia evoked a symbolic place in the imaginary of black people in the African diaspora, and was a reference to Africa before Adwa. As Safia Aidid (2018) deftly puts, “though in classical texts [such as the Bible], Ethiopia stood in for Africa as a whole, Adwa fused this symbolic Ethiopia with the contemporary Ethiopian state in the minds and hearts of the African diaspora. It produced and proliferated a particular *idea* of Ethiopia in Pan-Africanist thought, one that saw Ethiopia as the vestige of black freedom in a world where black people – whether in the Americas, Europe, or Africa – were subject to racial domination and exploitation.” The victory of Adwa along with the ‘civilizational pedigree’ of historic Ethiopia helped fuse this “symbolic Ethiopia” with actual imperial Ethiopia since the late 19th century.

In the US, it is apparent that Adwa was one of the key occasions that increased what Nurhussein calls the “visibility” of Ethiopia among black people. This visibility was a product of the proliferation of news coverages, periodicals, biographical accounts and histories of the country (Nurhussein, 2019, pp. 14 and 15). Throughout much of the first half of the 20th century Ethiopianism remained to be the focal point around which black solidarity was forged in African America (Bogues, 2003, pp. 1 and 7). Ethiopia was held up among adherents of Ethiopianism, as ‘the black imperial archetype’— an empire that was a future homeland that would bring together all black people of the world in one nation. It was in this manner that Ethiopianism in the US during the late 19th and 20th centuries made emancipation thinkable for black people by belonging to an empire. Ethiopianism continued to be a vital political struggle of black people for freedom and emancipation.

But as Anthony Bogues argues Ethiopianism was a religious-political practice that was exhibited on both sides of the Atlantic—in Africa and the African diaspora in the 19th and 20th century, and hence, was not just an African diasporic movement or practice. “Ethiopia”, Bogues argues “functioned on both sides of the Atlantic as a founding myth of the origins of Christianity, as well as a site of historical vindication for humanity” (Bogues, 2003, p.154). Ethiopianism incorporated transcontinental practices and “black thought” in the 19th and 20th century (Bogues, 2003, p. 156). In southern Africa it was primarily a religious movement centered mainly in independent black churches with a “racial, ecclesiastical and political character” expressed in movements such as

Zionism (Bogues, 2003, p. 155), which was fused with other cultural and spiritual practices to become a vernacular form of Christianity and autonomous Black life outside of the coloniser's church. The victory of Adwa was a key inspiration in the resonance and vitality that Ethiopianism, as a movement for Black autonomy and freedom, acquired in the late 19th and 20th centuries as a mode of anti-colonial struggle in the African world. Toward the end of the 19th century Ethiopianism was one form of embryonic pan-African consciousness in a colonising and colonised world. On the base of that already-established consciousness and imagination of Ethiopia – imperial, Christian and 'civilised' – and within a global context where the white boot of colonialism was firmly on Black necks, when the Italian invasion took place and it was defeated, at Adwa, the popularity and the importance of Ethiopia, still Abyssinia to many, rose significantly. Adwa entered the popular and political consciousness of Black people in many parts of the world.

In the document produced at the end of the First Pan African Congress in 1900, Ethiopia, along with the other independent Black states at the time, was understood not only to be important to the broader struggle against racism and colonialism, but in need of protection from a world seemingly hell-bent on the destruction of all forms of Black autonomy. Credited to du Bois, the document reads:

Let the nations of the world respect the integrity and independence of the free Negro states of Abyssinia, Liberia, Haiti, and the rest, and let the inhabitants of these states, the independent tribes of Africa, the Negroes of the West Indies and America, and the black subjects of all nations take courage, strive ceaselessly, and fight bravely, that they may prove to the world their incontestable right to be counted among the great brotherhood of mankind. Thus we appeal with boldness and confidence to the Great Powers of the civilized world, trusting in the wide spirit of humanity, and the deep sense of justice and of our age, for a generous recognition of the righteousness of our cause (Du Bois, 1900).

While we are able to critique some of the liberal humanist naivety of this document from the vantage point of today, based on the experience of over a century's worth of revolutionary struggle in the direction of decolonisation since it was penned, we are able to highlight a few key factors that will assist us further as we look through the window of Adwa. Held in 1900, the conference was only four years after the battle at Adwa. It is clear from the words that,

along with Haiti and Liberia, “Abyssinia”, as a ‘free Negro state’, in the wording of the day, occupied pride of place in the pan-African imagination and project. It was to be defended against invasion and encroachment, because, like Black people all over the world, it was vulnerable to attack from the forces of white supremacy. Just over thirty years later, it became clear that ‘the Great Powers of the civilised world’ would not respond positively to the pan-African pleas.

We have suggested how, in the wake of Adwa, Ethiopia became an important symbol on a global scale for many Black people. That is why the invasion of Ethiopia forty years after by fascist Italy struck a dissonant chord internationally and the event became a site around which a more radical critique of imperialism and colonialism was developed. The invasion of Ethiopia by fascist Italy became a catalyst for various projects, solidarity groups and initiatives of Black organising.

The League of Nations’ decision of non-intervention following the 1935 Italian invasion of Ethiopia, a fellow supposedly sovereign nation, exposed the organisation to be a tool of imperialism and of a European supremacist order, unwilling to take a decision that might affect the delicate balance of forces in the emerging antagonistic blocs in the build up to WWII. France and Great Britain’s potential alliance with Italy proved more important for them than the invasion of a sovereign African state. While the imperialists and the European state actors played their hands, so too did Black people all over the world. Black people, for whom Ethiopia represented hope, pride, a positive image of Africa, and a possible future, articulated not only their anger at Europe’s closing ranks, but also expressed solidarity with the East African country in many different forms. The contradiction that emerged sharply in this moment, between the imperial discourses that justified colonialism (the coloniser was in Africa to help Africans, the coloniser was the friend of African people, etc.) and the reality of the imperialist powers’ decision of non-intervention and their later acknowledgement of Italy’s conquest, led to movement away from hope or belief in Europe, broadly, as a power to be appealed to in the project of Black liberation. In this sense the response of the Europeans led to a more radical critique of the racist world order and opened the way for more autonomous Black organising. In this sense the anti-imperial Italian campaign in support of the political independence of Ethiopia was an extension of the world-historical significance of Adwa to struggles of Black people for emancipation.

William Scott, in *Black nationalism and the Italo-Ethiopian conflict, 1934-1936*, speaking primarily about the United States in this instance, recorded that:

One observer remarked that he knew of ‘no event in recent times that stirred the rank-and-file of Negroes more than the Italo-Ethiopian War.’ Another commented similarly, contending that the conflict in Ethiopia ‘did more to unite the Negroes’ interest in Africa than any event which has occurred since his sojourn in America.’ They viewed black interest in the conflict as a watershed in Afro-American history, marking the beginning of a new phase in black American attitudes toward Africa and world politics (Scott, 1978, p. 135).

The possibility of this watershed in the context of the United States, was linked to the ideas and organising of Garveyite and other pan-African groups that had been active since the 1920s at least. Within Black nationalist discourse of the time where the ‘Back to Africa’ idea was gaining traction and the dream of a united Africa was paramount, independent Ethiopia occupied a deeply important place as a site ideally imagined as devoid of the violence of white supremacy and central to any future programme of return.

In the African diaspora more broadly, the invasion galvanised Blacks into various kinds of action. Rev Hillman, a Caribbean intellectual said that:

Black Americans rallied towards the cause, and Black Jamaicans likewise. So the organisation was formed in New York, 151 Lennox Avenue, as the Ethiopian World Federation Incorporated. Those peoples gathered monies, medicine, clothes and whatever and sent it to Haile Selassie (“Black Americas Fight against the Italian Invasion of Ethiopia: A History”, 2021).

Soon after this, around Mussolini’s invasion, a branch of the same organisation was established in Jamaica. Although very few were eventually able to go to East Africa, many of these people volunteered to fight the Italians alongside the Ethiopians who they viewed as their brothers and sisters. They understood this as their battle to fight, connected to the conditions of racism they were experiencing at home. They not only understood this on an ideal level, but they acted on it, organising and contributing of their own resources to

assist in the response to the violent invasion at a time when the League of Nations was sitting on its hands.

Black socialist and communist organisations that were based, coordinated or had branches in Europe linked the war in Ethiopia to struggles of workers all over the world, relating it to a broader anti-imperialist struggle. The pages of *The Negro Worker* –the publication of International Trade Union Committee of Negro Worker, whose editorial board was comprised by Black radicals from USA, the West Indies, British Guiana, Great Britain, West Africa and South Africa, carried analyses and critiques of the fascist and colonialist impulse of Italian aggression. On the eve of the invasion, an article titled “Fight for the freedom of Abyssinia”, attributed to a certain ‘J.S.,’ called for solidarity from the workers in Europe in relation to the struggle for “Abyssinian” freedom:

The independence of Abyssinia was never more menaced than at present, it was never more necessary than it is now, to direct the attention of the toiling masses of the imperialist countries and of Abyssinia itself to the fact that the imperialists are now doing everything in their power to capture Abyssinia with provocative methods and with arms. Only the joint struggle of toilers of the imperialist countries and of Abyssinia can avert the danger (J.S, 1934, p. 8).

A number of pan-Africanists based in London at the time, including CLR James, Amy Ashford Garvey, Jomo Kenyatta and others, formed the International African Friends of Abyssinia in 1935, later to become the International African Service Bureau in 1937, to protest the Italian aggression, organise solidarity efforts and produce literature in support of the Ethiopian people. CLR James, who volunteered to go and assist in the war effort, wrote in 1935 in the pages of the Independent Labour Party weekly paper *The New Leader*:

Workers of Europe, peasants and workers of Africa and of India, sufferers from imperialism all over the world, all anxious to help the Ethiopian people, organise yourselves independently, and by your own sanctions, the use of your own power, assist the Ethiopian people. Their struggle is only now beginning.

Let us fight against not only Italian imperialism, but the other robbers and oppressors, French and British imperialism. Do not

let them drag you in. To come within the orbit of imperialist politics is to be debilitated by the stench, to be drowned in the morass of lies and hypocrisy (James, 1935).

The conflict clearly was a moment of intense intellectual synthesis and analysis of the balance of forces under imperialism as well as being a catalyst for autonomous organising. As the Ghanaian historian S.K.B Asante (1972, p. 217) demonstrates through archival sources in London, west Africa, the US and the Caribbean, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935-1936 had a major impact on “the transformation of Pan-African ideas”. In the words of one of the most important Pan-Africanist organizers, George Padmore, this invasion was “one of the most stimulating and constructive in the history of Pan-Africanism” (Padmore cited in Asante, 1972, p. 217). Moreover, the invasion and the Pan-African political organizing that followed brought about a major shift in the “intellectual leadership” of Pan-African organizations “from American Negroes [to] ambitious and politically disillusioned young West Indians and Africans such as C.L.R James (from Trinidad), T. Ras Makonnen (from British Guiana), Jomo Kenyatta (from Kenya), Nnamdi Azikiwe (from Nigeria) and such other important figures. Some of these individuals would later take the highest political office in their respective states after independence in the 1950s and the 1960s (Asante, 1972, p. 217).

As the political activities of this particular clique were doing much of their political work from London, Pan-African political organizations and political activity flourished, following Ethiopia’s invasion, in West Africa, the Caribbean, Europe and the US. These Pan-African political activities were channeled through churches in villages in West Africa, political organizations and student unions such as the West African Students Union in London, the Marcus Garvey Universal Negro Improvement Association in Kingston (Jamaica) and were conducted in major European and American cities such as Paris and New York (Asante, 1972, pp. 218-219). In addition to the most important Pan-African association of the 1930s—the International African Service Bureau that was set up in London in 1937 (Asante, 1972, p. 224),³ other Pan-African associations such as the United Aid for Peoples of African Descent and the Congress of the African Peoples of the World established in 1937 and 1938 were opened in the US (Asante, 1972: 222 and 226). According to S.K.B

³The bureau remained operational until 1944, and later became instrumental in planning of the 1945 Pan-African Congress that was held in Manchester.

Asante, these Pan-African organisations and grassroots political activities “laid the necessary background to the all-important 1945 Pan-African Congress held in Manchester” (Asante, 1972, p. 217). The Italian invasion of Ethiopia or, more specifically, Black autonomous response to it, was thus a key factor in radicalizing Pan-Africanism. The process of radicalization occurred as a result of the opportunity the invasion created for black people to come together, as well as through the production of journals and political writings that criticized and agitated not just against Italian invasion, but more broadly European colonial rule (Asante, 1972, p. 219).

Popular resistance to the Italian invasion, implicated as it was in the memory and legacy of Adwa, initiated by Black people in Africa, Europe, and the Americas, became a site of solidarity organising and consciousness-building about colonialism. The imperialist aggression was read within a broader strategy of white supremacy and racism. The struggle of the Ethiopian people and the affinities produced by the grassroots efforts formed part of a longer communal tradition of anti-colonialism. These developments were part of the pan-African movement’s shift over the first part of the 20th century from the liberal-humanist overtones of the 1900 declaration to a more militant anti-colonial position that characterised the sensibilities of the delegates at the 1945 Pan African Congress in Manchester on the eve of a new chapter of decolonisation struggles. This militant tone is captured in the opening lines of the document produced at that conference titled ‘The challenge to the colonial powers’:

The delegates to the Fifth Pan-African Congress believe in peace. How could it be otherwise when for centuries the African peoples have been victims of violence and slavery. Yet if the Western world is still determined to rule mankind by force, then Africans, as a last resort, may have to appeal to force in the effort to achieve Freedom, even if force destroys them and the world (Padmore, 1947).

As we will attempt to show next, the directness and radical sensibility of these struggles, as much as they had an organised political basis, they also gained a popular basis in and through certain cultural forms which, from the mid-late twentieth century, expressed another set of contradictions in relation to Ethiopian independence, Black intellectual production and anti-colonialism.

As we have suggested, Ethiopia has long been an important symbol for African people all over the world in the imaginations of pasts, presents and futures. There are multiple facets and histories to this fascination. One angle relates to the mention of Ethiopia in the Bible and its resultant importance for many Black Christians as an indigenous Christianity whose cosmology and symbolism was autonomous of colonial and racist expressions of the religion. Related to this was the angle of Ethiopia's 'ancient civilisation' – a society whose material culture contradicted the white supremacist myth of Africans as a people without history. The third aspect of this fascination relates most directly to the central focus of this special issue and our present chapter and is the one that in many ways was seen to encapsulate and confirm the previous two – that Ethiopia, in the face of colonial violence and European aggression, defeated a colonial power in battle and maintained its political independence. In the previous sections we attempted to show how Adwa and its aftermaths – Ethiopia's continued independence, the Italian Ethiopian war, the failure of the League of Nations, catalysing Black self-activity and international grassroots solidarity, etc. – was part of the process of growth, development and radicalisation of a pan-Africanist politics throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Haile Selassie, previously RasTafari, achieved a level of popularity in the Black world that had as its basis all of these preceding processes, becoming a cultural figure, a messiah, and the king of kings to many.

The cultural production of Rastafari is a site through which many of these fascinations with Ethiopia are refracted as they interact with multiple other social, political and ideological phenomena. The second track on Count Ossie and The Mystic Revelation of Rastafari's 1973 album *Grounationis* titled 'Narration.' It begins with an acoustic groove vernacular to Jamaica, a percussion ensemble and a bass player holding it down, with Count Ossie rapping, delivering somewhat of a lecture on African history, punctuated periodically with squeals and wails from seemingly possessed horn players. Ossie's lecture, his rap, is an anti-colonial interpretation of the origins and development of Jamaica through British imperialism, the history of the Atlantic slave trade, and the institution of plantation slavery, all of this rooted in Rastafari cosmology and its particular reading of the Old Testament. As common to the cosmology, Haile Selassie is referred to as "his imperial majesty in 1930, as king of kings, lord of lords and mighty conquering lion of the tribe of Judah," whose coronation "gave light to the Rastafari movement because they had seen the hope in our heritage." Also included in the rap is a short narration of the 1930s invasion of Ethiopia and a critique of Mussolini and

Italian fascism recording Haile Selassie's unsuccessful pleas to the League of Nations and the imperialists' lack of intervention in the conflict. The term 'grounation', the title of the album, refers to a gathering of religious, social and/or political nature, within Rastafari culture⁴ and 'Grounation Day' commemorates the day Haile Selassie came to Jamaica in 1966 when thousands of Rastafari came to see him. The album's concept and its collective ontological character is rooted in this vernacular form of spiritual and intellectual sociality, and the themes that emerge move seamlessly through anticolonial critique, interpretations of the bible, materialist history and discourse on love as a universal force. Other songs are: 'Four hundred years,' 'Ethiopian serenade', 'So long' and many others. As a collection it is a site of multiple facets of Black radicalism – an anticolonial impulse rooted in a vernacular intellectual and cultural tradition – which, importantly for our purposes here establishes a link to independent Ethiopia and situates its struggles as anti-colonialism.

Reggae, not exclusively, but more broadly has been a space of Black cultural and intellectual production that, while it often reproduces conservative politics around gender and tends often towards essentialist ideas of race, has maintained generally progressive stances with regards to its critique of slavery, colonialism racial capitalism. This is exposed for instance in excerpts from Anthony B's song—'Raid di barn' and its lyrics that goes as follows:

YugguhYoi, YugguhYoi, YugguhYoi
Emperor Selassie I
JahJah is the only way

Nobody wanna plant di corn
Everybody want to raid di barn
Who you gonna blame it on
When is a next man you a depend on
Well yuh wrong
Nobody wannu plant the corn
Everybody want to raid the barn
Haffi sing your owna song

⁴<https://dubstorerecords.bandcamp.com/album/count-ossie-the-mystic-revelation-of-rastafari-grounation>

...

Dem never realise with a little cooperation
We coulda unify relieve the frustration
Instead dem want to ride upon dembrudda back
No tears or cares if him even did stop or drop (B, 2005)

We can read from these lyrics a number of intertwining things characteristic of reggae's vernacular radical intellectual tradition. There is a critique of the plantation as a mode of production that both exploits and alienates labour. The injunction is that it is the labour of workers – whether wage labourers or slaves it is unclear – that produces, or more accurately, grows the corn which is then appropriated from them and stored in the barn (and then sold). It is this system of production that prevents the workers from realising that through working together, they could build their own autonomous lives; this is typified by the analogy of having to “sing yuh own song.” This is a profound critique of the relations of production of racial capitalism in the paradigmatic form of the plantation, common to the Americas but also to late colonial economies on the continent and elsewhere. This mode of insurgent critique is rooted in Rastafari cosmology that nurtures global black consciousness. As is prevalent in the reggae tradition, the beginning of the song begins with the glorification of the imperial despot Haile Selassie, whose actions in Ethiopia perpetuated the oppression of millions of Black people in the process of expanding, consolidating and defending the nation-state.

In a previous album Anthony B sings a song titled ‘Honour Marcus Garvey’ which pays tribute to the UNIA founder and theorist of Black Nationalism who is often understood to be a prophet in the Rastafari tradition. One of the sources of the ‘back to Africa’ movement and a fierce proponent of Black self-determination, Garvey’s ideas had a profound impact on the early pan-African movement and influenced Black activists all over the world.⁵ However while many of those who were influenced by Garvey

⁵For example, The ICU, the Industrial and Commercial Union, a Southern African trade union active in the 1920s with membership peaking at over 100 000 across urban and rural areas in South Africa, and what were then South West Africa, Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland, was one of the many organizations on the continent whose approach was strongly influenced by Garvey’s ideas. See for instance discussion on the membership and influence of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of

understood him as the prophet who predicted the emergence of the Black Messiah, he himself was critical of Ras Tafari (later Haile Selassie following his coronation):

After the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie fled to London and discreetly let it be known that he did not desire contact with Negroes, Garvey trained his biggest guns on the snobbish Lion of Judah. "Haile Selassie is the ruler of a country where black men are chained and Hogged," the *Black Man* raged. "He will go down in history as a great coward who ran away from his country." Garvey called upon the Ethiopian people to forget the cowardly flight of their ruler and instead wage fierce guerilla warfare in defense of their country (Cronon, 1960, p. 162).

Whatever Garvey's faults, he was not taken with the cult of Haile Selassie that was a seemingly contradictory element of much radical critique of European colonialism and imperialism that emerged from the reggae tradition. What is also interesting is that his encouragement to the Ethiopian people, to organise themselves to fight, resonates with CLR James's encouragement for independent organisation in response to the conflict as well as with all the self-activity of Black activists in their solidarity expressions. So, while the symbol of the nation-state was that which was being defended, it was independent and autonomous popular activity that organised the response.

Monique Bedasse, in her book *Jah Kingdom: Rastafarians, Tanzania and Pan-Africanism in the Age of Decolonisation*, provides another entry point into thinking about and considering the importance and legacy of Rastafari. She shifts the gaze away from the cultural and intellectual production associated with reggae and instead focuses on what she speaks about as the 'repatriation' of Rastafari to Tanzania within the broader context of movements and struggles for decolonisation. While many of these movements were underlain by a mystical and romantic idea of Africa, this was accompanied by the actual movement of people who then had to navigate building their new lives in the context of flag-independent Africa. They display an expression of transnational Black solidarity, a movement which itself refuses or at least extends the nation-

Africa in the 1920s in britanica.com and on the impact of the ICU in southern Africa as well as the influence of Garvey on that organization in Wickins (1973, pp. 210-211).

state/citizen paradigm. These movements were part of a historical moment when the future of Africa and much of the world seemed to be up for grabs and the Rastafari who 'repatriated' were part of the process of producing autonomous Black life within the post-colonial moment. As the nation-state was solidifying itself as the expression and form of freedom and state elites were repressing grassroots Black movements, Caribbean militants, coming from experiences of that kind of state repression, contributed to the critique of state-centric manifestations and appropriations of pan-Africanism. For example, concerning the Sixth Pan African Congress, held in Tanzania in 1974:

When Nyerere chose state diplomacy and supported the decision to not invite nonstate actors from the Caribbean, Eusi Kwayana, coordinator of the Caribbean steering committee for the Sixth PAC, denounced the congress. For Caribbean militants, "it was not a pan-African congress, just a meeting of governments and guests acceptable to the Tanzanian authorities" (Bedasse, 2017, p. 14).

In this sense, they joined the tide of critique against Nyere's government and his belief that he could build socialism from the top down, a critical current that had been active since the mid-1960s largely built around socialist students and academics, such as Issa Shivji, Walter Rodney, Zakia Hamdani Meghji, Karim Hirji and others, based at the University of Dar es Salaam.

These histories of intellectual and cultural production, real movement and radical critique, mysticism and idolisation that materialise and proliferate from the memory and imagination of Ethiopia and His Imperial Majesty, influenced by the teachings of Garvey and the beliefs of Rastafari point us toward a multitude of directions at the same time. Reggae critiques of racial capitalism are not separate from the glorification of a totalitarian ruler, but this also does not mean that the one cancels out the other, they hang together in all the contradictions of everyday life in which these various phenomena exist. The movements of militant Rastafari from the Caribbean to the continent might begin from a romantic imagination of Africa that is out of step with its reality but that those movements emerge from a genuine desire to contribute to Black liberation globally, and form part of a long history of pan-African resistance to white supremacy and their contribution to the democratic practices of grassroots movements cannot be doubted.

Adwa as a symptom of the fragility of political independence

The successful anti-colonial resistance of Ethiopia that was secured by the victory of Adwa was not attended by economic development on which popular political sovereignty would have been built on a strong foundation. The economic, political and epistemic hegemony of the West undercut national autonomy of the three independent black states of the first half of the 20th century—Haiti, Ethiopia and Liberia. The Haitian Revolution, that gave Haiti its political independence a century before Adwa, did not save it from a campaign of isolation by the white supremacist capitalist world order that attacked Haiti's sovereignty. The precarity of political independence for an African country like Ethiopia was lamented by Ethiopian intellectuals in the aftermath of Adwa. Gebrehiwot Baykedagn, who wrote about and meditated over this question, highlighted the fragility of Ethiopia's political independence. He explained in his classic *The state and economy* that, without the requisite knowledge and technical know-how that form the basis of economic development, genuine independence could not be achieved (Gebrehiwot, 1995, pp. 82-84 and 112-113). Similarly, the tenuousness of political independence for a poor, black state was emphasized by the Haitian diplomat and Pan-African organizer, Benito Sylvain. Sylvain became Emperor Menilik's aide-de-camp in 1897 and was one of the organizers of the first Pan African Congress held in London in 1900 in London. Before his appointment as a diplomat in Ethiopia (two years after Adwa), he represented his country as a diplomat in London and founded the weekly paper *Fraternite* in 1890 in Paris (Michell, 2020). Like other Haitians of the late 19th century, Sylvain saw a Pan-African and global black politics of solidarity as a vital platform to fight colonialism and as a necessary and essential condition to realize "the general amelioration of the [black] race" the world over (Skinner, 1906, p. 130).

Historical developments in the first half of the 20th century in fact confirmed the fears of people like Gebrehiwot Baykedagn and Benito Sylvain. The precariousness of the independence of all the three, black countries of the world—Haiti, Liberia and Ethiopia— was exposed by one or another form of western domination. Haiti was occupied by the US between 1915 and 1934. Liberia was dominated by African Americans who saw themselves as superior to their Liberian-born compatriots, while Ethiopia was occupied by Italy for five years between 1936 and 1941.

Moreover, political independence in an age when the modern nation state form was the dominant form of organizing politics and society meant that Ethiopia and other non-western, independent countries had to accept the

political, technological, cultural and economic superiority of the west. The political independence won by the victory of Adwa only reinforced a West conception of the state that emphasized centralization and disassociated formal from substantive independence. Western political modernity and the west's economic, scientific, military and technological dominance furnished its global influence (Elizabeth, 2010); (Bahru, 2002). In Ethiopia, the west was seen as the source of ዘመናዊ ስልጣን (modern civilization) and superior technology, both in pre-1935 and post-1941 Ethiopia. While Ethiopia was portrayed as a country rich with spiritual knowledge and "tradition", it was projected as a country with a dearth in technological and scientific knowledge. Similarly, the West's system of government, and education were considered superior and thus touted as systems to be copied and mimicked. In such a context, the acceptance of western hegemony became a form of subjugation (as Yirga Gelaw says a form of "native colonialism") without actual physical colonization (Yirga, 2017).

The frailty of political independence that was not accompanied by economic, political and cultural autonomy was further undermined by western dominion in the international order (Grovogui, 1996: 2). Even after most African states secured independence in the post 1950s and 60s, this international order continued to marginalize them and placed them in subordinate positions to their former European colonial rulers. As Siba Grovogui argued in *Sovereigns, Quasi Sovereigns and Africans*, what was menacing about political independence/decolonization was "the persistence of political and juridical mechanisms that served the requirements of the dominant Western political economies" (Grovogui, 1996, p. 3). As Grovogui argued, African states "lack tangible capabilities to deter other states or to act freely in the international arena... They have a shortage of the institutional features that characterize fully sovereign western state" (Grovogui, 1996, p. 179).

While the history of Black radical politics is profoundly constituted by independent forms of organising, the state form has also frequently been imagined as the ultimate goal and in many instances has become realised. The solidification of Black political energy in the nation state has presented a contradiction. Adom Getachew (2016, p.1) suggests that in the Haitian Revolution there was an orientation to defend and build forms of both individual and collective Black autonomy. Another pillar of that revolution was to extend the project of freedom from slavery and colonial rule beyond those living in Haiti at the time. Haitian citizenship was extended to all those who arrived on their shores and denounced slavery; this, part of the goal to assist with the struggle against these forms of domination, exploitation and oppression

beyond its own borders (Adom, 2016). In response to Haiti's revolutionary actions and intentions, the hostile white supremacist capitalist world order at the time isolated and attacked its sovereignty, making it difficult to fulfil its Black internationalist agenda. Related to these external politics, the Haitian state in various periods, from Christophe to the Duvaliers, became repressive and authoritarian, constituting itself as an enemy of the people's struggles and the principle of Black autonomy (Trioullot, 1990). From the history of over two hundred years across the Americas, the Caribbean, Asia and most recently, the African continent, post-colonial nation-state as a political form and a repressive apparatus presents Black people with a problem, setting itself up in an antagonistic relation to popular everyday desires and ambitions with regards to how they want to organise their lives. The political question and possibility presented by the Haitian radicals is: what can a Black internationalist agenda offer imaginations of the national question? In other words, what alternative imaginations and pathways are extended by a wider view of the terrain of the liberation struggle and how can that potentially provide us different responses to the contradictions of the nation-state? The question of how we can think about freedom and emancipation beyond a West's conception of the state as well as how can we conceive the national question in a new way are discussed in the next two sections.

The meaning of Adwa at home: how to memorialize a victory?

In Ethiopia, Adwa signifies different things for different groups. Views range from those who see it as an alibi of exceptionalism that distinguished Ethiopia from the rest of Africa and the black world to those who perceive it as a victory by a colonizing state. Far from uniting Ethiopians, Adwa divides. The division appears to be even wider and unbridgeable in the present moment when a civil war that started in the regional state of Tigray (where Adwa is located) in November 4, 2020 is expanding further into the rest of northern Ethiopia, engulfing the Amhara and Afar regional states. This devastating war has caused enormous atrocities: civilian massacres, hunger, mass starvation and rape—first in Tigray and now eleven months after the conflict, similar tragedies are unfolding beyond Tigray in Amhara and Afar regional states. Pictures of starving and emaciated bodies are beginning to appear in social media, and looting, destruction of resources and massacres are being reported from these regions in the mainstream media. The cruel irony of our contemporary moment is such that the 125 year anniversary of Adwa was celebrated officially by the federal government (on March 1 2021) while Eritrean armed forces are roaming

in the fields and mountains of Tigray. With the complicity of the current Ethiopian government this foreign force that proved to be hostile to the Tigrean Peoples Liberation Forces and Tigray, is wreaking havoc in the region making Adwa one of the key sites of combat between Eritrean and Tigrean forces. Eritrean forces appear responsible for much of the civilian atrocities in Tigray. This ruinous civil war did not only draw Eritrea, but also further aggravated the antagonism of other regional players like Egypt and the Sudan.⁶

It seems obvious to us that a major part of the national question for Ethiopians in this moment is the debate over history and, specifically now, how to remember Adwa. These questions present a series of challenges to the peoples of Ethiopia. Whose victory is the victory of Adwa when the heirs of those who fought alongside each other against invading Italian forces are now fighting what each of these conflicting parties are calling a war of “survival” and “national preservation”? Should Ethiopians simply celebrate Adwa without a sense of solidarity with all the victims of the currently unfolding war and starvation—in Tigray, Amhara and Afar? Should Ethiopians choose to simply commemorate the victory of Adwa without confronting what is happening in Tigray, today? How do Ethiopians reconcile the national narrative that paints the country and its peoples as gallant defenders of the motherland when the current Ethiopian government allowed the presence of a ravaging Eritrean military force, with very little outcry coming out of the larger Ethiopian public? How do the peoples of Ethiopia continue to exist as a society and as a public if they have a selective outrage to atrocities and human suffering occurring in their midst? In this context, far from a symbol of solidarity, Adwa appears to be a quintessence and evocative symbol of a fractured political community. It is this enigma of the present moment that drives the problem of this section: how to remember/memorialize Adwa.

“Monumentalizing” historical events “encumber rather than liberate a healthy growth of collective identities”. By treating a historical event as an “immovable” object, “as [a] heritage of the past” monumentalization basically is an attempt that seeks to freeze the future meaning of events in the past

⁶Egypt and the Sudan have had longstanding rivalries with Ethiopia over the river Nile. The construction and filling of the Grand Renaissance Dam in western Ethiopia drove the growing belligerence of these two countries towards Ethiopia. Even if Sudan had a favorable view of the construction of the dam until recently, diplomatic mishaps on the part of the Abiy Administration and now the war in northern Ethiopia encouraged the Sudanese government to change up and take sides with Egypt.

(Triulzi, 2003, p. 97). Italian historian Alessandro Triulzi argues that the historian's role should rather be to "document" not monumentalize a historical event since documentation leaves room for future inquiry and examination (Triulzi, 2003, p. 97).

Even if we recognize that documentation is key, what we seek to do in this section is neither "monumentalize" nor "document" Adwa. Rather we would like to show briefly how Adwa has been remembered and recounted and what consequences it had on the relationship between various cultural and national communities in Ethiopia. As stated in the beginning, we use Adwa as a window to look at struggles for freedom and emancipation in Africa and the African diaspora. These struggles are seen here as promises that portend the possibility for emancipation rather than as finished and complete victories where emancipation was realized.

By conceptualising Adwa as a promise, as a yet to be realized struggle for emancipation rather than as a complete victory, we ask how it ought to be memorialized in the present moment. We argue, beyond remembering its gains, it is necessary to confront its paradoxes, incongruities and inadequacies. Like many other struggles for freedom, Adwa's legacy is contradictory. Ethiopia's political independence, won as a result of Adwa inspired global black politics of solidarity in Pan-Africanist, Garveyist, Ethiopianist movements among Africans and African descendants in the diaspora. However, at the same time, it resulted in the consolidation of an exploitative, heirarchical and oppressive imperial state that paved the way for the emergence of modern Ethiopian nationalism. Internally, in an age that marked the rise of the modern nation state form—with fixed territorial borders—Adwa could be taken as a foundational moment in the formation of the modern Ethiopian state and its modern nationalism.

The earliest attempts to create a modern Ethiopian nationalism perhaps commenced with Menilik's commissioning of the writing of Aleqa Taye's *History of the People of Ethiopia* in 1898, two years after the victory of Adwa (Grover Hudson & Tekeste, 1987, p. 1). Taye, was among the most prominent Ethiopian intellectuals of the late 19th and early 20th century. In this small book, one of the things he highlighted was the place of the Amhara as the christian ruling establishment of historic Ethiopia. He asserted that the Amhara were, along with their brethren—the Tigre, were descendants of Sem (Aleqa Taye, 1997, p. 28) who lived in the highlands of Ethiopia for about two millennia. They lived he argued as christians, sedentary farmers (Aleqa Taye, 1997, p. 30), and soldiers and rulers (Aleqa Taye, 1997, pp. 28 and 34). However, a pan-

Ethiopian nationalism built on Abyssinian ethos, assimilative intentions and practices and “homogenizing visions” came to be established after the death of Menilik and the publication of *History of the People of Ethiopia* (in 1922). Modern pan-Ethiopian nationalism took root especially in the post-war period, after the expulsion of the Italian occupation in 1941.

National and cultural oppression that came to be part of the political life of the imperial state gradually became the target of popular agrarian struggles in the post-war period (Gebru, 1996).⁷ Further, national, religious and cultural equality became key social agendas in the 1960s and 70s. These social questions animated struggles that made up the 1974 Ethiopian revolution.⁸ The imperial history of the country as well as national and cultural oppression in imperial Ethiopia created a humus ground for the proliferation of divergent and conflicting historical narratives at least since the 1960s onwards. Critique of the Ethiopian empire came notably from the Ethiopian Student Movement (Bahru, 2014), liberation struggles in Eritrea (since the late 1950s) and in Tigray, since the mid-1970s (Young, 2006) and agrarian struggles and liberation struggles in the southern parts of the country, especially among Oromos and Somalis in the 1960s and the 1970s (Lenco, 2011). This eventually gave way to the divergences emerging in the ways in which Adwa was remembered in the decades that ensued. Moreover, Menelik II— “the architect of modern Ethiopia” who was responsible for extending the territorial limits of the Ethiopian polity that gave the country its present shape through his imperial exploits—became a source of controversy in the ways in which Adwa is memorialized in the country’s contemporary history.

What could be termed as an auto-critique of what Menelik’s victory at Adwa meant in Ethiopia, came from none other than Tigray—the northern province of imperial Ethiopia home to Adwa, the battleground. Tigray also came to be the abode of Tigrean provincialism and nationalism in the 20th and 21st centuries. For many Tigrean-speaking Ethiopians, Menilik’s ascension to the imperial throne, following Yohannes IV (who ruled Ethiopia from Tigray), is seen as an usurpation of imperial authority. The result of this is seen to be the marginalization of Tigray’s political influence and hegemony in

⁷Examples of such agrarian struggles include the Weyane rebellion of 1943, The Bale rebellion of the 1960s, the Gedeo rebellion of 1960. See a detailed discussion of these popular protests in Gebru Tareke’s *Power and Protest in Ethiopia*.

⁸Notable among these was the April 20, 1974 Muslim demonstration that protested the second-class treatment of Ethiopian Muslims. The mammoth demonstration that Muslims held in the capital came up with 13-point demands.

imperial Ethiopia. It is this same sense of marginalization that “explains” what Alemayehu Fentaw called “the ambivalence” of Tigrean nationalists towards Adwa. For Alemayehu, “Menelik II’s failure to capitalize upon the Adwa Victory”, to drive the Italians out of the colony they christened as Eritrea in 1890, in effect weakened Tigray and foreclosed the possibility of “reuniting [sic] the [two] Tigrigna-speaking parts [sic] of Ethiopia”, i.e. Eritrea and Tigray (Alemayehu, 2011, pp. 3-4).

The disjunctures in narrativising Adwa became most apparent, however, in the post 1991 period, when Ethiopia became a multinational federation. Triulzi, examining the centenary of Adwa in 1996 observed the ways in which the battle was remembered and the “historiographical consequences” of the shift in its memorialization with the onset of the federal period (1991 to the present). For him, the federal moment by “reducing the role of Emperor Menelik, and particularly of the Amhara leadership, in the independence of the country; playing down the internal unification theme which had been the core element of most Adwa historiography until the 1990s; emphasizing the African side of the victory achieved over European encroachments) marked the 1996 centenary and laid the basis for the new Adwa historiographical monument of post-Derg Ethiopia” (Triulzi, 2003, p. 96).

The “Federal experiment” opened the cannon⁹—pan-Ethiopian nationalism based on Abyssinian ethos—to further contestations and criticisms. Ethiopia’s present federal moment allowed critical narratives about Adwa to surface more widely in public discourse. The “ambivalence” that Alemayehu identifies among Tigrean nationalists and many Tigreans towards Adwa, is also felt by Oromos, Somalis and other peoples of southern Ethiopia (Safia, 2018; Awol, 2019). This stems at least partly from Menelik’s controversial position as a conquering monarch of imperial Ethiopia. The academic and public domain in the federal period exhibited plethora of views on Adwa and its meaning to different nationalisms in the country. There are those who claim that it is a “misrepresentation” to call Adwa “a pride for black people” and considered it as “a war fought between two maiden empires competing over the fate of black peoples” (Tsegaye, 2016). Others saw it as a story of “paradox” whose significance for black people under colonial rule and white domination “reverberated across the globe”, while the victor state was “a colonizing state itself” (Safia, 2018). There are also those who lament the writing out of the

⁹“Opening the canon” here does not imply that the ambivalence towards Adwa and the criticism of its political consequences started during the federal moment.

annals of history the pivotal role that the conquered peoples of southern Ethiopia played to decide the outcome of Adwa (Awol, 2019). Others concentrated on the celebration of the heroisms displayed by, for instance, Oromo cavalymen in the battle of Adwa (Being Oromo, 2021). Yet others chose to observe the victory while simultaneously underscoring the “paradoxes” of coming from southern Ethiopia and celebrating Adwa (Gemechu, 2020)¹⁰.

The federal period represents a time in Ethiopian history and Ethiopian politics where multiplicity of views about the Ethiopian past in general and Adwa in particular have found a relatively wider public hearing. While some tried to affirm the “glories” of the past, others questioned the very efficacy of the Ethiopian state. As Andreas Eshete notes:

For some federalism seems a diminishment of Ethiopian identity: a provincial profile has, in their eyes, supplanted a glorious self-image. They forget that the grand and self-aggrandizing narratives and icons of empire are entirely alien to many. Even events and symbols commanding wide collective pride are not equally or similarly prized by all peoples of Ethiopia. Victory at Adwa earned international recognition and prestige for Menelik’s Ethiopia, an accomplishment about which conquered peoples of imperial Ethiopia, including those that fought valiantly at Adwa, are bound to be ambivalent (Andreas, 2012, p. 44).

It is due to the multiple and often times conflicting ways in which Adwa’s legacy is remembered, that building a shared and consensual history of Adwa and, by extension, of Ethiopia appears, today, to be a remote possibility. Nor do we think this should be the aim. Simply choosing to commemorate or

¹⁰Gemechu Merera Fana’s facebook post in Amharic, March 1, 2020, entitled “Adwa—Ethiopia— Oromo—I” asserts that “For me not to rejoice Adwa, my ancestors were paid for their contribution [for Adwa] with exploitation, subjection and humiliation. I cannot unequivocally reject Adwa, [and] simply ignore such a great victory that my ancestors paid with their lives...” (translation my own). Safia Aidid in “the Ghosts of Adwa”, in a similar fashion characterizes Adwa as a “paradox”. While she acknowledges that it was an anti-colonial victory, Safia considers it a divisive victory that was won by a “colonizing state”.

“monumentalize” Adwa’s greatness and perpetuate that narrative tends to disregard, silence and “forget” the ambivalence of “conquered peoples of imperial Ethiopia” towards that victory. This has so far proved to be divisive and polarizing for a country with disparate national and cultural identities and groups who share a complicated past and present. This is the essence of the national question. What seems imperative now is an engagement that acknowledges and confronts Adwa’s contradictory legacies that helps Ethiopians move forward as a people and as a political community. We think, a memorialization of Adwa needs to have not only a critique of European colonialism but also a critique of imperial domination by the Ethiopian state at home. Without acknowledging and openly and courageously articulating Adwa’s consequences and contrasting receptions, Ethiopians will continue to find it difficult to achieve a “healthy” recapitulation of a shared past that recognizes the legitimacy of divergent memories.¹¹

Coming back to the conundrum of the present moment, “events and symbols” like Adwa could be a source of “collective pride” for Ethiopians only if the politics of solidarity that Adwa nurtured elsewhere is taken as a lesson to build a political community based on a recognition of suffering at home. This requires the cultivation of a narrative of Adwa that is sensitive to the sentiments of those Ethiopians who suffered the indignities of injustice, domination, cultural degradation and exploitation under imperial conquest. Such an effort might demand giving hearing to repressed narratives to come to the fore to foster public debate on Adwa in Ethiopia. Such a show and expression of solidarity should also be offered by the larger Ethiopian public to all victims of the current war in northern Ethiopia—in Afar, Tigray and Amhara. Rather than harping on with mythifications of Adwa that “the grand and self-aggrandizing narratives and icons of empire” represent or sponsor, what the present moment requires is a memorialization of Adwa that values the repressed memories and

¹¹Here talking about the divisiveness of repressed memories about Adwa in Ethiopia, Triulzi says the following: “Overlapping and divided memories ... haunt a ‘tense’ past... in... Ethiopia. ... [Some] may want to go back and examine how... a... nationalistic monument was built around the Adwa event to protect it from other voices and visions claiming recognition and redress of historic wrongs within the country. To re-contextualize such memories today appears to be a first step in the right direction. Tense memories may become divisive if we fail to see them or to recognize their request for public acknowledgement. To recognize their existence is perhaps a sign of a healthy ‘return of memory’ in both countries which must necessarily be neither vindictive nor forgetful”.

stories of the oppressed peoples of the Ethiopian empire that is built on the spirit of solidarity.. By further documenting how Adwa brought together both the ruled and the rulers, both the oppressed and the oppressors in imperial Ethiopia in the fight against European colonialism and imperialism, we might be able to ensure “a healthy ‘return of memory’” (Triulzi, 2003, p. 106). Memorializing Adwa as a collective struggle against imperialism, also connects Ethiopians of different hews and political persuasions with other struggles for emancipation not only in Africa and the diaspora but also the world over.

Perhaps the most important lesson that we can draw to re-think the national question in Ethiopia and beyond is by posing over the ways in which African and diasporan imaginaries of black solidarity that Adwa and other similar struggles for emancipation and freedom inspired in peoples of African descent. This could mean interpreting the national question in Ethiopia as a collective popular struggle against imperial and other forms of domination rather than as confined, nationally self-contained movements of national liberation. By identifying with the victims of Ethiopian imperial and state domination a popular positive understanding and interpretation of the national question could be conceived, one that envisions to bring together struggles against all forms of domination—economic, political and cultural, while at the same time recognizing the legitimacy and particularity of national and identitarian struggles. However, such an understanding or conception of the national question should not be seen as a lesson that is “internal”, one that could fit the context of just Ethiopia. The national question could respond to particular demands and social questions by specific national communities while it is conceived as a collective popular struggle by oppressed peoples. It should be re-envisioned as a struggle for the free expression of publicness without it being a struggle towards the negation of the other. If struggles for emancipation such as Adwa and others could inspire solidarity of Black people all over the world, why should they not be a source of inspiration for all oppressed nations to wage a collective struggle against state, imperial and capitalist domination?

P.S. Post State

Adom Getachew writes: “Rather than incorporating non-Western politics as local variations of a more general European phenomena, a decolonial approach to political theory understands them as constitutive of distinctive political trajectories and generative of alternative ideals” (Adom, 2016, p. 20). Adwa and its many afterlives and aftermaths is a great window to look out of and in at a number of different political and historical questions. Thinking tangentially

through and with Adom, we can ask at least two questions that proliferate responses and questions in multiple directions. Firstly, what are the distinctive political trajectories that the event of the military victory over the Italian forces formed part of, and subsequently inspired? We have suggested that Adwa forms part of an anti-colonial tradition that emerges at the first instances of European colonial violence and continues up until this day. We have also suggested that the consolidation of the Ethiopian imperial state in the wake of Adwa forms part of a political trajectory of European modernity in the sense that the form of ‘political independence’ that it took, took place within the context of a Eurocentric state making (political) logic—the nation state form.¹² It is therein that a whole set of contradictions emerge – a victory and inspiration for Black people, and an emergent form of power incorporated Adwa into its nationalist memory to suppress and oppress many groups of Black people. The second, related question we can ask with and through Adom concerns the alternative ideals that were inaugurated or perhaps reinvigorated by the victory of Adwa – what were these and what are their legacies? The visions and ideals of freedom, autonomy and independence for Black people were undoubtedly given fire and hope. This was seen by the spirit and expression of solidarity at the time of Italian invasion in the 1930s, in the importance of Ethiopia as a beacon of light in an anti-black world, and in the figure of Haile Selassie, taken up as the messiah and a symbol of Black independence which had ramifications far beyond what he and his imperial regime did and meant at home. These ideals took on other material meanings for people who were marginalised and oppressed by the Ethiopian state which incorporated Adwa into its nationalist memory, legitimating itself at home and abroad as it incorporated, through violence, various communities into its polity in subordinate positions.

The bigger question is how we think of freedom and emancipation beyond statist understandings and logics of ‘political independence’. We stated, even if Adwa was largely able to maintain the political independence of the Ethiopian state, this victory did not guarantee emancipation for those who live within its confines. In addition to the global capitalist economy that perpetuates western hegemony and the “political and juridical mechanisms” of the international system, this was also partly a function of the limitations of the

¹²This is of course not particular to the Ethiopian state as organizing a nation state and political society around a national culture with a homogenizing impulse is the dominant form of state making in a world dominated by western hegemony and the westphalian state form.

state form as an avenue of political and economic freedom. In the case of Ethiopia, Adwa, by ensuring the continuity of the nation state form, in effect created the condition of possibility for economic, political and cultural domination of a great many Ethiopians. This trend can also be seen in post-colonial nation-states throughout Africa, the Caribbean and beyond. The nation state form, time and again proved to be incompatible with the visions and aspirations of everyday people for self-governance and freedom. In an anti-black word this might require a revision, a revival and a re-imagination of a grassroots Pan-African movement for black emancipation with an internationalist agenda. One of the lessons that we can draw is this. The precariousness of state-centric political independence in an unequal international state system makes it necessary for black people to envision emancipation and autonomy beyond the confines of the nation state. This demands that we see solidarity beyond the nation-state form. As could be surmised from the foregoing discussion struggles against domination—imperialist, capitalist or state—should not necessarily be conducted within the framework of the nation state nor should the formation of the nation state be the necessary and ultimate goal of such struggles for freedom. In fact, what the history of grass roots and Pan-African struggles for Black emancipation throughout the 20th century demonstrates is that the politics of solidarity often times transcended national-state boundaries and they had a popular character. A grassroots and popular approach to solidarity politics should help us build connections not only across borders and continents, but across the various divides in our own particular locations, providing us with an internationalist approach to struggles for emancipation and the national question wherever we are. Such an approach emphasizes the need for solidarity politics that is based on the recognition of the aspirations and imperatives of particular national struggles, while at the same time should be one that appreciates the connected fate of the oppressed and the need for these struggles to build on these connections.

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