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GÉRARD PRUNIER
ÉLOI FICQUET
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FROM PAN-AFRICANISM TO RASTAFARI
AFRICAN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN 'RETURNS'
TO ETHIOPIA

Giulia Bonacci

On 7 November 1964 Noel Dyer, a Jamaican Rastafari¹ who had migrated to England, took the train from London to Dover. After arriving in Paris, he worked for three months in order to be able to continue on his way to Spain and Morocco. From there, he set off towards the east. He crossed Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt on foot, went beyond the Aswan dam and over the desert to reach Sudan, where he got arrested by the authorities, because he did not have a visa. He spent three months in prison until the Ethiopian Ambassador in Khartoum heard about the Rastafari who wanted to go to Addis Ababa on foot and authorized him to enter Ethiopia. It took Noel Dyer more than a year to complete his journey from England to Ethiopia. It was an exceptional journey, which shows at least two things in addition to his personal determination.

The first is the violence of the racial discrimination and economic marginalization that he had experienced first in Jamaica and later in

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England, and which had led him to leave. This violence is one of the common denominators for most Africans and people of African descent in the Americas and Europe. The root cause of their traditions of resistance is the backdrop against which they draw their identity and their political objectives. The second is the power of the imagination and the ideologies that led Noel Dyer to tie his identity, freedom, redemption, and future to that of Ethiopia. At the heart of this imagination, the racial identification with Ethiopia on the basis of skin colour is central, whatever Ethiopians may think of it. For Noel Dyer and others, Ethiopia is that mythical, biblical land where milk and honey flow. It is also a political reality, Ethiopia having been, with Liberia, the sole sovereign and independent state in sub-Saharan Africa until the end of the 1950s.

Noel Dyer is the only one to have come on foot. However, since the end of the nineteenth century many people of African ancestry, from the Americas and the Caribbean, have come to settle in Ethiopia and tied their lives to those of the Ethiopians. They formed a constant presence, even if their contribution to the development of the country remains little known. They are the reflection of a peculiar representation of Ethiopia, both sacred and sovereign. And by coming to live in Ethiopia, they have embodied the paradoxes of those engaged in fulfilling the Pan-African ideology, which postulates the unity of destiny and cause of Africans at home and abroad.²

The Ethiopian prophecy

It was with the Bible that the term “Ethiopia” first crossed the Atlantic Ocean. The Bible did not travel with the human cargo, but on the decks of European ships, including slave ships, and in the hands of churchmen including those who approved slavery. In the King James Bible of 1611, all the terms designating black people were translated by the word “Ethiopia” following the Greek usage. For the enslaved or freed communities in the Americas, the Bible, in spite of its association with the slave-owners, had two great assets. First, the numerous references to Ethiopia and Ethiopians offered a model with which the descendants of Africans could identify and thanks to which they could call themselves Ethiopians. Second, the history of the Exodus and the metaphor of the Hebrews, a divinely elected people reduced to slavery, offered them an archetype of deliverance and liberation. Verse 31 in

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Psalms 68 is the reference to Ethiopia that is the most known. The verse goes, "Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God".³ Interpreted by black congregations, it represented their aspirations: the promise of an imminent liberation and their active role in the prophetic destiny attributed to Ethiopia. This biblical interpretation was further reinforced with the victory of Ethiopian troops over the Italians at Adwa in 1896. Beyond its religious significance, Ethiopia then came to be seen in addition as a mighty sovereign state, successfully fighting against white imperialism. The Emperors of Ethiopia came to represent both a religious and a political power that was significant for a then colonized Africa and for all the oppressed black people in the world.⁴

This embodiment of black religious power and nationhood started to attract black people to Ethiopia at the end of the nineteenth century. The Haitian Benito Sylvain made four trips to Ethiopia and represented Emperor Menelik II at the first Pan African Conference convened in London in 1900 by the Trinidadian barrister Henry Sylvester Williams. Joseph Vitalien from Guadeloupe became the personal physician of Emperor Menelik and the first tutor of the young Tafari Makonnen, the future Emperor Haile Selassie. When these Caribbean and African American people started to come to Ethiopia they were faced by a strong racist reaction from the European legations in Addis Ababa which did not want to see the development of a close relationship between them and the Ethiopians. At first they were only a few, but more were to come, encouraged by the teachings of Marcus Garvey.

A Jamaican born in 1887 and a printer by trade, Marcus Garvey created the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Kingston in 1914. A few years later, the UNIA was moved to New York and Marcus Garvey developed a black nationalist programme that brought him a following of millions⁵ in the Americas, Europe, and Africa. Charismatic and controversial, Marcus Garvey called for the return of black people to Africa and used Ethiopia as a metaphor to designate both the continent and the black people in exile. Moreover, Garvey urged black people to see God in their own image, that is, "to see God through the spectacles of Ethiopia".⁶

In 1930, moved by the promise of liberation contained in the Ethiopian prophecy, Arnold Josiah Ford, originally from Barbados, settled in Ethiopia along with some of his disciples. Leader of a congregation of Black Jews⁷ of whom there were many in the Harlem of that era, he was a musician and a composer, and author of "The Universal

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Ethiopian Anthem”, the hymn of Marcus Garvey’s organization. Ford was well received by the Ethiopian authorities and he was given land, but he lacked the capital that could enable him to bring about a rapid development. And then another event became a major obstacle to black settlement in Ethiopia: the Fascist invasion of Ethiopia in 1935.

The Pan-African cause of the twentieth century

As the war approached, Ethiopia became a cause to defend. On this occasion, the first grand pan-African international mobilization took shape. In a few weeks the attention of Blacks in the entire world was focused on Ethiopia, the pan-African press circulated news on the war, and thousands of “Ethiopian” volunteers, American citizens and colonial subjects, were ready to take up arms to defend Ethiopia. The war had become a metaphor for the anti-colonial struggle, and Ethiopia was supported by songs written for the occasion, by massive demonstrations, by fund-raising, and by the boycott of Italian businesses in New York, sometimes followed by riots and other militant actions. This mobilization around the defence of the sovereignty and integrity of Ethiopia was one of the great moments of Pan-Africanism in the twentieth century.⁸

After the liberation of Ethiopia in 1941, a generation of Pan-Africanists committed itself to participate in the reconstruction of the country. They were teachers, professionals, technicians, journalists, photographers, and administrators. John Robinson, an American aviator who had already fought against the Italians as a military pilot in 1936, returned to Ethiopia in 1944. In a few years, he trained more than eighty air force cadets who later became the first Ethiopian civilian and military pilots. David A. Talbot, a Guyanese journalist, succeeded a black American, William Steen, as editor of the *Ethiopian Herald*. He also broadcast on the radio, and was in charge of English publications in the Ministry of Information. Mignon Ford, from Barbados, opened the Princess Zenebe Worq School in 1941, and Dr Tomas Fortune Fletcher, an American, became the director of the Medhane Alem School. The examples are numerous, and they illustrate the importance Ethiopia had in the lives of these professionals who identified themselves with the country and felt directly concerned by its reconstruction. Some stayed only until the end of their contracts but others, like Mignon Ford or David Talbot, remained in Ethiopia until the end of their lives.

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The Ethiopian government was shaping for itself a clear pan-African policy by recruiting and inviting black people to come to Ethiopia. Furthermore, as a token of appreciation for the support showed by the black people of the world during the war, Emperor Haile Selassie granted to the members of the Ethiopian World Federation (EWF) five gashas, equivalent to 200 hectares, of fertile land in the outskirts of Shashemene, a southern market town.⁹ The Ethiopian World Federation had been established in New York in 1937 by order of the Emperor with the objective of centralizing the moral and financial support offered in the Americas for the Ethiopian war effort. Headed by an Ethiopian, Melaku E. Beyen, it published a newspaper, *The Voice of Ethiopia*, organized fundraising and informed the public with news of the war. National and international branches were quickly established. The first settlers on the Shashemene land grant were Helen and James Piper. Born in the tiny Caribbean island of Montserrat, they had lived in the USA and were Garveyites, Black Jews and members of the Ethiopian World Federation. They came as part of the pan-African generation involved in the reconstruction of Ethiopia, and after a couple years spent working in Addis Ababa, went on to settle on the Shashemene land.

However, by the end of the 1950s, pan-Africanism began a major transformation as it was appropriated by the new African elites. The Pan African Congress in Manchester in 1945 saw the strategies of the anti-colonial struggle being put to the fore by young leaders like Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta. In the eyes of black Americans fighting for their civil rights, the significance of Emperor Haile Selassie, considered “the father of Africa”, started to be outshone by the “sons”, the heads of states of the new independent countries. The changes brought about by the process of decolonization inspired black Americans in their struggle more than the Ethiopian model, which began to be considered as an autocratic and ageing regime, struggling for its survival against a coup d’état (1960), peasant revolts and the Eritrean problem.

But the image of Ethiopia as a sacred sovereign state began to be glorified by a new and different population not previously noticed, the poor blacks coming out of the ghettos of Kingston, Jamaica. This was no longer the African or pan-African elite, the intellectuals of the grand congresses, the trade union leaders or activists engaged in the anti-colonial armed struggle; it was the Rastafari.

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The Rastafari and Ethiopia

The Rastafari were heirs to the ideologies of Ethiopianism and Pan Africanism and heirs to Marcus Garvey's black nationalism. Their contribution lies in their social practice, their cultural contributions and their resilient engagement with Ethiopia. The early Rastafari of the 1930s were accustomed to cultural resistance, and like many other Jamaicans they had travelled to Central America and the United States. As a result, they had familiarized themselves with the international lexicon of pan-African and racial unity.¹⁰ The Rastafari relayed the conviction that Ethiopia had a prophetic destiny in which they could take part, and, rejecting their status as colonial subjects, they identified with Ethiopians and declared allegiance to this Black Empire rather than to the British Empire.

Emperor Haile Selassie occupied a central place in the cosmology and practices of the Rastafari. The black communities had noticed his first political actions while he was still *Ras* Tafari.¹¹ A delegation sent to the United States in 1919, the gradual abolition of slavery in Ethiopia, the admission of the country into the League of Nations in 1923 were all measures that had given Ras Tafari considerable prestige. On several occasions, he had invited black people to come and settle in Ethiopia. His coronation on 2 November 1930 made him Emperor Haile Selassie I, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God, and Light of the World—all titles with a Biblical significance, used by Ethiopia's sovereigns since the nineteenth century to legitimize their political power. In Jamaica, only one step was needed for sensitized congregations to interpret these dynastic and messianic titles as proof that the man who had been crowned on that day had a divine nature and would play a role in the realization of the prophecy that announced their liberation. This interpretation made the Rastafari movement both religious and political, and it was at first harshly repressed in Jamaica.

The beliefs and practices of the Rastafari formed a critique of the colonial society in which they found themselves. Their hairdo, the *dreadlocks* (literally meaning "terrifying knots"), symbolized their religious consecration, in reference to their Nazarene vow (see Numbers, 6 in the Bible), as well as their rejection of European aesthetic norms imposed by colonial society. They created ritual organizations and social structures through which they transmitted their history orally to the younger generations. The contribution of Rastafari to the collec-

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tive Jamaican consciousness is now recognized. By opposing the image of Africans associated with the infamous chains of slavery, and by reversing the colour line to claim the black body as the site of divinity, in the image of Haile Selassie I, they participated in the exorcism of racism on which Jamaica was grounded.¹²

In Jamaica, as in most slave societies of the Americas, claiming the right for people of African ancestry to return to Africa caused major social movements and involved people representing a wide spectrum of society.¹³ For the Rastafari, repatriation to Africa or Ethiopia was a pillar of their faith. Both an imperious necessity understood in terms of human rights and a gateway for their redemption, repatriation to Africa had to be achieved by whatever means necessary. Various attempts at leaving Jamaica for Africa had already failed, but an announcement in 1955 by the Ethiopian World Federation that a land grant was available in Ethiopia had raised high hopes among the Rastafari. In 1961 the Jamaican government sponsored a Back to Africa mission to study the settlement possibilities in five African countries. However, despite encouraging conclusions, the results of this Back to Africa mission were somewhat forgotten in the enthusiasm of Jamaica's independence in 1962.

It was the state visit of Haile Selassie to Jamaica in 1966 that eventually encouraged Rastafari to pack up and leave. On his Caribbean tour, the Ethiopian Emperor visited Haiti, Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago. In Jamaica, ten thousand people were waiting for him at Kingston airport, overwhelming the protocol and national security forces. Far from putting an end to the Rastafari movement—as the British had hoped—the visit of Haile Selassie brought Rastafari into the limelight. They were invited to official receptions, and in a speech in the National Arena Haile Selassie declared that “Jamaicans and Ethiopians are blood brothers”.¹⁴

The first group of Rastafari left for Ethiopia in 1968. It was composed of three adults and four children, and they were followed the following year by another group made of members of local 43 and 31 of the Ethiopian World Federation. Leaving behind them fearful families, the Rastafari started to fulfil their claim to repatriation.

The Shashemene settlement

The Jamaican Rastafari arriving in Shashemene by the end of the 1960s found a few people already living on the land grant: Helen and

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James Piper, the first settlers, a handful of Black Americans, Baptists, Muslims and one Rastafari, as well as Noel Dyer who had arrived a few years before. Rastafari from Kingston continued pouring in, some members of the Ethiopian World Federation, and members of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, an organization founded in 1968 as a splinter group of the Ethiopian World Federation. It had developed its own doctrine and was very keen on the issue of repatriation. The relationship between those who were already there and the newcomers was not easy, as more people meant further distribution of the five gashas of land and a power struggle for their administration. Those early Jamaican settlers eventually petitioned the Ethiopian government and saw the land grant divided among twelve households in July 1970. It was an amazing achievement for poor black people coming out of the Kingston ghettos to find themselves masters of fertile land acreages in Ethiopia. While no further lots were arranged for other Rastafari arriving in the early 1970s, the Shashemene settlers built their houses and ploughed the land with the local peasants, reproducing the unequal labour relationships then prevalent in Ethiopia.

Although well received by the Imperial regime, they had to face the 1974 Ethiopian revolution and the large-scale land nationalization of 1975. Associated with the Emperor on account of their faith, they lost everything, their houses, their crops, and their right to land. The pan-African motivation of the Shashemene settlement could not withstand the massive social and political change that was overtaking Ethiopia. Some Shashemene settlers left because they felt threatened, a few stayed and a few continued to arrive during the years of the Derg, the military regime. They shared with the Ethiopians the hardships of curfew and food rationing, and struggled to survive in war-torn revolutionary Ethiopia.

Apparently Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, leader of the new regime, admired the continued presence of these foreigners who wanted to be Ethiopians and had not abandoned the country while thousands of native Ethiopians had fled abroad. But living in Shashemene was not easy. The image the settlers had of Ethiopia turned out to be in sharp contrast to the reality of the country. The peasants around Shashemene, the town's businessmen, and the civil servants had great difficulties understanding why these people came from all over the world to share their fate. The Ethiopians sometimes supported, assisted, and nourished them; at other times they stole from

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them, chased them away and even killed them. Following many petitions from the Rastafari, eighteen lots of land were granted in 1986 by local authorities so as to accommodate growing families piling up in small clapboard houses. That was the last time land was formally granted by the Ethiopian government to the Rastafari in Shashemene.

With the change of regime in 1991, Rastafari resumed coming to Ethiopia. An international coalition of Rastafari organized in 1992 a month-long celebration of the Centenary of Haile Selassie (born in 1892), thus putting Ethiopia back at the centre of the Rastafari movement. During the 1990s, and particularly around the millenniums in 2000 and 2007,¹⁵ hundreds of Rastafari came to settle in Ethiopia to contribute to the country's development. The former location of the land grant had been absorbed into the town of Shashemene, exacerbating the fragility of the community which lacked papers and land holding titles. The neighbourhood is now known as "*Jamaica sefer*", even though about fifteen nationalities are living there. This reflects the internationalization of the Rastafari movement. In the 1970s, while the Ethiopian Empire collapsed under the impact of social change, the Rastafari movement had spread beyond the boundaries of Jamaica. Because of reggae music, the Rastafari artists had broadcast their identity to the world, and in turn Rastafari from all over the world had arrived in Shashemene, sometimes from as far as Sweden, New Zealand, Chile, Japan and South Africa. Rastafari communities had meanwhile developed in Addis Ababa, Bahar Dar, Awassa and Debre Zeit.

Despite their small numbers in relation to Ethiopia's population,¹⁶ the Rastafari represent a particular figure in the Pan African relationship. They play a special role in the contemporary global representation of Ethiopia, as they learn Amharic in the Western capitals, agitate for the return of Ethiopian treasures looted by the British at Maqdala, and produce hagiographic discourses on Ethiopia, glossing over the subjects of war, famine, and poverty familiar to the international media. In Ethiopia they are a unique type of foreigner as most of them have left everything to live with Ethiopians in Ethiopia. They claim to be "Ethiopians" even though they cannot help sticking to their own identities. Although their culture is sometimes embarrassing to the Ethiopians,¹⁷ they nevertheless build schools and clinics, and develop businesses and services. They attract tourists, they invest, and they bring up their children in the country. Nevertheless, their contributions remain unrecognized, and their integration is not easy. Bob Marley is

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now celebrated in the country and adopted as a cultural reference by Ethiopia's youth.¹⁸ Yet, there is no government policy to facilitate the settlement and integration of Rastafari. Nor is there any legal or financial assistance from pan-African institutions.

Interestingly, the last ten years have witnessed a convergence between the Rastafari presence and the discreet but growing nostalgia for Emperor Haile Selassie's regime. Despite some legal restrictions¹⁹ the symbols of the *ancien régime* are nowadays visible in Addis Ababa, marketable to the tourists, and a number of Ethiopian associations openly express their proximity to Ethiopia's royalty. As an example of this convergence, one of these Ethiopian associations, the Emperor Haile Selassie I Memorial Foundation, organized on 22–24 July 2011 the first pilgrimage to Ejersa Goro, the birthplace of the former Emperor, in collaboration with the Rastafari community. Although the two parties express their involvement in this pilgrimage in different ways, it was the first time since 1974 that Ethiopians and Rastafari were working together on a tribute to Emperor Haile Selassie.

Conclusion

Ethiopia has assumed a central place, as much imagined as real, in the development of Ethiopianism and pan-Africanism. Although Ethiopia was not affected by the trans-Atlantic slave trade for which trading posts were established along the whole western coast of Africa, it has been chosen by generations of African American and Caribbean militants as a symbol of freedom, redemption, and sovereignty. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, pan-Africanism is trying to acquire new dimensions. The African Union has succeeded the Organization of African Unity (OAU, founded 1963), and a sixth region, that of the diaspora, has been established, even though discussions on the definition of this African diaspora and on the modalities of its claim to the eventual acquisition of an "African citizenship" are still going on. On the occasion of a conference held in Kingston in 2005, which included the African Union, South Africa and the Caribbean states, the contribution of Rastafari as the guardians of the vision of the founders of pan-Africanism was recognized and celebrated.²⁰ The resilience of the Rastafari in holding on to their identity, and their complete support for the last Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Selassie I, even more than thirty years after the downfall of the Empire,

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offers to the Ethiopians another representation of themselves and their legacy, located at the heart of the pan-African ethos.

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54. Like Teshome Toga, former Speaker of the House of Federation, and Haile Mariam Dessalegn (Deputy Prime Minister at the time of writing).
55. Gascon, 2005.
56. See for instance Hussein Ahmed, 2006.
57. Ibid.
58. Abbink, 2011.
59. Tronvoll, 2009.
60. Abbink, 2011, p. 274.
61. Marshall, 2009.

5. FROM PAN-AFRICANISM TO RASTAFARI: AFRICAN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN ‘RETURNS’ TO ETHIOPIA

1. Throughout this paper the word Rastafari is used to refer to both the movement and individuals as is the standard use in the literature (for example, Chevannes, 1994; Price 2009; MacLeod, 2014). Words like “Rastafarian” or “Rastafarianism” are avoided.
2. For a detailed account of African American, Caribbean and Rastafari settlements in Ethiopia since the end of the nineteenth century, see Bonacci, 2010.
3. See the discussion on this verse by Ullendorf, 1997, pp. 5–15.
4. This has been studied by a number of scholars, see for example Drake, 1970 and Geiss, 1968.
5. While Garvey had a tendency to vastly exaggerate the numbers of his followers (“four hundred million blacks”), records show that in 1921 UNIA counted a total of 859 branches, and in 1926 six million persons were apparently registered members. (Martin, 1986: 15–17, quoted by Tete-Adjalogo, 1995: 248–256).
6. Garvey, 1986: 44.
7. Black Jews formed their own congregations in New York and Chicago in the first thirty years of the twentieth century. They associated with the Ethiopian Jews known then as Falasha or Beta Israel, but are not to be confused with them. See for example Brotz, 1964.
8. This mobilization has been very well studied by Scott, 1993 and Harris, 1994.
9. A map of the Shashemene land grant is published in Bonacci, 2010.
10. For an account of the early Rastafari movement, see Hill, 2001.
11. Bonacci, 2013b.
12. See Chevannes, 1998.
13. For an account of the wider Back to Africa movement in Jamaica, see Bonacci, 2010, pp. 165–215.
14. Speech of Emperor Haile Selassie in Jamaica, 21 April 1966, published in *Reggae & African Beat*, 1986, vol. V (5/6).
15. While the Gregorian calendar is used internationally, Ethiopia uses the Julian calendar, which sets the date seven to eight years “behind” the Gregorian calendar. There were therefore two millenniums.
16. A 2003 government census numbered slightly more than a hundred Rastafari

living in Shashemene. However, a number of them refused to fill in the census forms. In 2014, 800 Rastafari live in Shashemene, half this amount in Addis Ababa, and a couple hundred in other towns. Ethiopia's population is estimated at 82 million.

17. MacLeod 2014 studies in-depth, the narratives of the relationship between Ethiopians and Rastafari.
18. In February 2005, on the occasion of the 60th birthday of Bob Marley, a festival dubbed "Africa Unite" was organized by the Bob Marley Foundation and the Rita Marley Foundation in Addis Ababa. The cultural impact of the huge reggae concert on Meskel Square is discussed by MacLeod 2014, pp. 126–66.
19. The flag of Imperial Ethiopia, red, gold and green with the Conquering Lion of Judah in its centre, is one of the symbols praised by Rastafari. However, the "Flag Proclamation N° 654/2009" outlaws its public display and indicates that any flag "related with a national historical phenomenon or event shall be kept at museums prepared for such purposes" (Art. 17/2).
20. Decision of the third extraordinary session of the Executive Council on the application of the diaspora initiative in the framework of the African Union, DOC. Ext/EX/CL/5, May 21–24/2003, Sun City, South Africa.

6. MONARCHICAL RESTORATION AND TERRITORIAL EXPANSION: THE ETHIOPIAN STATE IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

1. See the chapter on the Eritrean question by Gérard Prunier in this volume.
2. On this period, see Abir, 1968 and the critical revision on the literature of this period by Shiferaw Bekele, 1990.
3. On power relations between regional authorities in the first half of the nineteenth century see Crummey, 1975.
4. On the residual imperial legitimacy and the meaning of the Solomonic line, see Crummey, 1988.
5. Henze, 2000, p. 121.
6. Among the plentiful studies on the reign of Tewodros II, see Rubenson, 1966. An interesting historical reconstruction on the ascension to power of Tewodros and his tragic end was published by Marsden, 2007.
7. On the Islamization of the Oromo polities of Wollo see Hussein Ahmed, 2001.
8. Among many accounts of the British expedition to Ethiopia and the battle of Meqdela, see Arnold 1992.
9. On the reign of Yohannes IV, see the monograph written by his great-grandson Zewde Gebre Selassie, 1975.
10. On the religious policies of the Ethiopian kings in the nineteenth century, see Caulk, 1972.
11. On the resistance of Wollo Muslims against their forcible conversion to Christianity, see Hussein Ahmed, 2001.
12. The most famous and influential foreign adviser of Menelik was the Swiss engineer Alfred Ilg who was the inevitable middleman between any foreign inves-