

When Ethiopians Were Declared White: The Racialised Reconstruction of Identities in Europe and Africa After the Battle of Adwa (1896)

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Abstract

After the Berlin Conference (1884–1885), the Scramble for Africa formally began, and Europeans occupied the continent with seemingly unstoppable success. They claimed that their mission was to bring “the blessings of civilisation” to African peoples, who were widely regarded as inferior. Although Ethiopia at the time had a Christian population and was in the process of becoming a unified state, its people were not exempt from this racialised definition. Within European discourse, they were frequently described as “barbarians” and “savages”. However, this perception changed after the army led by Emperor Menelik II defeated the Italians at the Battle of Adwa in 1896, thereby crushing Italy’s colonial ambitions in Ethiopia. In the following months, Western newspapers such as *The Times* (London) declared that Ethiopia should be recognised as “a civilised power”, while across the Atlantic, *The New York Times* asserted that Ethiopians were “not black, but of Caucasian descent, as the Anglo-Saxon or the Celt”. As Marcus (2005) observed, “the Europeans had to rationalise Menelik’s victory”, since acknowledging defeat at the hands of Black people was inconceivable given the ideology of European superiority that had legitimised colonisation. Consequently, the victors had to be “whitened”. Moreover, the outcome of Adwa played a significant role in reshaping African identities: the battle became a powerful symbol that Africans could defeat Europeans, yet it also contributed to new distinctions between “successful” and “unsuccessful” Africans. This paper aims to explore the repercussions of these cross-constructed European and African narratives following the Battle of Adwa.

Keywords: identities, Africa, resistance, European colonialism

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Introduction

The most intense phase of what is known as the Scramble for Africa began after the Berlin Conference (November 15, 1884 to February 26, 1885). It was then that Europeans sought to make effective the domination agreed upon and negotiated over the course of the three months of this international meeting. Most of the participants rushed to establish their respective colonial states to prevent their rights from being contested as the Berlin Act signed at the end of the conference enshrined the *uti possidetis juris* principle (Hasani, 2003, p. 87), which required demonstrating the effective occupation of the territory to the other signatories in order to definitively establish domination. Furthermore, the act based these actions on bringing “the blessings of civilisation” to African peoples, who were considered inferior (Ceamanos, 2017, p. 55).

The process involved an inexorable advance across the continent, with African resistance movements failing one after another. Within this context, Ethiopia emerged as the *rara avis* of Africa: the government of *negus nagast*¹ Menelik II confronted the European colonisers and defeated them in more than one battle. Nevertheless, the event that became the symbol of this kingdom’s strength against the Europeans was the battle fought at Adwa on March 1, 1896. It was much more than an isolated victory, as it marked the definitive defeat of Italy in the First Italo-Ethiopian War and put an end to European ambitions and intrusions in that territory.² Among other episodes, Ethiopia had suffered the British expedition to Abyssinia in 1868, which had left behind death and the looting of local cultural heritage. That defeat, and others, would be eclipsed by the memory of Adwa.

The battle was not simply an African military victory. Its significance went much further: in order to sustain the justification of “dominate to civilise”, it became necessary, after Adwa, to reshape Western perceptions of Ethiopian Africans. As victors, it was no longer convenient to consider them Black—a term that, since the time of the Atlantic slave trade, had been synonymous with inferiority and savagery.

Humiliation and Plunder: The Abyssinian Expedition (1868)

To understand the significance of the Battle of Adwa, it is essential to revisit the historical circumstances that preceded it in Ethiopian territory. First, it should be noted that the existence of Ethiopia as a political unit was not an evident fact between the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century. It was Tewodros II who initiated the path towards the unification of Ethiopia. He managed to impose military control over the various local princes and proclaimed himself *negus nagast* in 1855, establishing the capital in Magdala. By that time, European incursions into Ethiopian territory—referred to as Abyssinia³—had already begun.

In negotiations with the British, who had offered their support to counter Egyptian threats, Tewodros II decided to write to Queen Victoria of England to request assistance in protecting his people from Muslim persecutions on the Red Sea coast and in the Nile Valley.⁴ To ensure

¹ King of kings in amharic.

² Italy insisted on the occupation of Ethiopia during Benito Mussolini’s government, but it lasted only four years (1936-1941).

³ It was the word used by Europeans to refer to Ethiopia until the mid-20th century. It derives from the Arabic term *Habesha* employed to name some peoples that lived in Northern Ethiopia.

⁴ Ethiopia territory suffered from Egyptian incursions since 1830.

the letter reached the Queen, he entrusted it to Charles Duncan Cameron, the British consul, who was preparing to travel to London. However, Cameron completely ignored Tewodros's request, and upon his return in 1863, the *negus nagast* decided to take him and other Europeans hostage (Araia, 2006). As Dominioni (2025) recounts, this episode triggered the British expedition to Abyssinia in 1868:

News of the British military mission's landing on the coast reached Magdala on November 13, 1867, and over the following weeks, information about their advance became increasingly abundant. The optimism and confidence of the prisoners grew. During the same period, however, Tewodros had to face multiple conflicts and internal revolts, which ultimately weakened his political prestige and military strength. Large areas were devastated with such violence that, after the repression, the local communities refused to submit, and the emperor's own men deserted en masse. Chronicles, reports, and British sources from that time unanimously state that Tewodros became increasingly harsh with rebels and his own men, losing clarity and reason to the detriment of his popular support. (p. 6)

This situation meant that, before facing the British, Tewodros's army had been reduced to 5,000 armed men, accompanied by about one hundred prisoners and several thousand soldiers' family members and their servants, without proper structure or organisation. The burdens of the march became insurmountable. When British Field Marshal Sir Robert Napier arrived in Magdala on April 9 and attacked, Tewodros's army quickly disbanded, and the prisoners were freed at the end of the battle. Although they achieved their immediate objective, the British bombarded and destroyed Magdala (Marcus, 1994, pp. 71–72).

The expedition was labeled as “punitive”, since even though the prisoners were released after the first day of battle, the British killed hundreds of people in mere retaliation. On top of that, Tewodros took his own life to avoid capture (Hailu, 2020, p. 6), while his wife, Tiruwork, and his son, Alemayehu, were taken prisoner. The empress died a month later, and her son passed away in November 1879 at just eighteen years old, in Leeds (Heavens, 2025, part two).

The Abyssinian expedition and the Battle of Magdala can be considered the lowest points in Ethiopian morale and pride in the face of European powers. In addition to the military defeat, the emperor's suicide, the affront to his family, and the number of deaths caused by British vengeance, the Ethiopians endured an attack on their cultural heritage. Valuable artistic and cultural artifacts were looted, including a 16th-century manuscript of the *Kebrā Nagast*⁵ and an icon of Christ with a crown of thorns known as the *Kwer'ata Re'esu Icon*, which was never returned.⁶ This plunder was not a spontaneous act by British soldiers; a member of the British Museum's staff accompanied the troops, which “demonstrates that it was a planned looting” (Gunning & Challis, 2023, p. 553).

The Italian Advance and the Retreat of Humiliations

Francesco Crispi, who was Italy's Prime Minister (1887-1891 and 1893-1896), implemented concrete colonisation policies that also involved the settlement of European colonists. Crispi

⁵ Meaning “The Glory of Kings”, it is a text written in Ge'ez language in the 14th century that refers to the Solomonic lineage in Ethiopia.

⁶ It is an iconic portrait of Christ with the crown of thorns revered by Ethiopian emperors. After being looted it was sold and nowadays it remains in private Portuguese hands.

maintained that the colonies “must be like arms” of the country (quoted in Choate, 2003, pp. 66–67). These policies took concrete form in the Horn of Africa, where, in the 1880s, there were still territories that had not been effectively colonised or “partitioned” and that also offered great strategic and commercial interest.

Tewodros’s successor was Yohannes IV, the *negus*⁷ of Tigray and one of his most important vassals, who was committed to “not yielding an inch of Ethiopian territory” (Isaac, 2025, p. 166). He sought to avoid armed conflict and instead achieve diplomatic agreements. However, this was not enough in the face of the Italians, whose military operations brought about one of the deficiencies Ethiopia still suffers nowadays: the loss of sea access. In 1883, the Italian army established a coal supply station in the Bay of Assab, located in the Gulf of Aden. Two years later, their soldiers seized the port of Beilul. They continued a series of movements that led them to settle along the Red Sea coast. In 1886, with the support of Great Britain and Germany, they occupied the most important port in the region, Massawa (Zaccaria, 2007), definitively blocking Ethiopian access to the Red Sea and later extending their domination over 650 miles of coastline between Cape Kasar and the French enclave of Obock, now Djibouti. Nevertheless, the Italians did not stop there and sought to continue their expansion inland, under the orders of Prime Minister Agostino Depretis the following year.

In response, *negus nagast* Yohannes IV attacked the Italian positions established in the border towns of Ua-à and Zula, resulting in the death of more than 400 European soldiers and a total defeat for Italy at the Battle of Dogali on January 25, 1887. To honor them, the Italian government erected an Egyptian obelisk in Piazza dei Cinquecento in front of Rome’s Termini Station, where their names were inscribed as national “heroes”. However, despite this defeat—and taking advantage of the *negus nagast*’s death in battle against Sudanese dervishes—the Italians continued advancing into the provinces of Hamacen, Okule-Kasai, and Serae (McLachlan, 2011, pp. 4–5).

Despite the Italian expansion over what is now Eritrea and the definitive blockade of Ethiopia’s access to the sea, the succeeding *negus nagast*, Menelik II, sought to reach an agreement rather than turn to arms again. In 1889, the same year of his coronation, he signed the Treaty of Friendship and Commerce between the Kingdom of Italy and the Ethiopian Empire at Wuchale (or Ucciali, in the Italian version). Article 1 of the treaty established that there would be “perpetual peace” between both signatories and their respective successors, servants, and protected populations, and that the Ethiopian emperor recognised Italy’s positions in Massawa and Asmara, as well as the area between the Red Sea and the Mareb River, meaning there was no dispute regarding Italy’s occupation of what is now Eritrea (Art. 3). However, the problem arose with Article 17: in the Amharic version, it stated that the Ethiopian emperor “could”, meaning optionally, manage his foreign relations with the intervention of the King of Italy, while the Italian version stated that he “must” do so through the King of Italy, which effectively turned Ethiopia into an Italian protectorate (Lozano Alonso, 2023, p. 44). Upon realising the deception, Menelik II decided to annul the treaty in 1893.

This background set the stage for the First Italo-Ethiopian War, during which the Italians sought to continue their expansion. However, just as Dogali had resulted in a disastrous outcome for the Europeans, the successive military actions would only worsen the

⁷ King or governor.

consequences. It is worth noting that the colony of Eritrea had been officially established in 1890, but not all was peaceful for the Italians. They had to confront Bahta Hagos's rebellion in 1894, led by a military commander who gathered 1,600 soldiers and challenged the Italians on December 19 of that year (Cimatti, 2022, p. 48). The Italians were only able to suppress the rebellion after changing their land appropriation policies to gain the support of local peoples exploited by landowners (López Villicaña, 2004, p. 12).

After controlling the internal rebellions, the Italians decided to materialise their desire to expand their colonial possessions inland and crossed the Ethiopian border to raid the Tigray region. This formally marked the beginning of the First Italo-Ethiopian War, which had its initial clash on December 7, 1895, at Amba Alagi, where the Italian army, led by General Oreste Baratieri, suffered a decisive defeat, losing a quarter of its forces (Zewde, 2001, 2.15). However, the worst for the Italians was yet to come: just under three months later, on March 1, 1896, they faced the Ethiopians again at Adwa, where Menelik II's forces—approximately 120,000 men—defeated the four Italian brigades, which had roughly one-sixth of that number and lost almost 6,000 soldiers. Although the Ethiopians also suffered around 10,000 casualties, Italy's failure was total. It led to the fall of Crispi's Italian government, which had ordered the incursion, and it marked the end of Italian ambitions in Ethiopia, that remained an independent kingdom.

The Meaning of Victory

The analysis of why Ethiopia achieved a military victory, beyond the significant difference in the size of the armies, has focused on the difficulties the Italians faced with an unfamiliar terrain, inaccurate maps, and the Ethiopians' tactical superiority. It has also been noted that, despite differences among the various regional leaders, there was a shared sense of unity that they prioritized in the face of the Italian invasion. Nevertheless, what interests us here is how this battle influenced the transformation of how both the colonisers and the Ethiopians perceived themselves, as well as how they perceived each other, supposedly belonging to different levels of civilization.

The leading newspapers of the time quickly took on the task of reporting on the battle and analysing its effects and consequences. For *The Times* of London, the defeat plunged Italy into a crisis “that will affect not only its own future but that of Europe in general” (*The Italian Disaster*, March 5, 1896, p. 5). *La Tribuna* of Rome published the words of the President of the Senate, who declared: “It is the first time that a civilised nation has trembled because of the outcome of its actions against barbarians” (September 5, 1896, p. 1). Meanwhile, *The Spectator*, another London newspaper, focused on the racialised opposition between the civilised and the uncivilised, which the defeat seemed to overturn: “The Italians suffered a great disaster in Abyssinia, one that, in fact, is greater than any other modern defeat experienced by white men in Africa” (*The Italian Disaster in Abyssinia*, March 7, 1896, p. 4). In other words, as Birhanu Teferra (1996) summarised one hundred years later, “the victory shattered Europe's aura of invincibility regarding the white European armies, and they saw that there were people out there proud of their history, their prowess, and their simplicity. The myth of European invincibility was torn apart by Menelik” (p. 467).

While the Italians had previously referred to the Ethiopian soldiers as “an army of undisciplined and poorly armed savages,” they found it very difficult “to swallow the bitter reality of having been defeated by them” (Waktola, 2023, p. 111). On the Ethiopian side, the

image they had of themselves—formed during the time of the British expedition to Abyssinia thirty years earlier—completely changed:

Until then, Europeans in Abyssinia had been regarded with respect, if not fear. Adwa, to use a colloquialism, completely ruined the Europeans' plans and entirely altered the natives' perception. To this day, most Abyssinians believe that they not only brought Italy to its knees but all of Europe, and their heads were held high in equal measure. This leads us to think that England was included in this category, and certainly, as far as those in the south are concerned, they completely forgot about Magdala. Since we had never before engaged in political relations with Menelik—and in fact, we did not because we considered him to be under the protectorate of, or at war with, our friends, the Italians—and since the idea that we were the ones who supplied the Italians with the money to carry out their campaign is firmly rooted in Abyssinia, our prestige in the country is greatly diminished and can be said to have hit its lowest point at the beginning of 1897. (Gleichen, 1898, p. 4)

These words by Lord Edward Gleichen come from his observations during the long governmental mission he led in Ethiopia one year after the battle. This mission was specifically aimed at strengthening relations with the local people and rulers to repair the damaged image of the British. But for the British, the Italians, and the Western world in general, the challenge was much greater, because they not only had to rebuild their image in the eyes of the Ethiopians but also in front of the entire world. How could they accept the defeat of white Europeans at the hands of Black people—those considered inferior and in need of civilisation according to colonial discourse—while still upholding the moral justification for the process of domination?

It was the international press that sought to answer this question, an issue that affected not only Italy but also Europe and the so-called Western world as a whole. Thus, referring to the Ethiopians—who, not long before, had been regarded as just another group of Africans in need of civilisation as part of the colonial expansion—*The Spectator* noted: “This dynasty of dark-skinned men, nominally Christian, is orderly enough to be admitted to relations with Europe” (*The Mission to Menelek*, February 27, 1897, p. 7). And *The Times* of London, which had previously described the Ethiopians as a “barbarian enemy”, later declared that they were “a civilised power, both in the way they conduct war and in their diplomatic practices” (quoted by Pankhurst, 2005, p. 218).

Nevertheless, the most striking shift came from the other side of the Atlantic. A few years before the battle, *The New York Times* had published an article about the “cruel” torture practices carried out by *negus* Menelik (*Cruel Tortures*, January 14, 1894, p. 20), later criticising him for his determination “to suppress anyone who reported on his plans against the Italians”, while boasting of “being a direct descendant of David and Solomon” (*Pretensions of King Menelik*, August 18, 1895, p. 20). Furthermore, the newspaper reported that after Menelik recovered ancient Ethiopian books to establish a library, the people—“although they could not read—superstitiously protected the treasure” (*King's Menelik Ethiopian Library*, June 25, 1895, p. 14), thereby portraying Ethiopia as a land of backward and illiterate people.

These disparaging images disappeared from *The New York Times* after Adwa, replaced by entirely different ones. The notion of superstition was abandoned in favor of Ethiopia's importance “for Christendom” and “its remarkable monarch, Emperor Menelik”, since that

country was “literally the cradle of culture and Christianity”. In the same article, Europeans were criticized for having characterized the *negus nagast* as “a barbarian” (*In Christian Abyssinia*, May 4, 1896, p. 9). However, this was only part of the change in perception about Ethiopians made public by the New York newspaper. The culmination of this new perspective was forcefully expressed in the article titled *The Most Gifted of Africans*:

The Italians' experience over the past few years with the Abyssinians has shown beyond a doubt that these highlanders of the ‘Switzerland of Africa’ are decidedly a superior race compared to other peoples of the Dark Continent with whom they came into contact in the context of their colonization and partition plans. To a large extent, this superiority is the result of their origins and pedigree. Although they are the modern representatives of the Ethiopians of history and myth, they are, in fact, not Ethiopians at all. They are not Black but of Caucasian descent, as pure as the Anglo-Saxons or Celts. (*The Most Gifted of Africans*, April 19, 1896, p. 29)

Thus, after the victory at Adwa, Ethiopians were not only described as civilised, capable of engaging in diplomatic relations on equal footing with Europeans, and originating from a region considered the cradle of Christianity and culture. From then on, they were also considered “Caucasians”. As Marcus (2005) pointed out, to rationalise Menelik's victory, the West “created an alternative discourse without abandoning notions of racism, since such an admission would have conflicted with the teleology of European imperialism” (p. 396). In other words: the way to assimilate the defeat of Europeans at the hands of Black Ethiopians was to “whiten” these Africans.

The “Ethiopian Exceptionality”

More recent reflections on the impact of the Battle of Adwa point out that “the image of an independent Ethiopia, the nation that successfully stood up to the Europeans, gave inspiration and hope to Africans and African Americans”, offering “a model of independence and dignity for people anywhere in the world seeking freedom from colonial servitude” (Getachew, 2019, p. 32). However, this idea must be carefully examined, because the sense of belonging to a common African identity was set aside in favor of constructing an image of Ethiopia as an “exceptional” case. We must remember that, in the Berlin Act of 1885, the political domination process that was launched was founded on the idea of promoting “the development of civilisation” among the colonised peoples. Therefore, it became necessary to reverse the notion that the Europeans had been defeated by “uncivilised” people or, at least, by people considered to have a lower level of civilisation, similar to that attributed to the rest of the African populations.

This led to the consolidation of the idea of Ethiopia's exceptional non-Blackness (Kebede, 2021, p. 25). In order to “reconcile the European defeat with the idea of Black inferiority, they simply reclassified Ethiopians as white, or at least essentially non-Black”, which is why “it is still common today to hear Amharic-speaking Ethiopians refer to non-Arab, non-white Africans simply as Africans or Blacks, excluding themselves from that category” (Woubshet, 2011, p. 200). This line of thought also supported other conclusions about the Adwa defeat that subtly suggest that Ethiopia remained independent because it was not, strictly speaking, a country of “Black” people.

Pseudo-scientific observations and legends turned into historical sources were used to reinforce these conclusions. An example of this is the discourse presented by Eduardo Ortega

y Gasset in his book *Ethiopia*, published in 1935, shortly before the invasion ordered by Benito Mussolini. In the book, Ortega y Gasset sought to revive the notion of Ethiopian exceptionalism by linking the country's name to Cush, one of Noah's great-grandsons, and by appealing to the "mythological" lineage of the builder of the Ark. He also pointed out that the word "Abyssinia" derives from the Arabic word *habesh*, meaning "mixed", and that, when applied to the territory of Ethiopia, it would suggest "a country of mixed bloods, of mestizaje, as it truly is, since numerous and disparate races inhabit large Ethiopian territories and countless varieties have resulted from their intermixing" (Ortega y Gasset, 1935, p. 51).

This author completed the construction of the monarchical genealogy by referencing the *Kebra Nagast* and the direct descent of Ethiopian kings from Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, from whose union a son named Menelik was born—the founder of the Solomonic dynasty—coincidentally bearing the same name as the victor of Adwa. From this lineage, according to Ortega y Gasset, would emerge "the predominant, the conquering race", that is, the Amhara people, characterised by being "tall in stature," with "straight noses" and "rather thin lips," who subjugated other peoples in the region due to "their military and political superiority" (Ortega y Gasset, p. 54).

In fact, the book was aimed at criticising the new Italian advance into Ethiopia, but not as an objection to colonisation in general or in defense of the principle of sovereignty and non-intervention; what it tried to recover was the post-Adwa image of the Ethiopians, when they were reclassified as white. In the 1930s, during a fully consolidated colonial context, the new Italian actions were not reprehensible in themselves but rather because they were directed at colonising a people who no longer fit the characteristics of the rest of the peoples of the continent.

The discourse of Ethiopian exceptionalism was further consolidated by emphasizing a history that was distinct from the rest of Africa. Specifically, it stressed that Ethiopia's past was separate from that of the enslaved and racialised Africans of the Atlantic slave trade and from those racialised by colonialism. However, as Hailu (2020) observed, "the non-colonisation of Ethiopia does not mean that the country avoided colonial influences or metaphysical colonialism" (p. 20). Therefore, this construction of historical exceptionalism has led to a disregard for the harm suffered by Ethiopians as a result of European actions. Moreover, this narrative reified the notion of a radical separation among Black peoples, distinguishing between the victorious, exceptional ones, and the common, defeated ones, making Adwa the historical event that laid the foundation for that division.

Ethiopians and Africans in the Face of Adwa

Nevertheless, the significance of Adwa for Africans considered "non-exceptional" cannot be overlooked. As Gamedze and Ayalew (2021) point out, "the victory at Adwa influenced imagination and freedom struggles in a multiplicity of ways", and Ethiopia's status as "non-colonised was celebrated by the struggles of Black peoples both on the continent and in the African diaspora". Consequently, the battle can also be understood as a positive reference for Black subjects around the world, as part of an expansive process of anti-colonial resistance and the emergence of a global Black consciousness.

Regarding the effects the battle had within Ethiopia itself, it undoubtedly legitimized the unification of the country around the victorious *negus nagast*. It also helped consolidate a national consciousness and served as a reference to revive it in times of crisis. As Steward

(2020) emphasized, the Italian invasion occurred almost simultaneously with the unification process, which culminated during the reign of Menelik II. This meant that many of those who participated in the battle belonged to peoples who had been forcibly subdued and incorporated into the Ethiopian Empire. This process of internal domination, which can be described as “internal colonisation”, was thus eclipsed by an emerging national narrative that recognized Menelik as the savior against the attempt at European colonisation. However, it is essential to note that among the peoples colonised by the *negus nagast*, feelings of resistance and resentment emerged when they were called upon to fight in this battle without receiving a fair distribution of the fruits of victory.

Consequently, returning to the analysis by Gamedze and Ayalew (2021), within Ethiopia, “Adwa means different things to different groups”, so “perspectives range from those who see it as the foundation of the exceptionalism that distinguishes Ethiopia from the rest of Africa and the Black world to those who perceive it as the victory of a colonising state” (p. 105). According to these authors, in light of Adwa’s contradictory legacy, its commemoration should involve not only a critique of European colonialism but also a critique of the domination exercised by the Ethiopian state itself.

Conclusions

By preventing Ethiopia from falling into the hands of Italian colonialism, the Battle of Adwa is undoubtedly a milestone of inevitable reference when studying the period of African history that began at the end of the 19th century, during which the rest of the continent’s territories were effectively colonised. Nevertheless, without denying the historical importance of this event, the implications of the battle itself have positioned it at the center of several key discussions related to the ideology and hierarchies imposed by the Western world.

First, after Adwa, there was a profound change in how Europeans perceived Ethiopia and in how Ethiopians perceived themselves. Following the humiliation, violence, and plundering suffered just a few decades earlier as a result of the British expedition to Abyssinia, the victory at Adwa permanently altered the mutual gaze between both groups. Europeans were now faced with a people who could and knew how to defend themselves. Ethiopians, for their part, raised their heads before potential colonisers, daring to look them in the eye as equals.

However, within the framework of colonialist ideology and the role of “civilisers” that Europeans had assigned themselves, what had happened could not be incorporated into their history without the addition of certain caveats. Africans defeating the emissaries of a superior civilization, Black people defeating white people: this was an inconceivable reality. The only way to integrate this defeat into European historical memory was to redefine the victors and transform them into white people. This meant reviving ancient biblical legends, reshaping racial descriptions, and separating the Ethiopians from the African history of the slave trade and colonisation in order to justify their “exceptionality” as the victors over European invaders. This thinking, however, was not confined to the years immediately following the battle. On the contrary, the idea of difference persisted and, in fact, became internalised by part of the Ethiopian population.

Adwa, ultimately, is much more than a battle won by Africans—a battle through which one can study tactics and military strategies. In reality, it is a pivotal event for historiographical analysis because it brings together the central ideological constructs used to justify European colonisation and the identity reassignments that this domination imposed within Africa. The

battle confronted Europeans and Africans, but at the same time, it put into play the two contrasting worldviews about each other upon which the entire colonisation process was built.

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