

# Marvels in the Sky and the Making of a Colonial Empire in Africa: Shrinkage and Expansion of 'Ethiopia', 1934–1954

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***“History is not the past. It is the present”***  
***James Baldwin.***

**Abstract**

*Between 1934 and 1954, the Horn of Africa underwent a profound transformation shaped by the militarisation of empire and the disruptive force of World War II. Italy’s 1936 invasion of Abyssinia led to the creation of the so-called “Italian East African Empire,” extending fascist control from the Somali coast to Eritrea. Aerial bombardment emerged as a defining technology of modern warfare, described by Somali poet Mohamed Ali Beenaley as a “marvel in the sky,” instilling awe and fear among colonised populations. Although Italy’s imperial project was brief, Britain’s 1940 counter-expansion redrew colonial boundaries, deepening the region’s entanglement with global conflict. This paper explores how the war and its aftermath reshaped political imaginaries and territorial configurations in the Horn. Drawing on untranslated Somali poetry from the period and critical literature, it traces how a zone once cast as savage was reframed by local voices as a site of black resistance, even as postwar settlements embedded Eritrea and Ogaden into a reconstituted Ethiopian imperial order.*

**Keywords:** Somali, Ethiopia, Abyssinia, European, fascisms, Italian, British, colonialism, imperialism.

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**Cover Photo:** Enhanced photo of mperor Haile Selassie at Buckingham Palace with King George V in 1924. Source Wikipedia.

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## 1 Introduction

In the turbulent years between the two World Wars, Ethiopia emerged not merely as a state under siege but as a stage upon which competing imperial, racial, ethnic, and symbolic orders were violently enacted. This dynamic found stark expression in the 1934 clash at Walwaal—ostensibly a dispute over wells in the Ogaden—which rapidly escalated into a geopolitical flashpoint, catalysing Italy’s full-scale invasion of Abyssinia and exposing the racialised duplicity of the League of Nations (Potter, 1936; Sbacchi, 1975). Far from being a marginal episode, Walwaal mirrored other imperial provocations—such as Japan’s incursion at the Marco Polo Bridge—and confirmed the Horn of Africa as a zone of strategic and ideological contestation (Ali, 2022). Yet what distinguished the Abyssinian crisis was not solely its military dimensions, but the unprecedented symbolic elevation of Ethiopia as a vessel of black redemption and African sovereignty (Moses, 1989; Appiah, 1992).

This paper interrogates the making of “Ethiopia” as both imperial agent and mythic symbol. It traces how a feudal monarchy implicated in slavery, expansionism, and internal colonisation was rebranded through a diasporic imagination in a world structured by racial subjugation (Hussein & Ademo, 2016), European appeasement, and wartime diplomacy (Phayre, 1935; Clapham, 2023; De Grand, 2004). In doing so, it argues that the figure of Haile Selassie—and the Ethiopia he came to embody—was less a reflection of political reality than a projection of imperial contradictions and racial desires. Abyssinia was simultaneously an empire and a symbol of anti-imperial resistance; a coloniser and a victim of colonisation; a state and a salvation myth. By unpacking these dissonances, the paper demonstrates how black internationalism, European geopolitics, and Ethiopian imperialism converged to produce a powerful fiction—an invented Ethiopia that served the aspirations of many, while silencing the histories of others.

Conceptually, the paper adopts an expanded understanding of both colonialism and imperialism. Colonialism is treated as a system of domination involving political control, economic exploitation, cultural hegemony, and territorial authority, often justified through civilisational or racial hierarchies (Sartre, 2001; Fanon, 1963). While often linked to European expansion, I apply the concept to Ethiopia’s conquest of Oromo, Somali, Sidama, and Afar regions, which resembled internal colonial rule (Holcomb & Ibssa, 1990; Wolfe, 2006; Jalata, 2001). Imperialism, in turn, refers to the state’s broader expansionist logic under leaders like Menelik II, involving centralised authority, forced assimilation, and claims to civilising legitimacy (Marcus, 2002; Clapham, 2017). This framing repositions Ethiopia as both a subject of European imperialism and a regional imperial power. It highlights how these intertwined legacies continue to shape exclusion, federal fragmentation, and resistance today (Bereketeab, 2020; Kaplan, 2021; Záhorský & Teshome, 2024), challenging conventional North–South binaries in analyses of African statehood.

The paper employs a multidisciplinary historical methodology grounded in critical historiography, archival analysis, and vernacular sources. It synthesises primary materials—such as League of Nations arbitration records, British and Italian colonial documents, and translated Somali oral poetry—with secondary scholarship on imperialism, sovereignty, and decolonisation in the Horn of Africa. Particular emphasis is placed on Somali poetic texts from the 1930s and 1940s treated not merely as cultural artefacts but as political commentaries and historical

testimonies. These are analysed alongside state documents, personal memoirs, and diplomatic correspondence to reconstruct competing imperial claims over Ogaden and Eritrea. The methodological approach foregrounds subaltern perspectives and interrogates how empire was imagined, contested, and naturalised through both European and Abyssinian lenses. The paper challenges dominant narratives of decolonisation and exposes the racialised exclusions embedded in international law and postwar diplomacy.

The remainder of the paper is structured thematically to trace the shifting configurations of imperial power in the Horn of Africa between 1934 and 1954. It begins with an exploration of Abyssinia's southern expansion into Harar and Ogaden, situating Walwaal as a pivotal site of inter-imperial contestation. The next section analyses the brief Italian occupation and Britain's subsequent reconstitution of Ethiopian authority, marking the transformation from colonisers to clients. The paper then interrogates how the global reinvention of Ethiopia as a black sovereign state obscured its own imperial practices, before returning to Walwaal to examine its catalytic role in modern colonial warfare. Finally, the paper follows Haile Selassie's postwar imperial consolidation in Ogaden and Eritrea, culminating in the denial of decolonisation to Somali and Eritrean populations—an erasure legitimised through both racialised diplomacy and pan-African symbolism.

Figure 1: Map showing present Somali Regional State (known also in the literature as Ogaden) boundaries.



## 2 Ethiopia Invented: Empire, Myth, and Black Redemption

### Walwaal and Imperial War

What began in 1934 as a seemingly minor dispute over who held imperial authority to occupy Ogaden rapidly escalated into a full-scale invasion of Abyssinia by Fascist Italy. The clash at Walwaal—initially dismissed as a peripheral border incident—mirrored the Marco Polo Bridge conflict between Japan and China in 1937, which also began as a localized confrontation before exploding into wider war. Both incidents, though underestimated at first, became catalytic triggers, transforming obscure disputes into major theatres of global conflict. Just as the Marco Polo provocation precipitated the Pacific War and culminated in the atomic devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Ali, 2022), the confrontation on the Somali frontier led to Mussolini’s brutal invasion and the unprecedented use of mustard gas against Ethiopian forces and civilians. This marked not only a violent assertion of colonial dominance but also a grim milestone in the evolution of modern warfare, where chemical weapons became instruments of imperial terror.

The parallels were not lost on contemporaries. In both the Walwaal and Marco Polo incidents, early international responses profoundly underestimated their broader significance, treating them as isolated colonial mishaps rather than harbingers of systemic escalation. A League of Nations conciliation commission reported in September 1935 that “the merits of the Walwaal dispute are now a matter of minor importance,” concluding that the affair should not be allowed to escalate “beyond” an imperial misunderstanding (Potter, 1936). Yet escalate it did. The Ethiopian expedition—estimated at 1,500 armed feudal retainers—had reportedly advanced toward Walwaal in search of provisions, water, and tribute from Somali communities in the borderlands (Potter, 1936). These men were not a modern army but emissaries of extraction, continuing Abyssinia’s long-standing tradition of asserting imperial claims through tributary raids along its southeastern frontier.

Their approach inevitably provoked direct confrontation with Italian colonial forces, who had maintained a presence near the Walwaal wells for over five years. When the Abyssinian contingent sought to assert sovereignty over the disputed site, Italian troops resisted, and exchanges of fire followed. Much like the Marco Polo Bridge episode—where Japanese troops attempted entry into Wanping and were refused—Walwaal rapidly escalated into a symbolic flashpoint between rival empires, each asserting dominance over contested terrain. However, unlike the Chinese defending internationally recognised sovereign territory, the Abyssinians were asserting claims over Somali lands already incorporated into Italy’s colonial domain. The Italians, though equally imperial in orientation, framed their military response as a defence of established colonial prerogatives rather than an act of aggression.

Walwaal’s strategic relevance swiftly expanded beyond its immediate geography. The clash reverberated across the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, drawing the attention of global powers under the pretext of League of Nations mediation. This culminated in what became known as the “Walwaal Arbitration,” an inquiry that ultimately failed to produce any viable resolution (Potter, 1936). Italy, under Benito Mussolini, faced virtually no consequence. With Hitler’s rearmament threatening Europe’s precarious interwar equilibrium, Britain and France preferred appeasement over confrontation, hoping to prevent an Italo-German alliance. The outcome was

a diplomatic surrender dressed in the garb of neutrality. As Spencer (2006) observes, Rome was “left to administer a civilised solution”—a euphemism for aerial bombardment, systematic displacement, and the notorious use of mustard gas.

The League’s paralysis at Walwaal was not a mere procedural failure—it was a deeply ideological abdication. In prioritising European stability, France and Britain calculated that alienating Mussolini might draw Italy closer to Nazi Germany. Appeasement thus became the path of least resistance, with African sovereignty sacrificed for continental security. As Sbacchi (1975) recounts, Abyssinia became a pawn in a wider strategic calculus. This was not passive neglect but active complicity. Joseph Avenol, the League’s French Secretary-General, even advocated for Ethiopia’s expulsion from the League, branding it “uncivilised” and unworthy of equal membership (Spencer, 2006). Behind this rhetoric was an enduring belief in racial hierarchy and civilisational gatekeeping.

The irony was unmistakable. Just a decade earlier, Italy had championed Ethiopia’s entry into the League—an act that drew British ire. Churchill, echoing imperial disdain, described Ethiopia as a “wild land of tyranny, slavery and tribal war,” inherently unfit for diplomatic equality (Churchill, 2010). Yet Churchill’s denunciation, however prejudiced, gestured toward an inconvenient reality. Ethiopia’s 1923 accession to the League was conditional on the abolition of slavery—an obligation that remained largely unfulfilled (Phayre, 1935; Spencer, 2006). When British delegates Lord Buxton and Lord Polwarth visited Addis Ababa in 1932, they observed with dismay that “little or nothing had been done” to honour this commitment (Phayre, 1935).

The contradictions at the heart of imperial diplomacy ran deep. On one hand, Abyssinia was derided for failing to align with Eurocentric norms of statehood; on the other, fascist Italy was permitted to impose its version of civilisation through violence and terror. From the port city of Asmara on the Red Sea to Mogadishu on the Indian Ocean, Italian forces launched a brutal campaign with a singular objective: the capture of Addis Ababa. Their tactics—blending mechanised aerial warfare with chemical attacks—stunned international observers. Somali poet Mahamud Cali Beenaleey, witnessing these horrors from the Ogaden, captured the anguish of a region entrapped between competing imperial logics and a new, more destructive military technology.

*Perplexing is the man who invented the marvel in the sky / Whether inspired by invisibility or endowed by innovative ingenuity / The inventor prides himself with the power to command...*

To Mahamud Cali Beenaleey, aerial bombardment was not merely a tactical innovation but the “marvel of modernity”—a technological force so asymmetric, so utterly demoralising, that conventional resistance seemed irrelevant. Witnessing this spectacle in the Ogaden, he lamented that confronting such power required either immediate surrender or a near-transcendental capacity for “extraordinary patience” (Beenaleey, personal communication, 1935). The sombreness of his reflection echoed across political and philosophical registers. Winston Churchill, reflecting on the transformation of warfare, famously described the aeroplane as a “new weapon of national rivalry,” one that restructured the dynamics of imperial dominance. Appiah (1992), writing decades later, identified the aircraft as a “murderous tool of modernity,” emblematic of a historical moment when technological progress became indistinguishable from the machinery of empire.

In these distinct yet overlapping diagnoses, the poetic, political, and philosophical converged in recognising how imperial modernity had introduced a qualitatively new scale and spectacle of violence—one that not only redefined the conduct of war but foreclosed the very terms of resistance. And so Abyssinia fell. The Solomonic empire, long enshrined in national mythology and diasporic memory, collapsed under the weight of mechanised imperial aggression. Haile Selassie—last emperor of the self-declared Solomonic line—did not resist to the bitter end. In May 1936, he fled Ethiopia, boarding a train toward exile. Contrary to the mythologised portrait later circulated by African diasporic movements, Selassie’s departure was not an act of dignified resistance but a calculated strategic retreat.

In the months leading up to the war, Selassie had grown increasingly desperate to avoid open conflict. So desperate, in fact, that he made a startling proposal: prior to the Walwaal incident, he appealed to Britain to assume formal sovereignty over Abyssinia in a last-ditch attempt to safeguard the kingdom’s survival (Spencer, 2006). The proposal was summarily dismissed. For London, Ethiopia was a peripheral concern—strategically “worthless,” as internal correspondence put it—especially in comparison to the British Empire’s priorities over the Red Sea and Suez Canal, areas to which Abyssinia had no viable access (Gleichen, 1897). British policymakers, ever attentive to balancing continental influence, viewed Mussolini’s Italy as a useful bulwark against French expansionism. In fact, it was early British diplomatic manoeuvring that had tacitly supported Italy’s initial colonial foothold in Eritrea (Villari & Abraham, 1935).

### **From Monarchy to Myth**

Mussolini’s invasion, though designed as imperial vengeance, inadvertently refashioned Abyssinia’s global image. What had been a feudal monarchy deeply enmeshed in slavery and internal conquest was reimagined as the “last outpost of African civilisation” under siege. The term “Abyssinia” was gradually displaced by “Ethiopia,” a name charged with biblical and pan-African resonance. This was a transformation orchestrated not by Abyssinians themselves, but by the black diaspora in the Americas and Europe. In political rallies, churches, and student unions, African Americans cited Psalm 68:31—“Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God”—as prophetic justification for black solidarity with Selassie (Moses, 1989). According to Wilson Moses, Ethiopia became “a symbol of redemption” for those whose ancestors had been enslaved, a cipher for black political rebirth.

Yet the romanticisation was profoundly unmoored from Ethiopia’s internal realities and contradictions. As Michela Wrong (2006) documents, Emperor Menelik II notoriously proclaimed, “I am not a Negro. I am a Caucasian,” a declaration that distilled Abyssinian contempt for blackness and its desire for civilisational alignment with whiteness. This racial distancing was not an isolated remark but symptomatic of a broader ideological structure within Ethiopia’s imperial elite. Those who also questioned why Haile Selassie referred to himself as “Emperor of Ethiopia” and not “Emperor of Abyssinia,” came to a conclusion that the former evoked a global Negro identity embraced by the diaspora, while the latter signified an exclusivist Semitic heritage (Du Bois, 1935). This rhetorical choice was not incidental—it was strategic and ideological. Ethiopia, as conjured by diasporic imaginations, became a fiction of black pride and redemptive continuity, one that concealed a historical reality rooted in conquest, enslavement, and ethnonational domination.

This dissonance was never lost on Oromo intellectuals and other historically marginalised groups. Hassen Hussein and Mohammed Ademo (2016) argue that while pan-Africanists across the globe exalted Ethiopia as a vanguard of black sovereignty, it simultaneously operated as a colonising empire that brutalised its own subjects. They document harrowing examples of Abyssinian violence during the conquest of the south—instances where imperial troops “hacked off the genitals and right hands of men and the breasts of women,” acts that signalled not just domination but an assertion of racialised supremacy within Africa. For them, Ethiopia’s “original sin” was not its resistance to Europe, but its reproduction of imperial violence upon its own peoples. The war with Italy, they contend, did not illuminate Ethiopia’s truths but actively obscured them—presenting the empire as a victim of European colonialism while concealing its complicity in internal subjugation and expansion.

The League of Nations had granted Ethiopia membership on the explicit condition that it abolish slavery—an act symbolising its eligibility for entry into the community of “civilised” nations. However, by 1935, slavery remained widespread and structurally embedded. British observers routinely reported that “little or nothing had been done” to dismantle the practice, despite repeated pledges by the imperial court (Phayre, 1935; Spencer, 2006). Fascist Italy seized upon this as a moral pretext for its invasion, framing its imperial venture as a humanitarian intervention. Italian propaganda presented the occupation as a civilising mission—an ideological inversion that allowed fascism to masquerade as anti-slavery reform. Spencer (2006), Selassie’s own advisor, described the emperor as “an intensely self-centred person” who displayed limited concern for his subjects’ suffering. During a British diplomatic visit to Addis Ababa in 1932, delegates reported that anti-slavery proclamations amounted to no more than “pious wishes,” routinely ignored by the feudal nobility who sustained the social order (Phayre, 1935).

In sum, the myth of Ethiopia as Africa’s eternal black republic was a diasporic construction forged from imagination, necessity, and hope. It provided a source of racial dignity for black communities facing subjugation, yet simultaneously obscured Ethiopia’s own internal hierarchies, ethnonational exclusions, and institutional violence. As Appiah (1992) argues, racial solidarity often carries an epistemological cost: “putting race as an organising principle of political and social solidarity” can flatten complex realities, erasing distinctions and reinscribing silences within the communities it seeks to uplift.

When Mussolini’s forces marched into Addis Ababa, Selassie fled rather than stay to defend the capital. His escape was orchestrated largely by British and French diplomats, who prioritised his symbolic value abroad over the safety of Ethiopian civilians. In a particularly damning episode, Selassie reportedly ordered his train to discard civilians seeking refuge, leaving them exposed in the desert—an act that, according to Spencer (2006), epitomised the emperor’s narcissistic disposition. While the black diaspora revered him as a divine leader, his actual conduct revealed a striking disregard for the people he claimed to rule. Ironically, some political prisoners sentenced to death were spared due to the chaos of occupation, suggesting that Mussolini’s invasion—however catastrophic—produced unexpected moments of reprieve.

Upon arriving in London, Selassie was welcomed at Waterloo station by British officials. He offered them warm greetings but conspicuously ignored a delegation from Marcus Garvey’s movement. Outraged, Garvey denounced Selassie as a “fool and puppet” surrounded by white advisors who had abandoned his people in their time of need (Renegade Expressions, 2014).

This fierce rebuke, grounded in ideological betrayal and racial disillusionment, stood in stark contrast to the messianic figure embraced by the Rastafari movement and many African Americans. For Garvey, Selassie's exile symbolised cowardice and elitism; for the Rastafarians, it marked the divine journey of a black redeemer in exile—a paradox at the core of his global persona.

This contradictory reception illuminates the politics of symbolic investment. As Appiah (1992) argues, marginalised peoples often construct myths of origin and salvation not from empirical fact but from the psychological and political need for affirmation. Ethiopia thus became a “source of validation” for a diaspora severed from ancestral sovereignty. Selassie's corporeal presence mattered less than the imagined Ethiopia he came to represent—an ideal of resistance, divinity, and sovereign blackness. Yet this Ethiopia was never grounded in material reality. As Appiah notes, it was a construction born from the trauma of racial oppression and the longing for a redemptive history.

These symbolic projections were not without consequence. They carried significant geopolitical implications, shaping how Ethiopia was perceived and defended on the world stage. Abroad, the empire was hailed as a symbol of African autonomy; within, it remained untransformed. The war did not disrupt Ethiopia's feudal institutions, nor did it eliminate slavery or ethnonational repression. As Sorenson (1993) observes, Ethiopia continued to embody “dual imagery”—simultaneously evoking modernist progress and premodern brutality. The diaspora's narrative favoured the former, silencing the latter. Hussein and Ademo (2016) refer to this as a “sanitised account,” one that erased Ethiopia's imperial excesses in service of a pan-African myth.

The symbolic elevation of Ethiopia in the interwar period reveals a fundamental disjuncture between imagined liberation and actual governance. For African Americans and other members of the black diaspora, Ethiopia's resistance was not merely geopolitical—it was existential. In the wake of slavery, Jim Crow, and colonial degradation, Ethiopia offered a rare symbol of African sovereignty that had withstood European conquest. The invocation of Psalm 68:31—“Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God”—resonated across churches, rallies, and nationalist literature as both spiritual prophecy and political affirmation (Moses, 1978). Yet what was being embraced abroad was Ethiopia's symbolic potential, not its concrete political order. Its dynastic rule, ethnonational stratification, and aristocratic governance remained largely invisible to those who projected hopes onto its imagined form.

This symbolic reconfiguration served dual ends. For the diaspora, it enabled a form of historical reclamation and psychic repair. For Selassie, it provided moral legitimacy in international forums like the League of Nations. But while his appeals to global conscience resonated with foreign audiences, his domestic record was marked by repression and elitism. As Shell (2018) notes, slavery persisted across the empire well into the twentieth century. Similarly, reports from Buxton and Polwarth in 1932 observed that imperial proclamations abolishing slavery had little enforcement and were largely rhetorical (Phayre, 1935).

The rebranding of Abyssinia into “Ethiopia” amid the Italian invasion was more than semantic—it was a geopolitical performance. It allowed an imperial monarchy with limited regard for African solidarity to be reframed as the epicentre of black emancipation. As Hussein and Ademo (2016) argue, this rebranding helped conceal Ethiopia's internal colonial logics,

enabling the state to operate as both anti-colonial icon and internal oppressor. The war thus invented a mythic Ethiopia—an imagined polity forged in the fires of diaspora longing and imperial crisis. As Appiah (1992) cautions, solidarity premised on racial essentialism risks collapsing diverse histories into a single narrative, thereby perpetuating new silences.

Ethiopia's invention as a “bastion of black freedom” was as much a product of imperial contradiction as it was of diasporic hope. It became a mirror—reflecting what the world needed to see, rather than what existed. In doing so, it sustained not only the radical imagination but also the illusions it often required to endure.

### 3 Haile Selassie's Return and Rise of African Imperialism

#### Ogaden and Eritrea Colonised

In retrospect, Haile Selassie's return in 1941 proved more consequential—and arguably more tragic for the Horn of Africa—than his initial exile. Marcus Garvey's pronouncement that “the emperor's term of usefulness was at an end for the present in Abyssinia” would soon be overtaken by geopolitical necessity. Italy's entry into World War II on the side of Nazi Germany in June 1940 marked a turning point. In declaring war on its European co-imperialists, Britain and France, Rome had transformed itself from a traditional ally to a regional threat. As Spencer (2006) notes, Mussolini's conquest of Ethiopia repositioned Italy as a hostile power endangering British colonial holdings in Egypt, Sudan, Aden, British Somaliland, and Kenya. It was not Ethiopian resistance but Italy's threat to British interests that catalysed Abyssinia's “liberation” (Stafford & Collenette, 1931). Framing Abyssinia as the first victim of Axis aggression, Britain recast its reinstatement as the first victory in the war. Selassie's symbolic value shifted: from exile to instrument. Britain revoked its recognition of Italian Ethiopia and deployed Selassie—now relocated from London to Cairo and sojourning in Sudan—as a figurehead to mobilise resistance and protect imperial holdings in the region.

European rivalries over the Horn of Africa, dating back to the Scramble for Africa, had long benefited Abyssinian emperors. The Allied victory over fascist Italy may have ended colonial rule over Ethiopia, but it inaugurated a new phase of internal imperialism. Ogaden and Eritrea, neither of which had historically been part of the Abyssinian state, were absorbed into Selassie's expanding empire. Prior to the war, Eritrea had functioned as an Italian settler colony, while Ogaden remained a buffer zone—claimed but never fully occupied by rival empires. For Abyssinian rulers, Ogaden was a strategic frontier warding off Muslim encroachment. For European powers, it was a zone of imperial anticipation. As Spencer (2006) notes, the area had long been contested, though his assertion that imperial rivalry began with Italian military build-up in the 1920s is historically narrow. The Ogaden was a site of conflict as early as the 1887 fall of Harar. Described then as the “Italo-Ethiopian frontier,” the region symbolised both imperial liminality and volatility. Ogaden was not, and never had been, fully Italian or Abyssinian. Rather, it was a crucible of colonial competition.

A 1935 British document captures the ambiguous status of Walwaal, located deep in Ogaden: “The Walwal district, situated in a desert country and frequented by nomad tribes under the authority of Britain, Italy or Ethiopia, is of special importance owing to the wells, some 300 in

number... indispensable for the requirements of the tribes in question and their livestock” (Award of September 3, 1935). The depiction of Ogaden as a “desert” and Walwaal as contested but unclaimed territory underscores its status as *terra nullius*. While Italy extended military outposts from southern Somalia into Walwaal and Wardheer and occupied the area for over five years, Abyssinia remained largely absent until provoked. Despite its minimal presence—often limited to punitive expeditions—Abyssinian elites presumed Ogaden to be their natural sphere of influence. Their justifications rested on two key claims: religious exceptionalism and imperial entitlement. Menelik II famously described Ethiopia as a “Christian island in a sea of pagans” and, in an 1891 letter to Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia, declared, “If powers at a distance come forward to partition Africa between them, I do not intend to be an indifferent spectator” (Menelik, 1891).

To his credit, Menelik was no less ambitious than Cecil Rhodes in imperial aspiration but lacked the material capacity to pursue conquest from Cape to Cairo. Ethiopia’s internal underdevelopment and entrenched feudal economy restrained its territorial expansion. Yet Menelik’s rhetoric about not remaining a bystander during the imperial partition of Africa resonated with Abyssinian ambitions. Abyssinian claims over Ogaden were justified through a dual logic: geographic proximity and religious affinity. Lacking the naval power to pursue overseas colonies like their European counterparts, Abyssinian rulers argued that neighbouring Ogaden offered a natural extension of their domain. Proximity thus became a geopolitical pretext. In parallel, religious identity provided a civilisational rationale: as Christians, Abyssinians framed their expansion as both defensive and redemptive, aimed at warding off Muslim advances and fulfilling a divine mission. With European arms and rhetorical cover, this dual claim fused into an obsession with Ogaden, seen not only as a buffer but as a rightful possession.

Menelik’s 1891 appeal further illustrates the ideological basis of Abyssinian imperialism. He lamented that “formerly the boundary of Ethiopia was the sea,” but, due to a lack of support from “Christian Powers,” the coastline had fallen into “the power of the Muslim man.” Expressing hopeful desperation, he pleaded: “We do not intend to regain our sea frontier by force, but we trust that the Christian Power, guided by our Saviour, will restore to us our sea-coast line, at any rate, certain points on the coast” (Menelik, 1891). This invocation of a historic maritime Ethiopia was more invention than fact, a colonial myth-making exercise projecting a past that never existed. Nonetheless, it revealed Menelik’s deep yearning for Christian solidarity and imperial restitution. His belief that European powers might restore the Red Sea coast to Ethiopia betrayed a misreading of their strategic interests but underscored his own imperial ambitions. This fantasy of a Christian maritime Ethiopia laid the ideological groundwork for future Abyssinian claims on coastal and lowland Somali territories.

These aspirations would partially materialise in the postwar order, albeit through subterfuge rather than divine intervention. Eritrea did not return to Abyssinia through celestial deliverance but as a victim of post-World War II geopolitics. Ogaden, meanwhile, became crucial for multiple imperial agendas. For Abyssinia, its occupation served three strategic purposes: blocking future Muslim incursions into the Christian highlands; annexing Saylac (Zeila), a long-coveted Red Sea port; and ensuring tribute flows from Muslim territories to sustain feudal armies. As de Grand (2004) aptly puts it, Ogaden became a “geographical asset” for Abyssinian imperial consolidation. This language of utility exposes the logic of internal colonialism:

territories like Ogaden were not seen as homes to sovereign people, but as resources to be appropriated and controlled. Abyssinia's imperial expansion, backed by Allied powers, thus mirrored the colonialism it had ostensibly resisted. It was a Christian empire imposing its will on a largely Muslim, pastoralist frontier under the guise of liberation and modernity.

Selassie's triumphant return to Addis Ababa on 5 May 1941, precisely five years after his evacuation, symbolised more than imperial restoration—it marked the resumption of Abyssinian expansionism. Empowered by international acclaim and the mythologisation of Ethiopia as the first victim of Axis aggression, the emperor viewed his return incomplete without the reincorporation of Ogaden and Eritrea into his imperial fold. Under British Military Administration (BMA), the Somali Peninsula—excluding French-controlled Djibouti—had been reunified under one command from 1941 to 1954. This fleeting unification, unprecedented in colonial history, was soon dismantled through competing imperial interests. While the future of Ogaden would be negotiated bilaterally with Britain, the fate of Eritrea fell to the newly established United Nations. In 1945, Norman Bentwich, a British jurist sympathetic to Abyssinian claims, openly asked: “What should be done at the Peace Settlement about [Ethiopia's] frontiers and her access to the sea?” (Bentwich, 1946). This question framed Eritrea's annexation not as an aberration but as an outcome of war-time diplomacy in service of postwar imperial realignment.

For Abyssinia, control of Eritrea was synonymous with access to the Red Sea. In Bentwich's (1946) formulation, Ethiopia was expected “to make her claim in regard to Eritrea, the former Italian colony along the southern shore of the Red Sea.” The ensuing UN debates revolved around three options: annexation by a UN member state, trusteeship under international supervision, or federation with Ethiopia. The first was swiftly dismissed, as postwar internationalism frowned upon overt colonial acquisition. The second, though more viable, encountered resistance from Abyssinia and its backers. While Eritrea was considerably more developed than Ethiopia—having benefited from Italian settler investments in infrastructure—it lacked both military capacity and international recognition. A UN commission composed of five states—Norway, South Africa, Burma, Pakistan, and Guatemala—produced divergent recommendations after visiting Asmara in 1949. Norway proposed full union; South Africa and Burma favoured federation; Pakistan and Guatemala endorsed independence (Haile, 1987). The divisions revealed the geopolitical tug-of-war over Eritrea's future, where the will of its people was increasingly marginalised.

With U.S. backing, Ethiopia lobbied vigorously against the proposal for Eritrean independence and instead championed a federal arrangement. Ignoring widespread Eritrean opposition to union with Addis Ababa, the United Nations ultimately succumbed to American pressure. In 1952, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia, despite clear indicators that this decision served geopolitical interests more than local aspirations. As Feseha Wold (2022) noted, Ethiopia's pursuit of Eritrea was driven by a strategic imperative: “access to a sea corridor.” Haile Selassie himself affirmed that the annexationist claim was “based on the need for access to the sea” (Haile, 1987, p. 10). The United States, for its part, viewed Selassie as a regional proxy capable of stabilising the Horn against perceived communist influence (Marcus, 1983). For Washington, Eritrea's value lay in its strategic positioning on the Red Sea, and its incorporation into Ethiopia ensured alignment with Western security priorities. This confluence of interests led to the

American suggestion of federation, which Selassie later repurposed as justification for annexation.

Though nominally designed to preserve Eritrean autonomy, the federal arrangement was fragile from inception. Eritrea was granted its own assembly and constitution but lacked key state functions such as military command and foreign representation. As Wold (2022) observes, Eritrea was “already vulnerable to annexation” from the outset. The British, retreating from imperial stewardship, oversaw the initial formation of internal governance in Asmara, but these efforts lacked enforcement mechanisms to protect Eritrea’s autonomy. By 1962, Selassie unilaterally abrogated the federal agreement, dissolving the Eritrean assembly and declaring full annexation. This marked the formal beginning of one of the Horn of Africa’s longest and most violent liberation struggles. Selassie may have dipped his imperial feet in the Red Sea, but Eritrean blood continued to spill for decades. Not until 1993 did Asmara finally reassert its sovereignty, emerging as Africa’s 53rd independent state after years of war, displacement, and defiance against Ethiopian imperialism.

Having secured access to the Red Sea through the annexation of Eritrea, Selassie redirected his imperial ambitions toward the incorporation of the Ogaden. For the Abyssinian elite, the territorial map of the empire remained incomplete without the Ogaden—a vast Muslim-inhabited frontier deemed essential as both buffer zone and imperial frontier. Framed as a divine mission, the conquest was justified in theological terms: opposition to Abyssinian rule was depicted not as political dissent but as defiance against God’s will. As Charles Gesheker (1985) argues, “like European colonial systems elsewhere in Africa, the Ethiopian state had to legitimise its presence in the Ogaden and control over a subject population” (p. 102). In the postwar period, negotiations between Britain and Ethiopia over the future of the Ogaden marked what Okbazghi Yohannes (1987) calls a “transfer from one colonial authority to another” (p. 652). This process reflected a broader legalisation of African colonialism, this time perpetrated not by Europeans but by an African empire under the banner of anti-colonial solidarity.

### **Decolonisation Denied**

Crucially, the global discourse on decolonisation had little to offer the peoples of Ogaden or Eritrea. As Michela Wrong (2005) notes, the postwar world, while focused on dismantling European empires, was “blind to the dangers of African colonialism” (p. 193). This racialised double standard meant that struggles against Abyssinian domination were dismissed as local unrest rather than recognised as legitimate anti-colonial resistance. Sorenson (1993) highlights how Eritrean and Ogadeni movements were “ignored because they were subject to black rather than white colonialism” (p. 28). In this context, decolonisation was less a universal principle than a racialised exception—white imperialism was condemned, while Abyssinian expansion was celebrated as African emancipation. Yet for those living under Ethiopian occupation, the brutality and dispossession were no less severe. If anything, the denial of their claims in the name of pan-Africanism only deepened their marginalisation. As such, the postwar Horn became a “zone of savagery,” not simply due to European retreat but because of African imperialism’s rise.

The Somali apprehension that imperial Britain might cede Ogaden to Abyssinia was widespread and became a galvanising cause. The Somali Youth League (SYL), the leading nationalist

movement across the Somali peninsula, not only established branches in the Ogaden but issued direct warnings to the British authorities. As documented in archival reports, the SYL asserted that “in case you decide to give Ogaden to Abyssinia, the people in that province are ready to fight until the last man” (Stafford & Collenette, 1931, p. 105). This unequivocal declaration of resistance, however, fell on deaf ears. Despite local mobilisation and political will, Britain proceeded with the transfer. In 1954, the final segment of the Ogaden was officially handed over to Abyssinia, formalising what was effectively a colonial transaction. As Gesheker (1985) observed, this episode revealed the enduring pattern of imperial impunity—where strategic interests trumped indigenous claims to self-determination.

Thus, imperialism triumphed, and the Ogaden conflict became protracted. The historical irony is striking: while European empires began a slow retreat from the continent after World War II, Ogaden and Eritrea became fresh colonial acquisitions of an African empire. These developments sowed the seeds of the prolonged state crisis that has since plagued the Horn of Africa. By the close of the twentieth century, the destinies of the two regions diverged. Eritrea—despite post-independence authoritarianism—emerged as a sovereign state in 1993, breaking free from Ethiopian control. Ogaden, by contrast, remained trapped in what Somali poet Abdullahi Ali Baddal described as the unending loop of Abyssinian domination: “fate, so far, sealed Ogaden into circles of raw Abyssinian imperialism.” The struggle continues, a colonial frontier unredeemed, caught between contested sovereignties and global indifference.

## 4 Conclusion

The storm of the Second World War swept across the Horn of Africa, first erupting in eastern Ogaden, where the exuberant hubris of imperial ambition found violent expression at Walwaal in 1934. Both Fascist Italy and feudal Abyssinia were imperial contenders, seeking to control this contested frontier. Rome extended its reach from southern Somalia, then known as Italian Somaliland, while Abyssinian forces penetrated Ogaden in search of tribute, water, and food. Yet Italy’s imperial fantasy stretched far beyond eastern Africa: it envisioned an empire linking Libya, Mogadishu, and Asmara. The complete subjugation of Abyssinia became central to this vision. When the League of Nations dismissed the Walwaal confrontation as a “minor accident,” it failed to address the imperial collision unfolding in the Horn. In doing so, the League denied Abyssinia equality, ultimately allowing Mussolini a free hand to implement a so-called “civilised solution” in the name of eradicating slavery and feudalism (Spencer, 1984).

Alarmed by Hitler’s militarisation of Germany, Britain and France sought to appease Mussolini, and Abyssinia was effectively sacrificed on the altar of European peace. Imperial Rome seized the moment, hoping to avenge the humiliation suffered at Adwa in 1896 and to forge an African empire in fascist image. What Europe termed a civilising mission quickly degenerated into barbarism. Mustard gas, aerial bombardments, and mass atrocities were deployed as tools of imperial terror—the marvels of modernity used to mutilate rather than emancipate. Addis Ababa fell in 1936. Haile Selassie fled via Djibouti, reportedly forcing terrified compatriots off a departing train and into the desert, sealing their fate (Spencer, 1984). Yet, paradoxically, Mussolini’s war yielded unexpected openings: Selassie spared political prisoners previously sentenced to death, inadvertently turning them into beneficiaries of fascism’s excesses.

In exile, Selassie became a global icon. The image of Ethiopia as a victim of aggression eclipsed its own colonial conduct. Pan-Africanists, diasporas, and African-Americans lionised Abyssinia, overlooking its internal hierarchies. In Latin America, Rastafarians proclaimed Selassie a “living God.” Ethiopia’s brutal feudal system, where Black bodies were chained and flogged—as Marcus Garvey warned—was eclipsed by the symbolic need for a Black sovereign state resisting white imperialism. When Mussolini joined forces with Hitler, Italy became a direct threat to British control of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. Recasting Abyssinia as the first victim of Axis aggression, Britain restored Selassie in 1941. Garvey’s claim that the emperor’s time was over was reversed; Selassie re-emerged not only as a statesman, but also, mythically, as a symbol of African liberation (Garvey, 1937; Spencer, 1984).

Yet this symbolic freedom came at a cost. While Abyssinia was the beneficiary of European rivalry and diasporic romanticism, the end of the war marked a darker fate for Eritrea and Ogaden. Selassie’s annexation of Eritrea—after a short-lived federal arrangement—ignited one of Africa’s longest and bloodiest liberation wars (Haile, 1987). He dipped his imperial feet into the Red Sea, while Eritreans soaked theirs in blood. Meanwhile, Britain gifted Ogaden to Ethiopia in 1954, dismissing Somali political opposition and the warnings of the Somali Youth League. Ethiopian colonialism in the region has persisted since. These struggles were rendered invisible by the racialised lens of global decolonisation: European empires were denounced, while Abyssinian expansionism was repackaged as African sovereignty (Gesheker, 1985; Yohannes, 1987).

Eritrea eventually gained its independence in 1993. But in Ogaden, Abyssinian imperialism remains alive, if strategically veiled. The region continues to endure what Somali poet Abdullahi Ali Baddal called the “circles of raw Abyssinian imperialism”—a colonial project camouflaged as national unity, long after the end of European rule.

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