

“When Britain Loved RasTafari: Englishness, Britishness and Ethiopianism”

At talk given by Dr. Robbie Shilliam: Reader in International Relations at Queen Mary University of London to the Anglo-Ethiopian Society and guests at SOAS, London UK, 22nd July 2015

This talk grew out of research collectively done for the

[Rastafari: Majesty and the Movement exhibition](#)

“This country is honoured by the emperor having taken up his residence here. Ten righteous men would have saved Sodom; I feel the emperor is one of the comparatively few who may save Britain.”

So says one English commentator in the summer of 1936.

The emperor in question is Qadamawi Haile Selassie of Ethiopia.

The occasion: his arrival in England after the fascist Italian occupation of his homeland.

But why would Britain need to be saved?

Well, when, in 1935, Italy invaded Ethiopia – both sovereign members of the League of Nations - Britain promised to support this victim of fascist aggression.

But Britain did not support Ethiopia – or international law. Instead, the government allowed Italy to consolidate its place in the African sun.

Sylvia Pankhurst’s letters, her newspaper – New Times and Ethiopia News - as well as the general press of the day, suggest that many white Britons and Black subjects from British Caribbean and African colonies took issue with this duplicity.

In short, Britain needed to be saved from its own perfidiousness.

What did it mean to be British in this colonial era?

What did it mean to belong to this perfidious empire?

A number of things.

One meaning was embedded in the idea of “Englishness”

“Englishness” denoted an inclination towards liberty, respect for the law, fair play, compromise and impartiality. In short, core competencies for enlightened imperial governance.

No surprise then that Englishness was also a racially exclusive culture of imperial belonging – a white one.

... Not so, the idea of “Britishness”.

Through Britishness, non-white colonial subjects, but subjects to the crown still, could vicariously identify with the competencies of Englishness.

In this respect Britishness was a colonial reflection of the glory of white English supremacy: its inclusivity was always meant to be enjoyed from a comfortable distance.

Britain’s duplicity over the defence of Ethiopia and upholding of international law undermined both cultures of imperial belonging – Englishness and Britishness - but in different ways: The empire needed saving, but for different reasons, and with different resolutions.

Let’s start with how the whole Italy/Ethiopia affair undermined Englishness.

Fascist forces sweep into Addis Ababa in May 1936, and Qedemawi Selassie is forced to seek exile in the UK. There, the Friends of Abyssinia League of Service ask their fellow Englishmen:

“Shall we continue to abandon Abyssinia, or shall we keep our pledged word...? Shall we lower the honour of Britain throughout the world, or maintain our high tradition for justice and fair play?”

A little more than a year later, the Dean of Winchester confirms: “the real thing which moves English people is that Abyssinia has not had fair play”

...Englishness ... fair play.. respect for the law..

Qademawi Selassie travels from the UK to Geneva in June 1936, there giving his historic speech to the League of Nations calling for collective security and international morality in the face of fascist aggression. Here is one eye-witness reflection by John Hilton, reporter for the New Statesman:

Yesterday I listened to the speech of the Negus. I have never heard or seen anything quite so impressive as his manner of delivering it. He did not move a finger or a muscle of his face. It was that kind of ultimate self-control and self-restraint that comes of great suffering nobly borne. I had an odd feeling that he was unreal; as if he belonged to a dream world, as if he were a sort of shadow. He seemed to radiate a spiritual quality in the light of which that congregation of go-getters didn’t quite know where they were or what they ought to do.

Here’s another eye-witness reflection:

...Our English gestures were unable, as impotent as our looks, to speak to him of our wretchedness
Yet it seemed that he sensed our homage
Knew that the shame of England was our own shame .

This shame.

It might also be shameful for white Britons to admit that an African peoples might be more righteous than the English on the world stage.

Witness one Isabel Bible from Devon:

I wonder how many people today feel hot shame mounting to their faces when they remember the GREAT BETRAYAL of 1936 in which England took such a leading part! ENGLAND, THE WORLD CHAMPION! The Guardian of freedom! HOW ART THOU FALLEN! BUT BE OF GOOD CHEER, ETHIOPIA! OUT OF THY MARTYRDOM THOU SHALT RISE UP A QUEEN!"

Freda Collier, whose brother is a governor of the Bank of Ethiopia, tries to bridge the gap. Points out that England and Ethiopia share the same patron saint.

English Poets even imagine that St George is now siding with the African not the European:

What though beyond the seas a nation stands
Called also by my name, untouched and bright?
What do I care for any other land
But her, but her, whose setting is my night?
Let Ethiopia sink in blameless pride;
But England is my own, and she has died.

If the English are no longer competent at being English, how can they still claim supremacy in imperial governance?

Hmm.

What of Britishness?

One English letter writer from Fareham addresses the question perceptively, on the eve of the Italian invasion: "[b]y going back on his word to Abyssinia, Mussolini is not only letting Italy down in the eyes of the world, he is letting the white man down in the eyes of the coloured peoples everywhere, he is letting civilization down"

Two years later, notable public intellectuals and politicians such as Norman Angell, Stanley Jevons, Lloyd George and H.G. Wells write to the Times, warning again of these repercussions and their impact upon the integrity of British Empire.

They are not wrong. For the Black subjects of the Empire are stirring:

"It being always understood all over the world that an Englishman's word is his bond", warns a writer from British Guiana, "yet they have made a gentlemen's agreement to hold Ethiopia in a state of bondage! ... we, the coloured race, are closely watching events".

Another Guianan writer, resident now in Bradford: "Africans at home and abroad have come to regard England as their Mother Country, but of late the Mother has been sadly neglecting her African children and has done them a cruel wrong in allowing Ethiopia to be ravaged by Italy"

C.C. Belgrave, self-describing as a "British West Indian Negro": "This cold hard inhuman attitude which the European powers have assumed towards Ethiopia, has taught us black men that somehow

or other, there is a difference in justice. There is one kind of justice for white folk, and another kind for black”.

Could it be, then: Africans are realising that Britishness no longer guarantees even a vicarious inclusion into the imperial family?

1938 and Wallace Johnson, trade unionist and social reformer organizes a resolution by the West African Civil Liberties and National Defence League chiding the British government, due to its recent recognition of Italian sovereignty over Ethiopia, chiding the government “for betraying the confidence of the African people in British equity and fair play”. The petition promises no further enjoining of Armistice Day commemorations by members of the West African League.

And indeed, the martial pulse is quickening across the Caribbean and African colonies.

George Padmore, famous Trinidadian Pan-Africanist observes that “Blacks ... have rallied to the defence of Ethiopia, as though they were the subjects of the emperor, Haile Selassie. Everywhere one hears them proclaiming the slogan : ‘Our flag is our Colour. An injury to one is an injury to all’”

So, in all these ways both Englishness and Britishness are seriously undermined by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.

Englishness has lost its moral highground – and with it white Briton’s exclusive and racial claim to imperial governance.

And Britishness has lost its claim to inclusivity for Britain’s Black colonial subjects.

How is this problem of imperial belonging resolved?

Differently.

First, Englishness:

And the resolution to the problem lies in the cultivation of a particular kind of Ethiopianism – a EURI-centric Ethiopinaism.

Much hangs on the catechism of Psalms 68:31: “Princes shall come out of Egypt; I-thiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto Jah”.

English Rev Josephy Gilbert, for one, preaches that “this ancient prophecy is being fulfilled in our own day ... Ethiopia is stretching out her hands in earnest supplication to all justice loving people”.

Similar exhortations from The Missionary Service Bureau and Ethiopian Prayer League: “Ethiopia . . . is stretching out her hands unto God.. Will His people come to her aid regardless of personal sacrifice or inconvenience?”

But let’s be clear.

While there is general acknowledgement amongst white Britons that Ethiopian Christianity has a pedigree surpassing even Rome, and while many note the Solomonic lineage of Qademawi Selassie,

Still..

For the defenders of Englishness, these justice loving people of Psalms 68 - God's people who will do his will - they remain white Britons.

Because, while the anciency of the Ethiopian Tewahido Orthodox church is granted by the defenders of Englishness, many of their commentators nevertheless suggest that it remains a "barbaric" institution. Ill versed in the pursuit of freedom and democracy, unlike the Western church, and even a good friend to slavedrivers.

And... that African St George – he is not quite African, thank god. In fact Ethiopians, considers one Miss Rouse, are "more Semetic Jews, only in the past they had inter-married a lot with the negroes". Some commentators go so far as to suggest that "there are no negroes in the country, except as slaves".

So Euri-centric Ethiopianism is a tool for defending Englishness.

Through Euri-centric Ethiopianism, Ethiopia is made exceptional to Africa. It is a land of "mixing", not of blackness, except amongst slaves. And it cannot save itself. Its institutions are unfortunately too barbaric. It needs saving by white Britons.

Englishness, even if disgraced and undermined by the exemplary conduct of Ethiopia,... Englishness will still find ways to defend its racial exclusivity and civilizational superiority: and it will do so through a Euri-centric Ethiopianism..

And CRUCIALLY, the effect of this defence is to insulate support for Ethiopia from any deeper and broader commitment to anti-colonial struggle, especially in the African and Caribbean worlds.

But Africans are not quiescent to this line of thinking. "Is it really true that Africa, and more especially Ethiopia, has nothing to offer to civilization?", muses one anonymous Ethiopian student resident in Italy.

Still, he writes,

let us define civilization as has been done by the great modern thinkers of Europe: Montesquieu, Voltaire, Vico, Hegel, Burckhardt and Croce. The conception all these great thinkers had of civilisation can be condensed into this formula: Civilization is consciousness of the universality of the human race.

The student does not need to finish his argument: European fascism is the negation of such consciousness. While the Ethiopian cause is its clearest expression.

So what of Britishness?

The Black subjects of empire cleave to a different catechism of Psalms 68:31. For Mrs Satira Earle, a Jamaican, 'the year 1935 was the commencing of Ethiopia stretching forth her hands unto God and not unto Europe as they think'.

In other words, God's children are Black.

And these children must retrieve another culture of belonging, not one ensconced in Britishness, but one inspired by a race consciousness already put into place by Marcus Garvey and Amy Ashwood Garvey via their Universal Negro Improvement Association.

They map the African world very differently to the defenders of Englishness – and they do so through an AFRI-centric Ethiopianism:

Witness a "Bantu voice" from Cape Town: "we sympathise with Ethiopia because she is in Africa, because she is black, because we believe her to be the Cradle of Blackdom. We say so with tremendous pride".

A statement from Theo Jean, a Trinidadian, reveals the deeper effect of Ethiopianism on British imperial belonging:

I claim Africa as my own because my fathers were born there. Because I happen to be born in lands known to be owned by Britain I am called a British subject; nevertheless the place of my birth has not affected my stock. I am all African. Africans at home and abroad are my bone and my flesh, and when anything is done to cause hurt to my bone and my flesh I must publish it abroad ... Oh Britain; Britain! ... "if we had served our God as faithfully as we served you, He would not in our times of trouble have turned His back upon us"

With Africentric Ethiopianism, Britishness is put aside for Pan-Africanism.

Lets remember: many future intellectuals and leaders of African independence are involved in the defence of Ethiopia. This Africentric defence is mounted from within the UK just as much as from the colonies.

Kwame Nkrumah is trodding London in 1935.

Sighting up a placard proclaiming Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, the future leader of Ghanaian independence feels "as if the whole of London had suddenly declared war on me personally. For the next few minutes I could do nothing but glare at each impassive face wondering if those people could possibly realise the wickedness of colonialism".

The International African Friends of Abyssinia (IAFA) convenes its first public meeting at around the same time. The association is established by Black luminaries including CLR James, Amy Ashwood Garvey, George Padmore, Jomo Kenyatta and Chris Braithwaite.

In supporting the Ethiopian cause, CLR James is keen to tell the crowds at a pro-Ethiopia rally in Trafalgar Square on August 2nd 1935 that the International African Friends are not animated by "anti-White feeling" but more by a "union of sentiment between black men ... all over the world".

By 1937 the International African Friends have morphed into the International African Service Bureau (IASB), the aims of which, as the name suggests, are to support a broader movement of self-determination amongst peoples of African descent.

Nonetheless, the IASB maintains its personal links to the Ethiopian legation in London as well as its ideological support of the Ethiopia cause in general. Let us be clear: its Pan-African mandate is carved out of the Ethiopian struggle:

...never since the emancipation of the slaves have Africans and other subject races been so awake to a realisation of the wrongs and injustices inflicted upon weak and defenceless peoples as since the brutal Italian fascist war against Abyssinia.

The newspaper of the IASB puts the case more bluntly in 1939: “as the Ethiopian struggle has shown, all Negroes everywhere are beginning to see the necessity for international organization and the unification of their scattered efforts“

Many of the leading lights of the IASB convene in 1945, at the Pan-African Congress in Manchester, and declare their intention to liberate themselves.

Afri-centric Ethiopianism continues to influence the agenda even here. The congress distrusts Britain’s persistent military presence in liberated Ethiopia. It cannot be liberated from the Italians to simply become a British protectorate.

And so the 8th resolution of the Manchester congress demands the “withdrawal of the British Military Administration from Ethiopian soil’.

Meanwhile, Sylvia Pankhurst, editor of NTEN continues to fight the same cause alongside these Pan-Africanists. Not all white Britons are Euri-centric Ethiopianists. Perhaps this is why Qademawi Selassie names her Wallata Kristos at her funeral in Addis.

In any case, Britishness can no longer contain Pan-African designs.

This culture of imperial belonging has fractured under the pressure of Afri-centric Ethiopianism.

Fractured, yes. And then independence from colonial rule.

But... the sons and daughters will now bring Afri-centric Ethiopianism back to the United Kingdom in the post-war, post-colonial era.

Then, when those from the Caribbean who have professed Britishness from afar, arrive to live intimately amongst the English, they are met with a most un-English visceral racism.

African-Caribbean youth are made to carry the main weight of this imperial melancholy. They are labelled incompetent – subnormal – socially deficient – unable to live an English life.

They rebel.

And a moral panic ensues.

Central targets of this panic are a loosely knit movement who, once more on English soil, wave the flag of Ethiopia – the red, gold and green. They know themselves as RasTafari.

Ras Tafari – he who inspires awe - is the Crown Prince title of Qademawi Haile Selassie.

They have taken this name as a claim to African belonging that stands opposed to the racist exclusions of Englishness. Indeed, the Rastafari movement dares to demand not settlement in England but repatriation to Ethiopia.

Rastafari are also on the front line of the uprisings of 1981 in Brixton and other urban areas heavily populated by African-Caribbean communities.

In writing his famous report of these disturbances, Lord Scarman enters into a hesitant but surprisingly receptive consultation with key RasTafari individuals and groups, and he is determined to include them in public sessions.

True, Scarman is motivated by his own political interests in this endeavour, and in any case he is less concerned with entertaining the RasTafari cause of repatriation to Ethiopia and much more focused upon facilitating integration and settlement of RasTafari in Britain.

Yet even so, it remains a puzzle as to why such an eminent judge would even enter into such a principled engagement with a group that so fundamentally disavows Englishness and even Britishness.

But...

Scarman was 25 years old when the Italy/Ethiopia war erupted in 1935. And a year later he joined Middle Temple as a Harmsworth Law Scholar.

And he must have been influenced by his fellow white Britons who, at the time, hailed Qademawi Selassie in his kingly character, albeit through their Euricentric lens:

“Nobody ... could fail to be impressed by the quiet dignity and regal fortitude of Haile Selassie”, comments one attendee to a reception at the Ethiopian Legation in 1936, “even in the most difficult circumstances, [he] displays just those qualities we like to regard as part of the public school tradition”.

Surveying Brixton in 1981, does Scarman, an old public school boy, recall another time when even white Britons were compelled to support – and even love - RasTafari? Is there a residue, here, of that old Euri-centric Ethiopinaism?

On 1 August, 2014 approximately six thousand people of predominantly African descent march from Windrush Square, Brixton to Downing Street.

The march, organized primarily by Rastafari Movement UK, but involving other Pan-African organizations, delivers a petition of over 65,000 signatures for a parliamentary inquiry into reparations for Atlantic slavery and its deleterious contemporary effects. Part of the petition reads:

“The lack of accountability by those responsible confirms the ongoing racism which creates disproportionate detriment to the offspring of the millions of individuals that were stolen

from Afrika ... Today the offspring of the stolen Afrikans encounter direct and indirect racial discrimination daily. This results in poverty, lack of education, unemployment, imprisonment and ill health”

As the invocation of African identities in the petition suggests, reparation for the Rastafari Movement is part of a broader and bolder agenda for repatriation to various sites on the African continent, including within Ethiopia. Afri-centric Ethiopianism lives on in the UK.

But, save for one local Brixton paper, no news media reports the demonstration. On this occasion there is no Lord Scarman to remind white Britons that they, too, might have cause to support RasTafari.

The national memory has become short and fickle.

Even Euri-centric Ethiopianism is forgotten.

In this national memory there is no BEFORE the Windrush, no BEFORE -when Africans - and Europeans - raised the banner of the red gold and green in the United Kingdom for the pursuit of global justice.

All that remains, now, is a story that “they” came, one day, suddenly, after the war...

And... ever since they have had problems settling in.

Pre and post war, pre and post Windrush, pre and post colonial rule. These are dividing lines that cut the national memory into its present shape. And, cut off from a time when Britain loved the Majesty of RasTafari, the national memory can now only conceive of the Movement of RasTafari as a bizarre alien cult.

But different stories of race and colonial rule are cultivated by the sufferers OF race and colonial rule. So often for the sufferers, the struggle over belonging seems to exceed any such distinctions and divisions.

They remember differently:

Settlement via Britishness in empire /

settlement via Englishness in the United Kingdom:

both struggles over belonging are joined by an Afri-centric Ethiopianism that orients the sufferers towards a different world map:

and a Pan-African resolution to race and colonial rule:

and a belonging within a de-racialized world.

Ultimately, those who, in their struggles, dare to claim both citizenship rights AND global justice can never be easily contained.