

Where or what is “Abyssinia”? –An investigation¹

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Territorial Ethiopia and its population underwent a transition under Emperor Tewodros II (1855-1868) Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889) and Menelik II (1889-1913). Tewodros' successful rise and achievements challenged various power centres, including those that had acquired near-autonomy, and oversaw the phasing of the power of descendants of the powerful in the so-called 'Era of Princes'. This set in motion a process of constant battles for redefining territories and populations as one 'country'. Nineteenth century travellers saw these confrontations as the absence or irrelevance of the *neguse negest* outside the areas these European termed *Abyssinia*. Negating the views of unifying *neguse negest* and their country, the roots of this European terminology had serious consequences for Ethiopian territorial history.²

The concept *Abyssinia* is rooted in European knowledge of Africa and even earlier. Its nineteenth century association with Africa, to say the least, was vague, and came when colonialism was in the offing in the region, or was already in full swing in the rest of Africa. Travelers, diplomats, missionaries, scholars and merchants left records on *Abyssinia*, using the term to refer to the northern Ethiopian highlands that they associated with Christians and earlier in older sources,³ with a mythical "land of the Prester John".⁴ Though the legend of the "land of the Prester John" was first heard of in Europe around 1122, it continued to

1 The first version of this article was made in 1987 for a talk in for a talk at the English Department in the University of London, by the kind invitation of Professor Ken Parker. Publication was delayed for various reasons.

2 European imposition of their notions of country and type of monarchy was raised first, I think, by Mesfin Wolde Mriam, *An Introductory Geography of Ethiopia*, Berhanena Selam H.S.I. Printing Press, Addis Abeba, 1972:21-23

3 As an example its prevalence, see a list of books, attached to the end of this article, carrying *Abyssinia* in their titles while writing about Ethiopia.

4 Sergew Hable Selassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270*, Addis Ababa, 1972, pp. 254-261.

resurface from time to time in subsequent documents⁵ in association with a place ruled by priestly kings in vaguely known about places such as India or Ethiopia.

True to legends, these perceptions gave secondary importance to the actual location, length, breadth or history of *Abyssinia*. Alvarez, one of the Portuguese missionaries who reached the Ethiopian highlands in the sixteenth century, entitled his travel book on Ethiopia *The Prester John of the Indies*. His firsthand experience firmly brought the tale of the land of the priest-kings to bear on the ethnography of the northern parts of Ethiopia that the Portuguese visited. Their “discovery” generated not only fresh but also heightened interest in Ethiopia, and indeed, religious texts and Gi’iz literature they brought out from what they called *Abyssinia* were claimed as “evidence” of true Christianity: the tenets of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church beliefs, purported to rest on a "pristine form of Christianity", were seen to have been preserved intact in that “isolated” country. This development firmly associated Christianity as the only religion of the Ethiopia that they called *Abyssinia*.

Though the religious debates of the period appear to have used the term, giving it wide circulation in the form *Abyssinia*, the term *Habesha* was never a place name, though it was a self-appellation to mean “mixed people” who live anywhere in Ethiopia. The nearest the word had come to refer to a place name, according to some scholars, was around 404-369 B.C. when King Harsiotef of Meroe “claimed to have sent a successful expedition against a town called Habasa (Habasi = Hebsi),” whose inhabitants, probably present day Barya-Kunama of south-western Eritrea, were called Metit.⁶ Sergew Hable Selassie who bases his conclusions mainly on ancient inscriptions and documents, claims that *Habesha* has otherwise been used to refer to two “tribes who migrated to Ethiopia” from the ancient Sabaeen kingdom of South Arabia around 1000 B. C., over half a millennium prior to Harsiotef’s expedition. In later stone inscriptions the word was used only once as a reference to the people who called themselves *Agazian* and their land *Behere Agazian*, which according to Sergew “seems to be very old” as an official name for the country as Gaze. It was used by an “unknown emperor of Ethiopia” (with uncertain dates), who left an inscription in Adulis.⁷

⁵ Sergew Hable Selassie, *op.cit.* pp. 254-261; Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: the Evolution of a Multi-ethnic Society*, The University of Chicago Press, 1974, pp. 6-7

⁶ My emphasis. Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972. p. 12.

⁷ Sergew Hable Selassie, *op.cit.*, pp. 26-27

A third century A.D. novel too (to be discussed below) seems to specify “Ethiopia” as the area of the ancient *Behere Agazian*.

The word *Habeshat* also appears in South Arabian inscriptions with reference to the activities of an Ethiopian emperor, Adbah (or Atsbeha). As part of the Ethiopian political presence in that area and was already visible from earlier centuries, Adbah sent a force of occupation in support of a king of Rayda against that of Saba,⁸ and this contact continued with different degrees of control well into the sixth and seventh centuries AD. On the western shores of the Red Sea, however, it appears that the word *Habesha* “was avoided in official as well as in literary texts.” The exception seems to have been the use made of it in the trilingual stone inscription of the military expeditions of the Aksumite emperor Ezana in the fourth century. The Sabaean and Gi’iz versions use the word *Habeshat*, but in the Greek, the word used is “Ethiopia.” Indeed, the inscription has slight variations of all place names in the three languages,⁹ implying that Ezana intended to use the languages in senses that went beyond the political message of his military exploits. F. Josephus, a Jewish Rabbi of the first century AD had already mentioned Ethiopia in association with the “Queen of Egypt and Ethiopia...” who came to visit King Solomon, and returned to her own country “having obtained the gifts ... and given others to the king from among her possessions...” Reminiscent of the Ethiopian story of Makeda (the Queen of Sheba) and Solomon, this story is repeated in the Gi’iz manuscript, the *Kibre Negest*, said to have been composed later in the tenth century AD.¹⁰

Of course, the differences in how Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians used the terms *Habesha* and Ethiopia has persisted to more recent times. Haggai asserts that for medieval Islamic scholars of the Middle East, *Habesha* is “black natives of the Horn of Africa, who joined Islam and lived under its sway”, “not the Ethiopians of the Horn of Africa.” In Arabic, *Habash* means “a mixture” and “in popular usage it connoted a mixed ethnic origin, partly black, partly brown.” Arabs and Turks used the word *Habesha* even in the tenth and fourteenth centuries, with reference to Ethiopia.¹¹ A geography book published in 1846 vaguely refers to Ludolf’s claims that “This country [Abyssinia] corresponds to the southern parts of the *Aethiopia*

8 *Ibid*, p. 80.

9 *Ibid*, pp. 94-95.

10 *Ibid*, pp35-77.

11 Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, 1994, p. 12-13.

supra Aegyptum of the ancients; and the Abyssinians still call themselves *Ethiopiawans*, and their country *Ethiopia* [strictly pronounced *Itəyopəya*], scornfully disdaining the names of *Abassi* and *Abyssinians*, which have been coined from the Arabic *Habesh* signifying a mixed people.² They prefer, however, the appellation Agazians for themselves, and Agazi, or Ghez, for their country. Sometimes they name themselves according to the provinces to which they belong: as people of Tigre, Amhara, &c.” Interestingly, the author’s footnote 2 denies the self-reference on the grounds of political correctness, saying: “This [*Ethiopiawans* or *Ethiopia*] is not politically correct, for the rulers of Abyssinia have at present no command of the sea coast. The Baharnegash territory, which forms the N. E. mountain-terrace of Abyssinia, overlooks the flat coast of the Red Sea near Arkeeko. The sea-coast itself is in the hands of the Mohammedans.”

Isenberg’s Amharic dictionary repeats that *Habesha* is the “common name by which the Abyssinians themselves as well as their neighbours call their country. The ancient name ‘Ethiopia’ is occasionally used among the learned...” Likewise Antoine d’Abaddie in his *Dictionnaire de la langue Amarinna* (1881) says: “*Ce mot de l’Ethiopie n’est employé que par un petit nombre d’indigènes qui parla un peu d’Arabe, sans savoir que dans cette langue le terme habax est injurieux*’. D’Abaddie also asserts that the Geez name ‘Ethiopia’ is used by the Amhara and Tigre for the region extending from Sawakin to Sennar, Kaffa and Harar.

Ethiopian scholars who base their work on Geez literature simply say that *Habesha* is the name of the country otherwise known as Ethiopia. Kidane Weld Kifle derives the etymology of the word from *abas*, ‘a sweet smelling plant’, while the rest claim the origin of the word Ethiopia to be the ancient Greek word for all blacks of Noba, Sudan and the south of Egypt, and extending to Madagascar. The ‘main meaning indicates the word black and that of being ‘lowlander’, says Kidane Weld Kifle. Other traditional scholars who emphasize the Bible derive the etymology from the Biblical name and descent of the Kushites. In traditional writings, for example in historical works from the nineteenth century, in newspapers from the early twentieth and in general from poems and everyday idiomatic expressions, the word is frequently used in the phrase *difin Habesha* or ‘the whole of the *Habesha*’ to mean all living in Ethiopia, or in the saying *ye Habesha ketero*, ‘a *Habesha* appointment’, to mean unpunctuality. Evoked when contrasting the formal political, military or religious structure of the state itself, the word *Habesha* locally appears to blot out ethnic differences and to connote the idea that land and people are inseparable.

In English and other European languages, the word *Habesha* became *Abyssinia* and gained influences that went beyond mere references, its subsequent uses engraining the reference to a geographical location rather than to people. Indeed, in Europe, the term had very little to do with the identity of the Ethiopians. It firmly referred to the lands that the Portuguese travel literature reported as Christian, and was used in the context of the heated religious debates of the Reformation that used “discoveries”, including on *Abyssinia* and its literature. In those debates, and subsequently in other European discourses, any distinction that could be made between fact, legend and the function of words in describing locations, were clouded by the claims and counter-claims of the Reformation; they left copious documentation on the word and the form it took. Evoking the exotic images and other material the Portuguese brought back from Ethiopia, imaginative elaborations appeared in certain aspects of European art: Verdi, for instance, produced *Aida*, and Mozart, the *Magic Flute*.

The process of spreading the use of the term was enhanced by the creative works of giants such as Samuel Johnson (1759), the central illustrative material used below. Such references ingrained *Abyssinia* in European languages as a reference to a block of highlands they "knew" to be Christian and nothing else. Irrespective of the incomplete geographical and ethnographic knowledge, they remained in use by diplomats, commercial entrepreneurs and travelers who visited Ethiopia in the heyday of the colonial era. Armed with such "knowledge" from high culture, such visitors eschewed the word “Ethiopia” in preference for *Abyssinia* and related to the country and people on their own terms.¹² The writers among them added romance to the image by touting *Abyssinia* as an inaccessible mountain block and by underlining its long isolation within a region. A Christian kingdom called *Abyssinia* became a fixture of northern Ethiopia. While some used it interchangeably with Ethiopia, many had *Abyssinia* (often followed by “other” Ethiopian peoples) in the titles of their works. Over thirty books bearing the name *Abyssinia* appeared between 1800 and 1896, when an Italian invasion was partially repulsed from Ethiopian soil.¹³

12 The terms and conditions of diplomatic relations with rulers in northern Ethiopia has been a subject of detailed studies. See Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence*, 1976. Rubenson also points out examples of forged or somehow unrepresentative translations of Ethiopian missives to the European courts. *Correspondence and Treaties 800-1854*, edited by Sven Rubenson, co-edited by Getatchew Haile (Ethiopian languages) John Hunwick, (Arabic), Northwestern University Press, Evanston Illinois, 1987.

13 Too long to insert here. the references are after the pertinent bibliography.

The borders of the lands that Europeans called *Abyssinia* fluctuated, depending on the authors' experiences and, from about the second half of the nineteenth century, colonial writings that generally denied historical relationships between African peoples prior to their arrival. Many wrote that Christian monarchs from the *Abyssinian* highlands forcefully held together a collection of tribes in North East Africa. True to the colonialist model, ethnographers in the 1880s and 1890s dubbed the monarchs and the rest of the government only as Amhara or Tigre, two ethnic groups they considered to be inhabitants of the "*Abyssinian* highlands".¹⁴ Used intensively in all manners, the term generated a seemingly knowledgeable nineteenth century literature that essentially divided Ethiopia into an *Abyssinia* of those two tribes and "others." Other than its reference to highlands in northern Ethiopia, this European *Abyssinia* lacked clarity as to width and breath, and the maps that emerged implicitly defined the African nation only in terms of tribes such as Tigre and Amhara.

Most scholars who use those sources ignore the influence of "*Abyssinia*" on colonial thinking. They emphasize Ethiopia's historical success in sustaining its independence, and attach little significance to how the term *Abyssinia* was used in nineteenth century records, thus inadvertently underscoring the validity of the name *Abyssinia* for northern Ethiopia. Only a few point out that Europeans used *Abyssinia* to impose an identity on Ethiopia.¹⁵ However, since it emerged in the European literary world, an unequal political playing field of the nineteenth century, *Abyssinia* has to be seen as part of how identities were created to suit colonial ambitions over Africa in that period. The assertions stereotyped Ethiopia in European thinking, placing the country at a conceptual level that favoured colonial patronage. Haggai Erlich refers to the slighting ways in which some Turkish governors too considered Ethiopia their colony, even long after they had lost their control of areas along the Red Sea coast.

In that sense, and loaded with ambiguous attributes, *Abyssinia* was the hidden face of colonialism. Its simple function was the later use in studies that reduced wars and other political relationships among regional leaders variously to the panache of individual leaders, the availability of guns, the "feudal" attraction of the right of access to land, or the military

¹⁴ Until later in the nineteenth century, widely published Italian literature was minimal though they eventually posed the most aggressive of the colonialist challenges.

¹⁵ Examples of such works are Rubenson, 1976; Baheru Zewde, 1991; Marcus, 1975, Zewde Gebre Selassie, 1975.

operations of the “kings of kings”. The validity of each of these attributes rested on accepting an *Abyssinia* that lacked coherent internal dynamics tying together politically the parts of the region. The approach denied any sense of nationhood to Ethiopia, except in the context of its state power, and ultimately its aggression in the North East African region. It seems to have justified making *Abyssinia* the starting point for Ethiopian studies at the expense of explorations into local notions about the nature of nationhood. Even in the context of studies on power relations and sovereignty, it precluded explorations into local concepts of borders, sense of national identity and pertinent reasons for defense against colonialist incursions.

Ethiopians, of course, were not concerned about the Arab/Turkish and European usage of the word *Habesha*. Local rulers who related to the nineteenth century visitors used either Ethiopia or the immediate locality to describe where they were.¹⁶ To a certain extent, of course, Ethiopian history itself fed into some of the attributes of the European *Abyssinia*. Among aspects of Ethiopian historiography that supported defining Ethiopia as Christian and nothing else, one was the well-known saga of Ethiopia’s repeated invitations to Christian Europe in a struggle against Islam in the Red Sea region. In the sixteenth century, as three centuries later when European colonialism surged through Africa, Ethiopia was still searching for Christian alliance against its traditional enemies, such as the Arabs and the Turks. In addition, the first travelers, missionaries, merchants and diplomatic and scientific missions that arrived in Ethiopian courts, saw that most rulers adhered to Christianity and used their personal power to protect the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Some, like Menelik II, swore in the names of saints of the Christian church even in their edicts. His predecessor, Yohannes IV, ordered provincial governors to construct churches throughout the land and even engaged in religious campaigns to convert Muslims and to persecute foreign missionaries. Earlier, Tewodros II, who was not very friendly towards the priesthood, tried his hand at reforming the church. They all brought priests with them to battlefields. With these signs of the state’s interests in the church, Europeans who reached nineteenth century Ethiopia found a lot that supported their own traditions of *Abyssinia* being Christian and almost nothing else.

¹⁶ See nineteenth century letters to Europe or elsewhere abroad, in Sven Rubenson, pp. 26-27. In a treaty (Doc. no. 135) e.g. pp. 179 and 187 Ali signed himself as ‘King of the habasha’ but this is rendered in English as ‘Ali King of Abyssinia. The king’s emphasis on people rather than place has been lost in the translation.

Moreover, with the attempts to keep the Turks, Egyptians, British, French or Italians out of the region, and to develop a stronger state for the purpose, the wars provided the material for an aggressively expanding new empire. In the 1930s some emphasized that Christian *Abyssinia* was a source of regional barbaric power that needed to be brought under a civilizing colonial yoke. The view that it was at best a reservoir of a pristine form of Christianity, included condescending attributes such as an “isolated” and “stagnant” civilization. It generated the famous statement by the notable historian Edward Gibbons: “Ethiopia slept for a thousand years forgetful of the world by whom it was forgotten.” In the early decades of the twentieth century, this contributed to vagueness about Ethiopia and a deconstruction of its realities. Insistence on *Abyssinia* was filtered through to new generation of Europeans by varied ways, e.g. school atlases, stamp albums and young peoples’ encyclopedia. In the *Oxford Junior Encyclopaedia*,¹⁷ for example, the first entry of Volume I, *Mankind*, reads: “ABYSSINIANS: The inhabitants of Abyssinia, or Ethiopia as *it is now called* [emphasis mine], in north east Africa, live in a country which has always been a land of mystery because of its inaccessibility.” Added to ill-developed ethnographic analysis and the lack of a serious undertaking to study the Ethiopian sense of nationhood, along with, of course, the Italian invasion of 1935-41, *Abyssinia* remained a European name for Ethiopia and, since the mid-1970s, the conceptual starting point for any studies on Ethiopia, arising from the use of European literature.

A comparison of the two books discussed below is critical to specify the degree of deliberateness and intent of such European emphasis on the word *Abyssinia*, especially given its subsequent political influences.

Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas*

Despite high powered studies on European literary sources, the warped definition of *Abyssinia* in them facilitated Italian, French and British incursions in the North East African region. Among the catalysts for that was a famous novel by the illustrious Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia: An Oriental Tale* (1759).¹⁸ The work by that

¹⁷ *Oxford Junior Encyclopaedia*, L. E. Salt and G. Boumphrey, General Editors Oxford University Press, London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, 1955 (1948).

¹⁸ The references in this article are from Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*, edited with an introduction by D. J. Enright, Penguin Books, 1976.

great literary figure acquired significance immediately on its publication, a significance that continued over the remainder of the eighteenth century as well as throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁹ Popularizing the term *Abyssinia* more and more, the book had run into more than 450 editions in English by the 1960's, and had been translated into almost all European languages and into Amharic. Johnson's construction of an image of a timeless and stagnant *Abyssinia* in *Rasselas* sharply contrasted with the Europe of his day and, as we will see below, had remarkable influences on Ethiopian historiography.

It has to be pointed out that, soon after its publication, a controversy ensued among Johnsonians and others on whether or not the author used empirical data from fifteenth and sixteenth century Portuguese explorations in Ethiopia. Reviewers emphasized the novel's relationships to the so-called oriental tales as a literary genre. The debates revolved around eighteenth century political and religious issues, and also included discussions on the educational value of travels by the Portuguese and the Scot, James Bruce, among others. Most of the debates were on aspects of the whereabouts and characteristics of Ethiopian topography and history used in *Rasselas*. As we will see presently, a few in the twentieth century pointed out how the novel's use of history deliberately revised an ancient European mythology on Ethiopia and reinforced a new imagery. Needless to say, discussions on these, which continued during the height of the colonial period, exerted an influence on British and other European perceptions of Ethiopia, and generated significant "knowledge" on the country's political geography, and subsequently, historiography.

The plot of *Rasselas* is straightforward. An Ethiopian prince, Rasselas, and his sister, Nekayah, were brought up secluded as prisoners on top a mountain in order to prevent them plotting against the reigning monarch. They were provided with all things pleasant. However, they became bored and successfully tried to escape and search for happiness in the world outside. Accompanied by Pekuah, an attendant of the princess, and Imlac, a philosopher friend of the prince, they traveled incognito out of Ethiopia, sailed up the Red Sea to the Gulf of the Suez and then traveled by land to Cairo.

¹⁹ A kind of romanticism often attached to *Rasselas* as a novel depicts the work in the context of Johnson's mother's death, and therefore, and thus as a product of a sad philosopher's mind. Another view considers it as a product of a giant at work. Norman says, for instance, that "in *Rasselas* he simply drove his characters into the Happy Valley, denied them the normal pleasures of a life of fiction, and set them all talking in epigrams ...". Collins Norman, *The Facts of Fiction*, Gollancz, London, 1932, pp. 82-83; See also W. P. Courtney and D. Nichol Smith, *A Bibliography of Samuel Johnson*, Oxford, 1925, p. 86; Leyburn, op. cit. p. 1067.

Apart from the philosopher Imlac, the travellers are characterized like highly protected children, totally innocent of the ways of the world. In contrast to their limited experiences from their mountain dwelling, the philosopher Imlac is widely travelled, having been to India, Persia and the Middle East. He therefore provides them with guidance and advice. By the use of the story within the story, we hear the tales of Imlac's travels, the work of an astrologer who imagines he can control the weather, and of a hermit who has retired from normal life because of dissatisfaction with it. When the lady Pekuah is taken captive by an Arab merchant-raider, from whom the others ransom her, she too narrates the story of her Arab captor. These narratives widen the experiences of the young royal siblings who are finally presented trying to systematically explore a broad range of human experiences from their base in Cairo. They assess and evaluate a variety of cultures and activities such as trading, city-life, eccentricities, unpleasant experiences encountered, and visits to places of interest like the pyramids. In the process they learn, interacting and discussing their experiences together and with others; in Cairo they even attend the seminars of another philosopher.

Their experiences affect them even as they affect others. A mad astrologer regains his senses after discussions with them. They make a point of supplementing what they learn from experience with observation, an undertaking which they divide between them. They finally recognize that happiness is not acquired by any life-style in any society by anybody; it has never been achieved and never will be, however much human beings may wish for it.

Work done so far on *Rasselas* can be classified into three: the book as a piece of literary art work,²⁰ its philosophical tenets and the Ethiopian background it uses.²¹ Typology and some attempt at structural analysis, the latter almost entirely in terms of the text, seem to dominate especially among students of literature.²² Many of these categorize *Rasselas* as an oriental tale by citing the traveling theme and the story within the story motif.²³ The importance of

20 Norman Collins, *The Facts of Fiction*, Gollancz, London, pp. 82-83

21 The earliest recognition of the Ethiopian background of *Rasselas* appears in Thomas Tyers' "Biographical Sketch of Dr. Samuel Johnson" (London, 1785), p. 18 [*Augustan Society Reprints*, Los Angeles, 1952].

22 See for example Gwin J. Kolb, "The Structure of *Rasselas* " in P.M.L.A., *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, LXVI, 1951, pp. 698-717. Taking the "determinant" as the problem of happiness, Kolb refers to *The Rambler* essays 204-205 and to other works on Ethiopia as "extra structural", p. 703.

education for the prince, the description of the palace in which he lived in the Happy Valley, and the idea of the search for happiness are also used to support this view. Perhaps the most dominant work on the book has been investigations on the philosophical tenets contained in the narratives and discussions, which are used to show that the work is a well-meditated philosophical piece, firmly rooted in Samuel Johnson's own Christian beliefs.²⁴

As already indicated, the point of scholarship most pertinent to this paper is the debate on the importance of the Ethiopian background in the book, *Rasselas*.²⁵ The majority of Johnsonians resist admitting its importance, grudgingly picking up instead words or bits of the story only to assert Johnson's extraordinary memory in recollecting a translation of a travel book he had made twenty six years prior to writing the novel *Rasselas* (and completed in the evenings of just one week).²⁶ They point out, rather carelessly according to some, that in the travel book, the name of the prince, *Rasselas*, is given as that of an actual Ethiopian prince, *Ras Se'ile Kristos*²⁷ (a nobleman who had never been imprisoned at the mountain), and they assert, wrongly, that the book he translated mentioned the practice of incarcerating young princes on a mountain.²⁸

23 Ellen Douglass Leyburn ("No Romantick Absurdities or Incredible Fictions": the Relation of Johnson's *Rasselas* to Lobo's *Voyage to Abyssinia*, in P.M.L.A. no. 70, 1955, p. 1059) quoting Boswell *Life of Johnson*, ed. Hill and Powell (Oxford, 1934-50), I, 341. The generally accepted classification of Ethiopia as an oriental country is asserted by commentators on Johnson's translation of *A Voyage to Abyssinia*. At the time this work was first drafted in 1987, the British Museum and other libraries in Britain were still classifying books and documents on Ethiopia as "Oriental".

24 Related to the philosophical tenets is Johnson's concern about the universality of human motives. Leyburn, *op. cit.* pp. 1059-1067.

25 This is adequately discussed by D. Lockhart, "The Fourth Son of the Mighty Emperor: The Ethiopian Background of Johnson's *Rasselas* " *P.M.L.A.*, 78:1963, pp. 516-529; Eirionnach in *Notes and Queries*, 4th ser. II (1868), pp. 1-2; Kolb, "The Paradise in *Abyssinia* and the Happy Valley in *Rasselas* " *P.M.L.A.* It is also discussed in various editions of *Rasselas*: G. B. Hill, Oxford, rep. 1945; O. F. Emerson, New York, 1895; William West, London, 1869.

26 W. P. Courtney and D. Nichol Smith, *A Bibliography of Samuel Johnson*, Oxford, 1925, p. 86; Leyburn, *op. cit.* p. 1067

27 Leyburn quoting Hills, *Life of Johnson*, pp. 152, 212, 262. Lockhart challenges the parallel drawn between Lobo's work and *Rasselas* as expounded by Moore, Jenkins and Leyburn as "fanciful in the extreme," *op. cit.*, p. 525. He makes the point more sharply, asserting that it is Ludolf, not any other source, who uses the name *Rasselas* in that form, with the final sibilant, p. 518.

28 Lockhart traces it to the work of Francisco Alvares, *The Life of Sir Francis Alvares, a Portuguese Priest, made into the court of Prete Ianii, the Great Christian Emperor of Ethiopia*, In Purchas (1625) II.

The same details have been used by a minority of scholars to argue the importance of the Ethiopian background in *Rasselas*. One of them, Donald Lockhart, who by 1987 had been studying Samuel Johnson's work for four decades, has shown that Johnson's interest in Ethiopia, and particularly the circumstances for the Ethiopian background in *Rasselas*, was not as casual as has been often supposed.²⁹ He asserts, with convincing evidence, that *Rasselas* was based on sustained research over a period of seven years, from, at least, sources quoted in Job Ludolf's *Historia Aethiopica*.³⁰ The book, which Samuel Johnson had used and expressly admired when he translated and annotated *A Voyage to Abyssinia* in 1733, apparently features in the catalogue of his personal library.³¹ The very name "Rasselas" is reminiscent of that of *Ras Se'ile Kristos* who features in the Portuguese reports, although he was not imprisoned in the mountain fortress, a custom which had been discontinued in much earlier times.³²

Further ascertaining that Johnson had direct or indirect access to at least thirty books, including a fiction and a map,³³ Lockhart draws attention to many specific borrowings in *Rasselas* from quite a large number of sources:

"The custom associated with the princes' mountain in Amhara and its antiquity, the escape, the valley, the overhanging summit, the rivulets that fertilize the valley, the lake whose superfluities are discharged through a dark cleft of the mountain making a stream which fell with dreadful noise from precipice to precipice (the Nile), the flocks and herds in the pastures and the beasts of chase in the mountains, the exclusion of dangerous animals, the palace and its treasure and its unbroken succession of officers, the princes' life

29 "The Fourth Son of the Mighty Emperor": The Ethiopian Background of Johnson's *Rasselas* in *PMLA*, pp. 516-528.

30 Lockhart, p. 527.

31. Lockhart, pp. 518. Leyburn too draws specific parallels between *Rasselas* and *A Voyage to Abyssinia* in her "No Romantick Absurdities or Incredible Fictions": the Relation of Johnson's *Rasselas* to Lobo's *Voyage to Abyssinia*" in *PMLA, Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, December, 1955 Volume LXX. Number 5 pp. 1059-1067, "No Romantic Absurdities..." also showing (p. 1063) the process of how the work of translation was transformed into a novel through *The Rambler* essays nos 204 and 205.

32 Leyburn, Ellen Douglas, "No Romantick Absurdities..." p. 1063.

33 Lockhart, p. 518-519; "Introduction" in *A Voyage to Abissinia*, Yale edition, Vol XV, xliii. Lockhart lists the books that influenced Johnson in an Appendix on pp. 527-528.

of sensuous enjoyment, the emperor's annual visit to the mountain, the monks of St. Anthony, the Father of the Waters, the mystery of the Nile's course and the identification with it of that fascinating quarternion crocodiles, river-horses, sirens, and tritons, and finally the names of Imlac and Rasselas and the identification of the latter as the fourth son of the mighty emperor of Ethiopia -these particulars are too many and too exact to be in any great measure attributable to the recollections of a casual reader who had no intention of making specific use of them.”³⁴

Indeed it appears that Johnson made the outline for *Rasselas* in the preface of his 1733 translation. Censoring the Portuguese Jesuit writer on the Ethiopian church he wrote in it:

“Let us suppose an inhabitant of some remote and superior region, yet unskilled in the ways of men, having read and considered the precepts of the Gospel, and the example of our Saviour, to come down in search of the TRUE CHURCH: if he would not enquire after it among he would not look for it in the TRUE CHURCH of Rome.”³⁵

This “supposition” articulated by Johnson himself is, as Lockhart says, the strongest evidence of his deliberate intention to use Ethiopia in *Rasselas*. Although *Rasselas* was published only in 1759, twenty six years after this preface was written, the main protagonists in it, presented as inexperienced, innocent, almost childish youth, even though in their late twenties, set out to seek an unachievable goal.

The pertinence of the novel to the European imagination of Ethiopia comes from the fact that *Rasselas*, which is neither the first nor the only novel to incorporate fact and fiction on Ethiopia, markedly depicted an image that differed from previous ones. *Rasselas* as an Ethiopian story has precedents in European literature, particularly classical mythology of which Samuel Johnson was well aware, if not knowledgeable. In the classics, “Ethiopia” was used to depict the far away and the orient, with attributes of a people who were pious, and dark-skinned, living close to the sun. In Homeric Greek, “Ethiopia” in fact means “land of

34 Lockhart, p. 526.

35 *Ibid*, *op. Cit*.

burnt faces". The same meaning was used in a third century A.D. romance by Heliodorus, the bishop of Tricca in Greece. Called *Ethiopian Story* (also *Aithiopica* and *Theagenes and Chariclea*)³⁶ the book reappeared in the sixteenth century, and Johnson most probably had access to it. Interestingly, the image of "Ethiopia" Johnson evoked in *Rasselas* contrasts specifically with that of the third century novel. The contrast is all the more pertinent to this essay because a combined legacy of classical and medieval literature on Ethiopia appears to be at work in *Rasselas*. Using a mixture of fact and fiction, as in the classics, Johnson largely removed the romantic imagery of Ethiopia in *An Ethiopian Story*, leaving it in *Rasselas* simply as a mountainous Christian kingdom whose civilization may have remained stagnating at an elementary level.

In the culture which produced Homer, "Ethiopia" was an important mythical space representing the abode of the sun and of the sun deity. As the sun was supposedly most powerful in the east, people who lived close to it got burnt. Nevertheless, the sun deity visited those people as they were pious. Classical historians such as Herodotus interwove that Homeric mythical space with the geographical reality they came to know about, and used it to critique contemporary non-Hellenic people of "the orient". Moreover, with the changing awareness of the eastern frontiers of their geographical knowledge and their awareness of other nations, their religious conceptions got the better of them, obliging them to shift the "location" of the abodes and leisure centers of their relevant deities.

A mythologist, Albin Lesky (1959), demonstrated this shift by focussing on an element of the myth, that of the gods feasting with the Ethiopians.³⁷ In Homeric and subsequent Greek classical literature, the Ethiopians prepared their wonderful food of cooked meat and mutton, and served it on a table of the sun at the edges of the earth which were bounded by the sea. By slow degrees factual historical writings shifted the location of the "east" of such literature from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean and eventually even to the Atlantic. Lesky discusses the transformation by juxtaposing classical literature with Greek historical

³⁶ Heliodorus, *Ethiopian Story*, Translated by Sir Walter Lamb, edited by J. R. Morgan, J. M. Everyman, London, Charles E. Tuttle, Vermont, 1997. The date for this novel, originally in Greek, and its author are known only vaguely. Various editors give their own estimations. Morgan gives the fourth century A.D., and points out that the story is set in real places and, in part in real events (pp. xvii-xviii). There is speculation that the author may have been involved in the cult of the sun at the time of writing the novel.

³⁷ "Aethiopika" by A. Lesky in *Hermes* (87) 1959, pp. 27-38. I am indebted to Ms. Janet Bowcott of the Senate Library, University of London, for translating this article for me from German to English in 1987. The article is also referred to and discussed by D. Levine *Greater Ethiopia* (1964), p. 15.

experiences. He points out that the shift coincided with the mercantile expansion and geographical discoveries in the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. “Ethiopia” began to be the identity of all the lands occupied by black people, including Indians in the south-east, Libyans and others further west by the Atlantic Ocean. Recognition of other cultures influenced the religious outlooks as well. As Lesky points out, whereas in Homer “Ethiopians” shared their food with the gods, in Herodotus they shared it with ordinary mortals.

Lesky believes that such transformation occurred partly because classical historians interpreted “Homeric mythology” as “mistaken history”, and partly because they failed to understand the artistic nature of that literature. For instance certain crucial phrases in the Iliad and the Odyssey were there purely for artistic purposes. Words and concepts such as “Ethiopia” were there for purposes of identifying distance and the orient, in spatial terms, and piety in moral terms. Needless to say, even if the Homeric legends belonged to a different literary culture, the purpose of which were beyond such superficial colouring, the accessibility of information gleaned by seafarers and traders gave an empirical grounding to the historians Herodotus, Pliny, Ptolemy and the geographers Kosmas and Strabo, who used essentially different forms of reporting.

Donald Levine (1964), who traced numerous other perceptions about Ethiopia, including this one, agrees with Lesky but, asserting that for classic historians and geographers the imagery of Ethiopia as a pious, magnificent kingdom, the land of savage people and bastion of independence, he points out that the images they portrayed served two main rhetorical, but contrasting, purposes.³⁸ First, the imagery was useful for contrasting examples of the effects of environment on the colour, features and life-styles of peoples living in widely separated regions. For example Aristotle used Ethiopia to contrast the dry environment which gave Ethiopians (in the far south) their woolly hair with the moist environment which gave Scythians (in the far north) their straight hair. Their explanations were similar to racist stereotypes that later pervaded the social Darwinists of the nineteenth century; but the important point is that their literature reflected their use of empirical evidence to rethink their mythology. Secondly, it was used to illustrate the “unity of mankind” as did St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.).

³⁸ Levine, pp. 15-25.

The constant interaction between myth and history in changing the imagery of Ethiopia in the ancient world was clearly marked even at the height of Greco-Roman power. According to Sergew Hable Selassie, Pliny the Elder and Diodorus in the first century B.C. claimed that in antiquity Ethiopia was a powerful kingdom inhabited by people who were never brought into subjection by a foreign prince; they saw their contemporary Ethiopians as “savages”, as they did all non-Hellenic people. Diodorus maintains nevertheless that the gods Hercules and Bacchus were “awed by the piety of the Ethiopian people”. It was Latin historians and geographers, namely Pliny, Solinus and Pomponius Mela, who later also took up the attribute of “savagery” with regard to Ethiopians. Archaeological and recorded evidence shows that European, at least ancient Greek and Roman, empirical knowledge and identification of “Ethiopia” roughly in the area bearing the same name today was firmly established during the first three centuries of the Christian era.³⁹

The mythical attributes continued to be used well into the third and fourth centuries. It was in the third century A.D. for example, that Heliodorus wrote his *Ethiopian Story*, associating Ethiopia with noble-character types. The first prose novel of classical times, this was described by George Saintsbury as “almost the Homer of Prose Fiction”. In the fourth century, St. Augustine too used “Ethiopia” to expound the universality of certain themes in Christianity. By the fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era, the country began to communicate with the outside world on its own initiative from its commercial centre of Axum. By then, it had adopted Christianity and, as a major commercial and political power in the Red Sea, was described as the third Great Power in the known world. Probably as a result of that, early Christian writers such as St. Augustine used “Ethiopia” to illustrate their own form of universalism, thus specifying the religious attribute to that of Christianity but maintaining the image of the far-away, pious land.

With the rise of Islam in the seventh century, followed by the “Dark ages” in Western Europe, “Ethiopia” disappears from direct European empirical perspective, and in the Middle Ages reports about the country reached Europe only indirectly, either by the medium of Arabic literature or through the crusaders in the Holy Land where they met Ethiopian pilgrims worshipping at their monastery in Jerusalem. One of the results of this indirect

³⁹ Sergew Hable Selassie, *op. cit.*, pp, 15-19, 72.

reporting was the presence of “Ethiopia” in medieval maps that used the “holy” land as the centre (because of its perceived significance), and Ethiopia as a block of land inhabited by creatures with mouths and eyes on their breasts, decidedly in contrast with the Islamic world of admirable peoples and civilization. To some extent, this changed also the classic image of the “orient”, and, as Manzaloui shows, the form and content of the European novel leaning towards the development of the so-called “oriental tale”, specifically deriving from what is now called the Middle East.⁴⁰

For a time during the Middle Ages, the legend of a powerful Christian kingdom ruled by a priest king (mentioned already) who could possibly be an ally of Christian Europe against Islam, removed the romance associated with “Ethiopia” in the classics. In 1400 King Henry IV of England wrote to the Ethiopian king:

“Therefore, great prince, we do most truly rejoice in the Lord, and give thanks to Jesus Christ, in that He has thought fit to enlarge His Church, as we hope, through the devout faith of so great a Prince and his subjects.”⁴¹

The association of Ethiopia with a powerful Christian kingdom, however, lasted only till the sixteenth century when the Portuguese established direct contact. By the 1520's, when the Portuguese expeditions reached Ethiopia, the kingdom, much weakened by the wars led by Ahmed Gragn, had been looking for help from other Christians, and had even sent emissaries to Portugal,⁴² desperately trying to attract the attention of European allies. Because of their activities in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, the Portuguese became the first Europeans, after almost a millennia, to reach the Ethiopian highlands.

The Portuguese explorations and contacts with Ethiopia produced a number of travel accounts, as mentioned already. Lockhart shows that at least thirty of those were published in one form or another before 1759, when Samuel Johnson wrote *Rasselas*. Only five remained unpublished until the twentieth century. Despite being first hand, Portuguese information was

40 Manzaloui, “*Rasselas* and Some Medieval Ancillaries” in M. Wahba, pp. 61-64. The article draws similarities between *Rasselas* and other medieval works.

41 Levine, *Greater Ethiopia*, p 6.

42 Buckingham, C. F. “Jeronymo Lobo: His Travels and His Book” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library*, Vol. 64 (1981-82), pp. 10-26.

blurred by their initial contacts with the Arab world. One instance of this blurring is their insistence on applying the term *Abaxa* as the name for the country, which, in Europe became *Abyssinia*. Interestingly the Portuguese described a civilization equal to their own, but as priests who tried to proselytize the country,⁴³ they produced a slanted account of the precepts and rituals of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, Portuguese accounts on Ethiopia inspired a map and several works of fiction including the *History of Ethiopia* published in 1610 at Valencia by Father Luis de Urreta. This was followed by another fiction, *Purchase His Pilgrimage*, in 1613, and half a century later, in 1670, by *The Late Travels of S. Giacomo Baratti*. These popularized the notion that there was a delightful mountain in a place called Amara where Ethiopian royalty were kept under guard. It was the proliferation of such literature that gave a new impetus for a different romantic view on Ethiopia.⁴⁴

Both the fictional and the factual reports about Ethiopia became important vehicles for debating the political and religious controversies of the Reformation and its aftermath.⁴⁵ Johnsonians point out that, even influential writers such as Coleridge and Milton used the material in their literature, vaguely contrasting it with the Middle East. Milton, for example, who is understood to have been alluding to the Glorious Revolution, refers in the Fourth Book of *Paradise Lost* to delightful paradises, including “Mount Amara”, which cannot vie with the true paradise in Assyria. Such contrast was made by Coleridge as well.⁴⁶

In addition, European mercantilism, which facilitated the Portuguese arrival in Ethiopia, coincided with the revival of classical literature. One of the classics that surfaced was Heliodorus' *Ethiopian Story* already mentioned. It resurfaced in Latin in 1534, and was “englished” by Thomas Underdowne in 1569. A second edition came out in 1587 and was reprinted for the third time in 1606. However, its potential to revive the classical image of “Ethiopia” was overshadowed by the contrasting image the Middle East provided for Europe

43 Buckingham, C. F., op. cit.

44 A reviewer of *Rasselas* in the Annual Register (ii:477) wrote: “The ideas, which travelers have given us of a mountain in which the branches of the royal family of Abyssinia are confined, though it may not be very well founded in fact, affords a ground for the most striking description of a terrestrial paradise, which has never been drawn; in this the author places the hero of his tale”. Quoted by Kolb, “The ‘Paradise’ in Abyssinia and the ‘Happy Valley’ in *Rasselas*” p. 16.

45 *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, (Yale xv), p. xliii

46 Emerson, O. F. *Rasselas* (New York, 1895 ed) pp. xxviii-xxiv; Kolb, “The Structure...” p. 703, Kolb, “The ‘Paradise’ in Abyssinia....” p. 16.

through the new mercantilist travels. Thus, by the time Johnson was writing *Rasselas*, there was a mixture of the reviving classical image of Ethiopia and the new one emerging out of the factual and fictional information from Portuguese sources. Both images were being used in the European process of political and religious reformation.

Inevitably, Johnson's translation of *A Voyage to Abyssinia* in 1733 and his writing of *Rasselas* in 1759, reflect this process. Critical of European attacks of people they came across, his views were additionally coloured by the hostile British attitude towards Portuguese merchants and colonialists, and by Reformation views towards the Catholic Church. Thus, for instance in 1759 he wrote:

“On what occasion, or for what purpose cannons and muskets were discharged among a people harmless and secure, by strangers who without any right visited their coast; it is not necessary to inform us....We are openly told, that they had the less scruple concerning their treatment of the savage people, because they scarcely considered them as distinct from the beasts; and indeed the practice of all the European nations, and among others of the English barbarians that cultivate the southern islands of America proves, that this opinion, however absurd and foolish, however wicked and injurious, still continues to prevail...”⁴⁷

Johnson, like others before him, re-thought Portuguese information on Ethiopia and formulated his own ideas on the country, particularly its peoples and their version of Christianity. He had been preceded in this by Job Ludolf the German classicist and “Father of Ethiopian Studies in Europe”, who had set the scene when he wrote his *Historia Aethiopica* in Latin in 1681; it was “Made English” by J.P. Gent and published in 1682 (and in 1864), thus becoming not only available to Johnson but also popular.

Ludolf's *Historia Aethiopica* was a carefully calculated presentation of Ethiopia from the perspective of Protestant Germany and was highly critical of its Portuguese Catholic sources,⁴⁸ particularly those from the Jesuit missionaries who had difficulties in converting Christian Ethiopians to Roman Catholicism in the sixteenth century. Ludolf's interpretations

47 Quoted in “Introduction” *A Voyage to Abyssinia* (Yale XV) pp. xiv-xlvi.

48 Ibid.

of Ethiopian Christianity challenged Jesuit claims that it was heretical, and asserted that its beliefs and practices supported those of the Protestant Reformation. In the process of being used as evidence in the controversy over Catholicism and Protestantism, the Ethiopian material acquired the status of uniqueness, and the image of Ethiopia as a special Christian kingdom was much reinforced.

Samuel Johnson had access to this and other critical literature on Ethiopia, and as he was interested in the religious controversies of his day,⁴⁹ he engaged himself in comparing and evaluating those sources. He owned a copy of the English translation of the work of Ludolf whom he acknowledged as a great historian, and strongly recommended Michele Geddes' *The Church History of Abyssinia*, published in 1696. When he translated from the French in 1733, Lobo's *Voyage to Abyssinia*, he already had read Ludolf's work and other critical literature on Ethiopia. *Voyage to Abyssinia* contained material appropriate for the debates because it was on the Jesuit experience of Ethiopia.⁵⁰ It also had an additional and expanded series of dissertations and commentary by the French translator, Joachim Le Grand, who criticized in the work some Protestant views.⁵¹ When Johnson published it in English five years later, he edited it heavily, meticulously censoring the religious commentary and "unfavourable" representation of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity by the Catholics. His engagement in criticizing the Portuguese and in the European religious debates of his time was clearly based on comparison and evaluation of such sources. In the 1960's, the editors of the Yale edition of this book usefully pointed out how Johnson set about achieving a slanted version without violating the factual information, and having the final word on both Le Grand (who had complained that Ludolf criticized the Ethiopians only where they agreed with Catholics) and Ludolf (who had then criticized Le Grand).⁵²

In the Introduction to *Voyage to Abyssinia*, Johnson had this to say:

49 Johnson obviously kept abreast of contemporary affairs and used his imagination around developments such as ballooning, on-going war, and the like. See "210th Anniversary of the birth of Doctor Samuel Johnson at Lichfield 18th September, 1919" in *The Johnson Society: Addresses and Translation* vol 1 1910-1924 from the *Lichfield Mercury* [reprint of 1969] p. 20.

50 Buckingham, "Jeronymo Lobo ..." vol. 64, 1981-82.

51 *Ibid* p. 14.

52 "Introduction" *A Voyage to Abyssinia* (Yale XV) pp xxxix-xiv.

“The Portuguese, to make their mission seem more necessary endeavoured to place in the strongest light the differences between the *Abyssinian* and Roman church, but the great Lodolfus laying hold of the advantage, reduced these later writers to prove their conformity.”⁵³

Johnson consciously used the opportunity to express his own opposition to *ex cathedra* authority and perhaps to dogmatism. To quote more fully a passage already mentioned:

“Let us suppose an inhabitant of some remote and superior region, yet unskilled in the ways of men, having read and considered the precepts of the Gospel, and the example of our Saviour, to come down in search of the *true church* (emphasis mine): if he would not enquire after it among the cruel, the insolent, and the oppressive; among those who are continually grasping at dominion over souls as well as bodies; among those who are employed in procuring to themselves impunity for the most enormous villanies, and studying methods of destroying their fellow-creatures, not for their crimes but their errors; if he would not expect to meet benevolence engaged in massacres, or to find mercy in a court of inquisition, he would not look for the *true church* in the Church of Rome (emphasis mine).⁵⁴

As previously indicated, the opening lines of this quotation show a considered opinion and an intention to use the Ethiopian material for an analogical expose of his own treatise on certain religious and broader philosophical views. That certainly was the root, at least the precedence for, the view of “Christian Ethiopia” or “Christian *Abyssinia*” used in subsequent interpretations of Ethiopian history and politics, and it provides ample evidence that Johnson’s use of the topography became dominant in European thinking.

chapter

Manipulation of topography in Johnson’s *Rasselas*

Further evidence of Johnson’s use of the material is provided by the landscape in his *Rasselas*. By design or default the symbolic use of people and landscape in the novel conveys a message on Ethiopian geography and history. This is stressed by those who have examined the importance, in the novel, of the topographical imagery of the valley in the

53 Translation ...

54 *Ibid.*

mountain, the contrasting importance of water and other land marks such as the pyramid in Egypt. As a powerfully intense piece of literature by a well-known writer, *Rasselas* was bound to exert influence on European imagery of Ethiopia, as soon as it was published. Consequently, the geography especially became a bone of contention once commentaries began to appear.⁵⁵ The most persistent opinion from the early days has been that the topography was not Ethiopian but some imaginary landscape Johnson applied to achieve an impression of the “Orient”.⁵⁶ Given the preoccupation of the period with the “orient”, perhaps this initial reaction is understandable. The denial of Johnson's interest in Ethiopia, however, has been recurrent,⁵⁷ and in 1968 Wimsatt suggested, rather mechanistically, that the geographical places were there to give colour, not to represent any factual place, and to draw the reader's attention to the story's theme of traveling:

“The most conspicuous color consists simply in the proper names of places... We are ‘oriented’ at the outset (Chapter 1) by the names (“Abissinia”, “Egypt” and “Amhara”). Soon we follow Imlac (Chapters VIII-XIII) from Goiama, “near the fountain of the Nile”, by way of “the shore of the Red Sea”, “to Surat”, and to “Agra, the capital of Indostan”...and thence to “Persia”, “Arabia”, “Syria”, “Palestine”, “many regions of Asia”, “Egypt”, “Cairo”, and “Suez”, -the latter name preestablishing for us the route which will be followed by the fugitives from the valley a few chapters hence.”⁵⁸

Other views expressed are comparable to Herodotus' and other classical historians' attempts to find actual landscapes exactly matching the description of those in myths. In the 1960's,

55 Robert M. Lovett and Helen S. Hughes in *The History of the Novel in England* (Boston, 1932) called Johnson's *Rasselas* “the longest and most sustained of [Johnson's] sermons on the vanity of human wishes” p. 124, and thought that it was deliberately set in a non-Christian part of the world “so that Johnson could deal with man on a purely naturalistic level and feel free to discuss the issues he had in mind unimpeded by other considerations.” p. 125

56 Kolb, “The Structure of *Rasselas*” *P.M.L.A.* 1951, p. 703. For Kolb, the Happy Valley being the mountain prison of Ethiopian royalty is Johnson, “employing for the purpose the ‘romantic’ tradition of the imprisonment of Abyssinian royalty and endowing the spot with all the remoteness, delights and luxuries usually attributed to paradises”, p. 702. From this point of view, Kolb calls the Ethiopian reference “extra-structural” p. 703.

57 Leyburn (p. 1067), *op. cit.* thinks the topography was for “aesthetic distance as the regions of the Nile provide. ... Johnson uses the geographical placing of the narrative to establish the degree of remoteness from daily life ... [to]... enforce the impression that it is human beings, not just Englishmen, whom he is discussing.”

58 “*Rasselas*' Journey from Amhara to Cairo Viewed from Arabia” in *Bicentenary Essays on Rasselas*, pp, 21-29.

one Louis Goodyear used contemporary geographical knowledge to seriously contemplate the journey undertaken by *Rasselas* and his companions in order to demonstrate how Johnson had overlooked the fact that they had to travel over very difficult terrain of mountains and deserts and, more significantly (according to Goodyear), through Muslim countries.⁵⁹

A more focused matching has been attempted regarding the mountain prison abode of *Rasselas* and his companions. That has been the most intriguing and controversial point because of the existence of a historical mountain prison for Ethiopian royalty. Quoting sources such as Ludolf and Lobo, Gwin Kolb, among others, dismissed the Ethiopian background to the novel by arguing that the mountain prison was in fact a place of grinding poverty and oppression, and not the earthly paradise that Johnson depicted. Only fictional works such as those of Urreta, he points out, refer to a happy mountain prison for the royalty. He supports his argument by the mistaken claim that Johnson used only Job Ludolf's *Historia Aethiopica* and knew of other sources, or, if at all, only indirectly.

Others, notably Lockhart, have shown that Johnson did have access to a much wider source on Ethiopia, including the description of the mountain prison, and that he deliberately made the place a Happy Valley in a hollow mountain. Philip M. Griffith pointed out in 1979, that the description of the mountain exists in the dissertations accompanying the *Voyage to Abyssinia*, the only section which Johnson said he translated exactly,⁶⁰ that is without censorship or revision. As Lockhart says, therefore, "Johnson had very good aesthetic or symbolic reasons" for choosing to reverse the topographical image of the mountain.⁶¹

The key for this choice lies in the symbolic importance attributed to certain land features in Johnson's days. The mountain for instance was associated with intellectual illumination and Johnson himself pontificated about its value, citing for example the ancient Greeks' placing of their deities on mountain tops. With a serious contemplation of the Ethiopian mountains he obviously did not want to make them a place of intellectual illumination. Instead, by quite a feat of artistic achievement, Lockhart shows, Johnson deliberately reversed the actual

⁵⁹ "Rasselas Journey From Amhara to Cairo Viewed from Arabia" *Bicentenary Essays on Rasselas* (ed. M. Wahba, 1959), *op.cit.* pp. 21-29. Cf note 43.

⁶⁰ Philip Mahone Griffith "Topographical Imagery in Johnson's "Rasselas" *Transactions of the Johnson Society* (Lichfield, 1979), pp. 37-46.

⁶¹ *Op. cit.* p. 1063.

mushroom like shape into a valley floor, surrounded by mountain sides which *Rasselas* and his fellow prisoners had to pierce in order to escape.⁶²

Johnson uses other topographical features to reinforce his interpretation of the Ethiopian reality, which he contrasts with others. Among other such features, Griffith points out, Johnson uses water imagery quite effectively, sometimes literally referring to streams, rain, lakes, flowing rivers, brooks, sea, the ocean and the sea coast, torrents and showers.⁶³ For instance, he uses the still lake in the middle of the Happy Valley to symbolize - quite interestingly for reasons that will be discussed soon - the undisturbed and static life around it. In Chapter I, he writes: "This lake discharged its superfluities by a stream which entered a dark cleft of the mountain on the northern side, and fell with dreadful noise from precipice to precipice till it was heard no more.... The palace stood on an eminence raised about thirty ... above the surface of the lake". The lake which looks "smooth and quiet", as Imlac the philosopher says, reflects the palace - the central prison of the Valley - whose inhabitants are happy only on the surface. Johnson uses flowing water such as the rivers and streams to symbolize time and the passage of life. Water acquires motion only as it leaves the Valley, and interestingly, the characters in the novel, notably *Rasselas* and his sister *Nekayah*, contemplate by the banks of the flowing water. *Rasselas* was inspired to escape as he was sitting by the river bank, and at the end of the story, we leave him and his party stranded by the flooding banks of the Nile. Their escape from the mountain and their return to it are closely tied up with the presence of flowing water. In the upside-down mountain valley, water imagery takes the place of the mountain as a source of inspiration.

This reversal is not a mere coincidence. It should be recalled that in the mid to late eighteenth century, the time Johnson was writing *Rasselas*, speculation on the source of the Nile was used as "an exemplum of improper curiosity," as J.P. Hardy put it. Investigating its courses -the undesirable knowledge- was the dream of a mad artist who had spoken to the prince before the latter left the Happy Valley. Using water symbolism (inspired by the Nile, and so on), Johnson also brings out *Rasselas* and his companions from the Happy Valley which he specifically says was near the source of the Nile. The mountainous topography of Ethiopia was deprived of the symbolic importance it had in the days of Johnson, and, on its own, the

62 *Op.cit.* pp. 520-521.

63 Griffith, p.41.

Nile adds nothing to their intellect or their search for happiness. The history of Egypt, their destination, did not fare any better. Although its desert contrasts to the mountain and the source and course of the Nile, the man-made “mountain” as he labels the pyramid, is portrayed as vainglorious. When they are at the pyramids, Pekuah, the princess's companion, is scared of going in. The princess who, before they left the Happy Valley, had said that she was “almost afraid... to begin a journey of which I cannot perceive an end...,” now encourages her:

“My dear Pekuah... I will always go before you, and Imlac shall follow you. Remember that you are the companion of the princess of Abissinia.”

to which Pekuah pleadingly replies:

“If the princess is pleased that her servant should die...let her command some death less dreadful than enclosure in this horrid cavern.”⁶⁴

The pyramid described as a “horrid cavern” by Pekuah is an empty structure where even the chest where the founder supposedly once resided is empty. Imlac stresses its uselessness and emptiness:

“I consider this mighty structure as a monument of the insufficiency of human enjoyments.... Whoever thou art, that, not content with a moderate condition, imaginest happiness in royal magnificence, and dreamest that command or riches can feed the appetite of novelty with perpetual gratification, survey the pyramids, and confess thy folly!”⁶⁵

Thus the pyramid is used to emphasize the folly of ancient Egyptian civilization. Pekuah does not even enter it, instead she is removed to experience the ordeal of capture which spills over to her friend the princess who grieves greatly until Pekuah is ransomed. Griffith remarks that Pekuah’s escape from the “enclosure in this horrid cavern” is an escape from imagined danger to real danger.

64 *Rasselas*, p. 107.

65 *Rasselas*, pp. 108-109.

By contrast to the pyramid, the monastery of St. Anthony's, the other man-made structure, is a place of deliverance from the ordeal the travellers experience. Ransom is paid for the lady Pekuah and her release is arranged at the monastery. As Griffith says, that the young woman is kept in captivity in a castle is "archetypal", but that she should be released at this particular monastery is highly symbolic for two reasons: Firstly, the theme of the vanity of human wishes, which is the theme of the novel *Rasselas* itself, relates to the life of St. Anthony [c. 251-356], the founder of the monastery. Secondly the desert where the monastery is located is an ideal setting for her liberation. St. Anthony, a noble born ascetic, founded the monastery in the fourth century A.D. after unsuccessfully leading a life of contemplation in the deserts of Egypt. ⁶⁶

Griffith draws attention also to the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt through the deserts and concludes:

"When one remembers Pekuah was imprisoned at the extremity of Egypt and her liberation occurred in the desert, one can see that she, like the Hebrews, followed a similar geographical path to deliverance and salvation." ⁶⁷

According to this view, it is not surprising that Johnson used the monastery to symbolize Pekuah's ordeal and salvation, given his scholarship in the classics and Biblical studies, including the writings of the church fathers.

In the context of the novel as a whole, however, the symbolic significance of Pekuah and of the monastery goes beyond that. At this crucial junction in the story, an intense and remarkable interaction is brought into play between the royal siblings and their companions. Nekayah reminds Pekuah of her role, but eventually she needs her brother's support to overcome her companion's captivity. Meanwhile, these innocent travelers acquire knowledge from their base in Cairo. Neither the desert, nor the monastery, which contrast with the rest of the topography they had to leave behind, contribute to this effort. Thus, although the symbolism of the topography underlines the story and adds "greater significance to his [Johnson's] work", as Griffiths says, it is Cairo, the capital of Egypt, which is used to symbolize the end of their search for happiness. If Johnson intended a link between his novel

⁶⁶ Griffith, *op.cit.*, p. 41.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

and the founder of the monastery it could not have been more than an allusion to the fourth century, when the ascetic lived and when Christianity became established in Ethiopia.

Johnson, Ethiopia and a Classical romance, *Ethiopian Story* by Heliodorus

Either way, Johnson's reference to the classics brings into context the other novel on Ethiopia, Heliodorus' *Ethiopian Story*⁶⁸, which contrasts with his *Rasselas*. Heliodorus's romance both begins in Ethiopia, where a black queen in Egypt gives birth to a white daughter, Chariclea, supposedly because the queen saw the picture of Andromeda at the crucial moment, and culminates in Ethiopia. The book is a romance between the heroine Chariclea and the hero, Theagenes. An Ethiopian king initiates war against the lieutenant of Egypt because he sought to occupy some mines; he fights by flooding the waters of the Nile. His army captures the hero and heroine along with their female companion, a wicked slave, and their male companion, a coward and chatterer. The king of Ethiopia acknowledges Chariclea as his daughter, and she marries Theagenes. Back in Ethiopia, Theagenes becomes a priest of the sun and Chariclea a priestess of the moon, thus achieving a height of glory.

The similarity between Heliodorus' and Johnson's work is in the underlying "Augustan" approach to the universal theme of a human concern with spirituality. Johnson's shyness to discuss spiritual matters in *Rasselas*, "in terms as little specifically Christian as possible", with characters from Christian *Abyssinia*, illustrates his deliberate utilizing of Ethiopia as a background "familiar" to him. The novels contrast a lot: Chariclea and Theagenes find deliverance back in Ethiopia, where the story ends with their marriage. In *Rasselas* instead, marriage is only discussed in general terms by the prince and his sister, and their companion, who could have been married by her Arab captor, returns with a tale of his harem. The romance about marriage was deliberately avoided. The flooding of the Nile, deliberately carried out by the Ethiopian king in Heliodorus' book, becomes instrumental in bringing them back to Ethiopia, rather than leaving them stranded in Egypt as in *Rasselas* .

It is here appropriate to recall an aspect of the 18th century rethinking of European classics, particularly with reference to Egypt and the Mediterranean world. In his book, *Black Athena*,

68 I am indebted to Professor Ken Parker who drew my attention to this work in 1987.

Martin Bernal draws attention to this process which he believes effectively changed the ancient model of history, giving prominence to Greece over Egypt. According to him, while the revolutionaries and the Freemasons were engrossed in their rediscovery and admiration of ancient Egyptian civilization, including the pyramids and its measurements, others, notably linguists and literary figures, were actively rediscovering and interpreting anew Greco-Roman classical literature and history.⁶⁹

It should be noted too, that in 1669, almost two-thirds of a century before Johnson translated Lobo's *A Voyage to Abissinia*, the Freemasons and the Royal Society had brought out a summary translation of *Ethiopian Story*. A Tory, Johnson was reportedly opposed to anything Whigs were interested in and objected to Freemasonry and their interest in the Nile and Egypt. His interest in Lobo's book may have been accidental, but his flooding of the Nile in *Rasselas* could have been in the context of this hostile perspective. His use of *Abyssinia* in that historical context may represent a possible example of the deliberate transition from what Bernal (1987) calls the "old model" of history to the "new".⁷⁰ As Earl Wesserman asserts in the context of how Johnson focuses his readers on the intellectual concerns of his characters, the "eighteenth century produced a literature that, like Johnson's performance on the moral commonplace questions [in *Rasselas*], transforms, and undermines the established norms themselves. And the fact suggests the possibility of a spectrum of eighteenth century subversive and transformative strategies".⁷¹ Johnson's multi-faceted *Rasselas* achieved a transformation also in how Ethiopia became *Abyssinia* through the available literature.

Johnson's representation of the travelers' starting place in Ethiopia as a Valley of idyllic sensual happiness, rather than as a mountain symbolizing intellectual stimulation, contrasts with the image of the land of the powerful monarch depicted in the third century novel. In addition, his Ethiopian royalty are innocent personalities almost in the state of nature, unlike those of Heliodorus. He contrasts them with the peoples through whose countries first the philosopher and later, to a lesser extent, the others travel. Imlac the philosopher becomes a poet, obviously a highly valued art, only after visiting Persia and Arabia. On his return home,

69 Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: the Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Vol 1: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985*, Free Association Books, 1987, p.170-172.

70 *Ibid*, Chapter, III.

71 "Johnson's *Rasselas*: Implicit Contexts" *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol 74, 1975 p. 2.

Imlac reports, his companions (obviously incapable of appreciating poetry) “considered me as one corrupted by foreign manners”. Most telling of the intention, of course, is the contrast with the Europeans. The prince asks:

“By what means...are the Europeans thus powerful? or why, since they can so easily visit Asia and Africa for trade or conquest, cannot the Asiaticks and Africans invade their coasts, plant colonies in their ports, and give laws to their natural princes? The same wind that carries them back would bring us thither.”

The philosopher responds

“They are more powerful, Sir, than we, because they are wiser; knowledge will always predominate over ignorance, as man governs the other animals. But why their knowledge is more than ours, I know not what reason can be given, but the unsearchable will of the Supreme Being.”⁷²

Johnson's biographer, Boswell, reports that on their trip to Scotland in 1781, Johnson, who he reported had not looked at the novel since it was published, read this paragraph with concentration and commented: “This, Sir, no man can explain otherwise.” Given that attitude, however, his contrast of Ethiopia with Egypt does not fare any better. He has the philosopher Imlac, on reaching Cairo, describe the city in these terms: “This ... is the place where travelers and merchants assemble from all corners of the earth. You will here find men of every character, and every occupation. Commerce is here honourable:...” Johnson reportedly despised commerce and placed in a similar package Ethiopia and the rest of the countries associated with Africa.

The Reception of *Rasselas*

Rasselas was translated into several European languages and ran into several editions before the end of the eighteenth century (both before and after Johnson's death). One appeared across the Atlantic even while Johnson was still alive. Several translations were made,

⁷² *Rasselas*, p. 63.

including a few in Italian, one of them as early as 1760 by a near contemporary of Johnson.⁷³ The more than 450 editions of the book down the centuries since it first appeared, needless to say reflecting the preoccupations and interpretations of each period. Evidently as part of the influence of the rethinking process, the attempt to categorize *Rasselas* as an “oriental” tale dominated its reception in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. From the start, this was debated around the inconclusive ending. That focus generated two sequels, both continuing to use the Ethiopian background. One was by Miss Ellis Cornelia Knight who called her sequel *Dinarbas* in 1790. Miss Knight obviously believed that *Rasselas* should have the so-called oriental ending, where the characters live happily ever after at the end of their travels. She took the travelers back to *Abyssinia* and married off the Prince. The writer of the other sequel (1835), Mrs. Whately felt that Miss Knight “continued only the narrative, and did not assuage the discontent one felt on closing the original work.” The search for happiness was “unenlightened and unaided by revealed truth.” Her own work takes the philosopher back to Ethiopia to “seek pardon and arrange the terms of the group's return. He later wrote that they had been banished, but that money for their living would be supplied.” The philosopher remains in Ethiopia, but, interestingly, his place is taken by an Englishman, Everard, who assures “the royal exiles that the debased Christianity of *Abyssinia* contains the key to happiness, and that the truth can be theirs”.⁷⁴ A prelate’s wife writing for young persons, she wanted to bring about a happier conclusion by supplying the seekers of happiness “with Christian hopes and Christian motives”. Throwing back the philosopher into his mountain, and replacing him by an Englishman (Johnson's superior European?), she like Johnson, used the Ethiopian/*Abyssinian* story to pass on certain precepts of Christianity.⁷⁵

Rasselas affected other works too on Ethiopia that came out in this early period. The first of these was that of the Scottish traveler, James Bruce of Kinnaird (1730-1794), who returned from Ethiopia with reports of his first hand experiences while Johnson was still alive. Bruce published in 1790 a five volume work, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile in the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772, and 1773*. Despite the claims to the contrary, Johnson, who continued to be interested in Ethiopia, is said to have led criticism against him, calling

73 “Per La Fortuna Del “*Rasselas*” di Samuel Johnson in Italia: Una Versione Inedita di Guiseppe Baretti”, *Geornale Storico della Letteratura Italiana*, 55 (1910) 339-356.

74 George Sherburn, “*Rasselas* Returns to What?”, *Philological Quarterly*, xxxviii (July, 1959) pp. 383-384.

75 Discussed in Robert F. Metzdorf, “The Second Sequel to *Rasselas*” in the *New Rambler*, no. 1 (January, 1950).

him “the Abyssinian Liar”, referring to the drawing of a lyre James Bruce had published. Possibly that he did not want to acknowledge the existence of instruments that would hint at high culture.

In this, as in other works on Ethiopia, two tenets kept appearing. One was the subtle suggestion that Ethiopian Christianity needed further enlightenment. This resulted from Johnson’s use of “Augustan” spirituality on the Ethiopian material, successfully masking that the Ethiopia he was drawing on was a Christian country. The other was that the country, limited to a mountainous heartland, was also in a static stage of civilization and in need of European intervention. Indeed, “the Mountains of *Rasselas*” became a difficult image to relinquish. Recording his impressions of Däbrä Damo, Henry Salt wrote that on seeing Däbrä Damo, “of which in the earliest periods of the Abyssinian history, served as a place of confinement for the younger branches of the reigning sovereign.” He continues

“from the circumstances of my being a native of Lichfield, that my thoughts immediately recurred to the beautiful and instructive romance, founded on this custom by Dr. Johnson, whose character, from a pure union of ability and feeling, was impressed on my mind by local connexion, as an object of admiration, from my childhood; and I feel assured, that I shall stand excused for observing, that the reflections which his interesting tale gave rise to, on this as well as on many other occasions, added greatly, from a natural association of ideas, to the pleasure which I experienced in traversing the wild regions of Ethiopia....”⁷⁶

Half a century later, during the British expedition to Maqdela, *Rasselas* was a point of discussion in the British parliament. One member, Lord Beaconsfield, exulted that by an expedition to *Abyssinia* “the standard of St. George was hoisted upon the mountains of *Rasselas*,” but Justin McCarthy retorted: “the idea that Johnson actually had in his mind the very *Abyssinia* of geography and history, when he described the Happy Valley, was in itself trying to gravity”.⁷⁷ In those heydays of British footholds in and around Ethiopia, with the colonial spirit in full swing, *Rasselas* had direct implications for the mundane political

⁷⁶ *A Voyage to Abyssinia* (London, 1814) pp. 248-249.

⁷⁷ Quoted by Lord Stanley of Alderley (from *History of our Own Times*) in his introduction to *Francisco Alvarez’ Narratives of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia during the years 1520-1527*, Hakluyt Society No. LXIV (London 1881), p viii. Cf. John Robert Moore, “*Rasselas* and the Early Travelers to Abyssinia,” *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol 15, No 1 March, 1954, p. 36.

realities of the day, and indeed their influences on them cannot be not easily dismissed. In the nineteenth century, editors and scholars on *Rasselas* insisted that the book was a philosophical treatise with no reference at all to Ethiopia.

With the novel's fame across Europe and its huge number of over 450 editions, scholars continued to hold anniversary celebrations. By the 1990 they were also mulling over Johnson's influence on images of Ethiopia. Despite denials *Rasselas* remained relevant to travelers, political representatives and missionaries who tried to forge links between Europe and Ethiopia. The image of mountainous Christian Ethiopia, a label popularized by *Rasselas*, remained one of the caricatures dominating European perceptions about Ethiopian politics and history. Exceptional trends emerged in the nineteen thirties, during the campaigns to resist Italian aggression and colonialism in Ethiopia. These tried to present a positive image of Ethiopia by using the topography in *Rasselas*. Some, notably those who campaigned to defend Ethiopia from the Fascists, used the romantic notion of Ethiopia as a mysterious Christian country with an ancient civilization, even quoting it in their prefaces. Of course, despite its origins and limitations, *Abyssinia* was not always used for colonialist purposes alone. Not a few scholars and diplomats also romanticized images of its monarchy, landscape, people, and ancient relics. In the 1930's some used it in campagins against Fascism and Italian occupation of the country. There was a European scholarly tradition that acknowledged and used the term Ethiopia too. The Hakluyit Society, for instance, reproduced old travel books and documents, using the word Ethiopia and others tried to put across that perspective on the country.⁷⁸

The continued association of the images also influenced major political decisions also after World War II, when Ethiopia's association with any non-Christian and low-lying areas in North East Africa was seriously challenged. Their material, including their criticisms of the country and its peoples, were appropriated for purposes of straightening out Europe's colonial agenda. They generated deconstructionist attributes that overshadowed the positivist traditions. Some still imagine a terrain in northern Ethiopia as *Abyssinia*, and despite the currently available information on the complex history and multiplicity of religions and languages within it, others consider Ethiopia as a state in a country and people without a

⁷⁸ It is of circumstantial significance that *Theagenes and Chariclea* waited to be reprinted until the twentieth century, in competition to *Rasselas*.

sense of nationhood or even connections among them. Some, even those whose purpose is remote from defining the country's name, take the colonialist imageries to their logical conclusions by simply assuming that the word was a "former" name of Ethiopia.⁷⁹

***Rasselas* in Ethiopia**

The territorial and other problematic and romantic images of *Abyssinia* were not conveyed in an Amharic translation of *Rasselas* by Sirak Hərūy who gave it the title “*Rasselas :Mäsfänä Ethiopia*” “*Rasselas : History of an Ethiopian Prince.*” Interestingly made at the instigation of the Press officer in the British Information Office in Ethiopia,⁸⁰ the translation was first serialized in an embassy Amharic monthly in 1945. With World War II about to conclude, the British were preparing to decide on the disposition of the East African colonial territories from where they had helped drive out the Italians. Their diplomatic community in Ethiopia was divided into two, one group claiming that Ethiopia must be placed under the British Middle East Command as occupied enemy territory, and another supporting Ethiopia's sovereignty on the grounds that its patriotic resistance had achieved Italian defeat. Although the British had supported Emperor Haile Selassie when the Second World War had begun to affect Europe and its colonies, the Ethiopian government had to put up dogged resistance well into the 1960s to thwart British claims over Ethiopia.

Nonetheless, it would not be farfetched to conclude that the instigator of the Amharic translation of *Rasselas* was underlining the anti-Fascist campaigns on behalf of Ethiopia, an issue that had become a tradition by the 1930s. The serial was introduced to readers as an example of Ethiopia's renown and fame in the Europe of Samuel Johnson's days. Using Ethiopia in the title and text meant acknowledging the tradition of European scholarship that saw Samuel Johnson as someone who was inspired by his knowledge of material on Ethiopia, but there was no other attempt to place the work in the context of history of the novel in English literature. Accidentally coming at the time when Ethiopia, the earliest victim of the Axis powers, had been recovering from the shock of the Italian occupation in 1935-1941, and at a time of serious shortages of text books and reading material for schools, *Rasselas*

⁷⁹ See, for instance, fn 20 above.

⁸⁰Molvaer, Reidulf K., *Black Lions: the Creative Lives of Modern Ethiopia's Literary Giants and Pioneers*, 1997, 177-78.

impressed the post-war generation of Amharic readers. That Ethiopia was a subject of a novel in such a far away and (in the context of World War II) mighty place as Britain was important to that generation, and perhaps to the British diplomat who instigated the translation. Both the history of the use of the word *Abyssinia* and the place of *Rasselas* and its author in English literature were lost on its readers in Amharic, leaving them none the wiser as to the purpose achieved by the work.

More significantly, travel writers sustained the romantic image of the mountainous terrain, and at least one, Thomas Pakenham, set out to look for the ancient prison, calling his travel book, *The Mountains of Rasselas*.⁸¹ Books used in tertiary level education were mostly by academics who had accepted *Abyssinia*, or at least, never questioned it. Indeed, some academics treated *Abyssinia* as a "former name" of the country, while the majority opined a terrain in northern Ethiopia with that designation. Donald Levine records that Ethiopians he met in the early sixties objected to the term, and only a few other scholars, among them Sven Rubenson, have pointed out its divisive and colonialist manifestations in the nineteenth century. Despite later scholarship that has availed of information on the complex history and multiplicity of religions and languages within Ethiopia, the name *Abyssinia* was persistently used by student led political movements for revolution and Eritrean secession. This in turn misled some to assert that Ethiopia is a country with neither a sense of nationhood nor political connections among its people. Many Ethiopian readers of foreign language works continue to think of the Amharic translation of *Rasselas* as an example of the benign and exotic importance Ethiopia had for foreigners. The view is remarkably similar to how their ancestors perceived foreigners who were traversing the landscape during the nineteenth century. Others see *Abyssinia* as a term that was popularized by the discourse of revolutionaries and Eritrean secessionists.

The function of *Abyssinia* in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* is by now remote, indirect and almost imperceptible. The word his work popularized, however, continues its corrosive effect on the Ethiopian sense of 'nation', just as it did during the colonial period. Rather like the eighteenth century, when Ethiopian resources were used for debating the Reformation,

⁸¹ Pakenham, Thomas, , *The Mountains of Rasselas: an Ethiopian Adventure*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1959. Pakenham had also written on the history of the incarceration of royal rivals: "Gondar and the Mountain" in *History Today*, vol. 7, 1957, pp. 172-181.

scholars in the late twentieth century used some aspects of Ethiopian politics for investigating the viability of the nation state, often with reference to academic books that construct history on the basis of colonial records. In their works, *Abyssinia* is a nexus for challenging the nature of both government and state. In practical politics, this trend is reflected in the denial of the very existence of Ethiopia as a nation.. Three significant issues, all of which began in the 1960s, are notable in this regard: the challenge posed to the monarchy from the educated elite seeking social and economic justice, the Eritrean secessionist movement, and the ethnic based search for self-determination (the latter coming to the fore in the mid to late seventies). Essentially “conscious” of the *Abyssinian* “other”, the complexities of these stem from their revolutionary intentions, supplemented by Marxist-Leninist interpretations of the oppression of ethnic “nationalities” with rights to self-determination. The Eritrean secessionist movement specified its legitimacy for liberation by reference to the Italian colonialist interlude, while elsewhere the “nationalities” simply plead the need for throwing off the “*Abyssinian*” yoke. All protagonists draw up a dichotomy between “*Abyssinia*” and themselves in [a new] Ethiopia. Whether or not this is warranted, some of those who vie for political power continue to use the same conclusions, along with the European mythical *Abyssinia*, as a nexus for their discourse on Ethiopian nationhood.

It is in that context that non-Ethiopians who hold *Abyssinia* as a historical reality have denied Ethiopian identity. One of them for instance, John Sorenson, wrote his *Imagining Ethiopia: Struggles for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa*,⁸² to illustrate that Ethiopia is a construct of the imagination of some local kings and European colonialists. He makes *Abyssinia* his starting point for exploring the political identity of Ethiopian states. Given the challenges posed by ethnic “nationalists” for throwing off “the *Abyssinian* yoke”,⁸³ he asserts, Ethiopia has no local base and the nature and identity of the state is not national. Emphatically refuting also the images of Ethiopia that continued to be shaped by western perceptions of its political economy under the military dictatorship, 1975-91, he concludes that, in and of itself, Ethiopia fails to generate an identity that can be considered coherent and continuous, as claimed by the legitimizing myths of the state under the monarchy and its successors.

82 John Sorenson, (1993), *Imagining Ethiopia: Struggles for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

83 Among his substantial references is such works as Bonny Holcomb and Sisay Ibsa *The Invention of Ethiopia*, The Red Sea Press, Trenton New Jersey, 1990.

Thus use, European conception of *Abyssinia* raises three academic issues on aspects of the country's history: the problems of national identity in a 'failed state', the prominence of ethnicity in Africa, and the political transformations arising from the search for social and economic justice. These issues currently form the backdrop to new trends such as one scholar's conclusion that Ethiopia was imagined or invented by *Abyssinians* in the nineteenth century.⁸⁴ They are also pertinent to similar such statements as the state lacking a cohesion, continuity and identity,⁸⁵ or new identities being forged out of *Abyssinia*.⁸⁶ Some papers of the 1997 International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Kyoto, Japan⁸⁷, and the volume *Remapping Ethiopia*,⁸⁸ reflected on these issues comprehensively. In the context of political developments on ethnic and national identities they reconsidered old and new models of scholarship.⁸⁹

The prominence of the politics of self-identity in Africa, particularly ethnicity, has pushed to the fore old debates in a new light, that run counter to the anthropological and historical debates in the nineteen seventies. With a view to localizing the perspectives during and after colonialism, these had articulated European traditional knowledge about far off places and peoples. They have also opened up investigations into various angles on political thinking. Undoubtedly a political question in post-colonial Africa, ethnic difference has been brought to the fore in the Ethiopian context. In that context, blotting out ethnic differences for

84 Sorenson, John, *Imagining Ethiopia: Struggles for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa*, Rutgers University Press, 1993.

85 See for instance Bonnie Holcombe and Sisai Ibssa 1990, *The Invention of Ethiopia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

86 See for instance *Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Enquiries*, T. W. Baxter, Jan Hultin and Alessandro Triulzi (eds), The Red Sea Press, 1996.

87 *Ethiopia in Broader Perspectives: Papers of the XIIIth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Katsuyoshi Fukui, Eisei Kurimoto and Masayoshi Shigeta, (ed), Kyoto, 1997; this is a follow up of the critical studies in *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies: Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Harold Marcus (ed), 1994.

88 the volumes cited in fns. Above.

89 Such academic curiosity about Ethiopian identity has also been animated by political movements that have raised the banner of the "nationality" of ethnic groups and their right to self-determination. The earliest of these, the Eritrean movement, traced its roots to colonial history and combined its struggle for independence with controlling a territory that Italy carved out of northern Ethiopia. Its protégés the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) followed the same policies at their inception.

political contestations in traditional Ethiopia has taken on a different meaning. Re-read as self-identity, it has followed the strongly divisive connotation promoted by the use of *Abyssinia*, but with a couple of new twists: Ethiopia as a colonizer and Ethiopia as a non-existent nation. To say the least, it has glossed over the history of attempted colonialism (1896 and 1935-41) that Ethiopia resisted successfully as a nation. The promotion of Ethiopia as a colonial state that arose from *Abyssinia*, and comprising disparate ethnic or linguistic groups has pushed aside pertinent debates on the effects of globalization on Ethiopia and its independence, let alone any positive consideration of the development of its human population as a nation.

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