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Decolonizing knowledge and Epistemology: Conceptual Categories, Narratives and Interpretations in the works of Colonial, Anthropological and Orientalist Writers in the Horn of Africa.

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ABSTRACT

Background

The Horn of Africa has long been a subject of intense Eurocentric scrutiny, heavily shaped by the writings of colonial administrators, early anthropologists, and Orientalist scholars. These historical texts did not merely record reality; they actively constructed the conceptual categories, narratives, and interpretations that continue to influence contemporary understandings of the region's identity, politics, and history.

Objectives

This article critically examines how knowledge about the Horn of Africa was produced, institutionalized, and weaponized through colonial, anthropological, and Orientalist discourses. By interrogating these historical texts, the study aims to advance the project of decolonizing epistemology—shifting the locus of enunciation back to indigenous frameworks and lived realities.

Methodology

Utilizing a decolonial theoretical framework grounded in critical discourse analysis and archival historiography, this study evaluates key texts from the 19th and 20th centuries. It scrutinizes the linguistic and conceptual tools used by external observers to categorize the region's diverse populations.

Key Findings

The analysis highlights three critical dimensions of epistemic coloniality in the Horn of Africa:

- **Imposed Conceptual Categories:** External writers frequently relied on rigid, racialized, and binary classifications (e.g., "Hamitic" vs. "Nilotic," "civilized" vs. "primitive") that erased fluid indigenous social structures.
- **Reductionist Narratives:** Historical trajectories were often forced into Eurocentric teleologies, portraying the Horn either through the lens of exceptionalism (in the case of Ethiopia) or perpetual lawlessness and clan warfare (in the case of Somalia).

- **Flawed Interpretations:** Local religious, political, and land tenure systems were systematically misinterpreted to justify colonial intervention, administrative control, or intellectual subjugation.

Conclusion

The article concludes that decolonizing knowledge in the Horn of Africa requires more than just adding local perspectives to existing canons; it demands a radical dismantling of the foundational Eurocentric epistemologies that govern academic discourse. True epistemic liberation necessitates centering local languages, oral traditions, and indigenous philosophies to reconstruct more authentic and pluralistic narratives of the region.

Keywords: Decolonization, Epistemology, Horn of Africa, Orientalism, Anthropology, Colonial Discourse, Knowledge Production.

Introduction

In the first half of 16th century northern part of the Horn of Africa had witnessed fierce military conflict between Abyssinian kingdom and Adal sultanate. The war represented the most violent episode in a long standing and uneasy relations between two closely related polities that co-existed since at least 10th century. The Abyssinia-Adal military conflict also became a major international event when the world powers of the time, Portugal and Ottoman Turkey, came to the aid of their respective co-religionists.

There are two well-known eyewitness accounts of the war told from the Portuguese perspective. While the first account was authored by Miguel de Castanhoso, a soldier in the Portuguese army; the second one belongs to Joao Bermudez – a Catholic priest who accompanied the Portuguese force. The two accounts were written in 1541 and 1565 respectively in Portuguese. In 1902 R.S. Whiteway, a British colonial officer in India, translated and compiled them under the title *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia in 1541-1543*. In that book, not only did Whiteway translate and edit the two narratives but he also included an eighty-page long introduction in which he revised the historiography of Ethiopia in general and of the Abyssinia-Adal War in particular.

The essay offers a critique to the narratives raised, the conceptual categories deployed and the empirical observation/interpretations made in the Portuguese expedition to Abyssinia in 1541-1543. In others the focus is on how they described and interpreted the realities they found. Focus is so much on the conceptual categories, methodological weaknesses and misinterpretations. The aim of the panel will also be placed on reading these texts from within a particular historical period when certain realities were shaping and to critique them within their own context while drawing lessons for decolonization today.

Despite difference in certain factual issues, the authors featured in the book (i.e. Whiteway, Castanhoso and Bermudez) share fundamental conceptual categories, emphasize similar empirical observations and put forward analogous historical narratives. My objective is to To reveal [but also critique] the underlying assumptions and categories that have shaped history and the reading of history in the African contexts.

The essay has four sections. The first section locates *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia in 1541-1543* in an academic tradition of Ethiopian studies where it has flourished as an authoritative text. Since Ethiopian studies is a direct outgrowth of European orientalist tradition, I argue that the broader epistemic tradition where the book belongs is Orientalism. Hence, Edward Said's critique of the latter is deployed in this exercise of deconstruction. A discussion on the relevance of other conceptualizations of European

representation of Africa including Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa* and Miller's *Blank Darkness* are also included. Section two challenges the text's representation of the Abyssinia-Adal conflict as a conflict between indigenous Christians and invading Muslim foreigners- a representation that permeates conventional Ethiopian historiography ever since. Section three examines the conceptualization of Abyssinian Christians as followers of a 'debased' and 'savagized' form of Christianity. The fourth and final section deals with representation of the war itself. The empirical observations made by the authors depict both parties in the conflict as societies who were engrossed in senseless wars while being backward in the 'ways of war.' In an attempt to unpack and critique those underlying assumptions, the section discusses different alternative empirical observations which provide nuanced explanation about the causes and the conduct of the war.

1. "Orbis Aethiopicus" and the Orientalist Tradition of Ethiopian Studies

In 1992, Piotr O. Scholz[1] coined the term "Orbis Aethiopicus" to refer to Nubian-Ethiopian area that constitute a unified spatial remit of the well-established field of area study - Ethiopian studies. Later, Siegbert Uhlig, an editor of Encyclopaedia Aethiopica, borrows the term from Scholz and extended its meaning by noting that the "term has developed on the basis of ancient conceptions, approximating to the Horn of Africa. The area of present-day Ethiopian and Eritrea is in the center; Djibouti and those parts of the Sudan and Somalia bordering on Eritrea and Ethiopia are also included."[2] Scholz's and Siegberg's proposals are of course reflecting the very recent geographical expansion of Ethiopian studies. In early periods of its existence, however, the main focus of Ethiopian studies was the Abyssinian kingdom in the highlands, the Islamic polities of coastal areas and lands that lay immediately beyond the coast. The early geographic boundedness seems to be defined by the disciplines that were foundational to the scholarly tradition which include philology, history and theology. Thus, the long tradition of writing, the rootedness of Christianity and Islam as well as the presence of 'Semitic' element in the region induced European historians, theologians and philologists to draw the highland and the coastal areas apart from its surroundings and the rest of Africa.[3]

That was indeed a consequential beginning. And since 17th century European scholarly imagination considered the region as part of the 'Orient' and a century later it became one of the core areas in European orientalist discourses. The direction was set early by Job Ludolf, a well-known German orientalist who is widely considered the father of Ethiopian studies in Europe. In his 1682 book, *A New history of Ethiopia*,[4] Ludolf wrote in reference to the inhabitants of the region that they "…formerly inhabited Arabia, and were reckone'd into the number of the Sabeans and Homerites … For their ancient language, which we call the *Ethiopiek*, is very near a kin to the *Arabick*. They have also many customs, as

[1] Uhlig, Siegbert. "Orbis Aethiopicus." *Encyclopaedia* Aethiopica. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003.

[2] Uhlig and Bausi, *Encyclopaedia* Aethiopica, p. V.

[3] Mantel-Niećko Joanna, "Aethiopica: International Journal of Ethiopian Studies." *Warszawskie Studia Teologiczne*12, no 2 (1999), p.149.

[4] Ludolf, *A New History of Ethiopia*, p.8.

circumcision, which are common with the Arabians. Their Genius and the shape of their bodies and the Lineaments of their countenances resemble the Arabians much more than the African Ethiopians."[5]

The Portuguese accounts of the Abyssinia-Adal war which later included in *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia in 1541-1543* became important sources for the fledging orientalist scholarship on the Horn. And several translations of those texts appeared in different European languages. Ludolf, for example, cautiously acknowledged the Portuguese sources noting "the first knowledge of the Abyssinian Emperor was discovered to us by the Portuguese in the beginning of the preceding age…. Francisco Alvarez and John Bermudez affords a clearer light as having spent some time in Ethiopia..."[6]

The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia in 1541-1543 therefore undoubtedly belongs to the European Orientalist intellectual tradition. And as Edward Said's seminal thesis demonstrates 'orientalism' was not just one area of European scholarship innocently specializing on the 'Orient.' Nor was it limited to intellectually created distinctions (both epistemic and ontological) between the West and the East. Instead Orientalism is better understood as a dominating discourse (in Foucauldian sense) that deals with the 'Orient' "by making statements about it, authoring views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it."[7] Orientalism is a discursive field where "European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively…".[8]

In his 1995 afterword to *Orientalism*, where he responds to his critics; Said notes that in deploying 'orientalism' as a concept of critique he was mainly challenging the orientalist discourse for reducing "a heterogeneous, dynamic, and complex human reality from an uncritically essentialist standpoint."[9] The argument is not that the orient is entirely the creation of orientalist discourses; it is not. The value of Said's critique lays instead in showing us the 'internal consistency' of Orientalism in which knowledge about the orient and its people is selectively propagated to form a generalized epistemic whole.[10] Such a construction of alterity would serve as a medium by which the West proclaims its own superiority and civilization over the homogenised and inferior 'Other.'

"By following Said, my epistemological critique of *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia in 1541-1543* focuses on revealing general conceptual categories and empirical (mis)observation that already pre-existed in European conception of the Orient and being imported in the process of narrating a particular historical episode in the Horn of Africa."I do not, however, stop at Said's critique of orientalism. Despite an anomalous placement of the region (or one portion of it) as part of the Orient; other forms of European discourses commonly used to represent the rest of sub-Saharan Africa have not been entirely absent. Christopher Miller summarizes the difference between 'Orientalist discourses' and what he calls "Africanist discourse" in his book *Blank Darkness*. He, quoting Said, argues that while the orient has a negative connotation in Europe the latter still acknowledges that the oriental Other "…always has a

[5] The English edition I am referring here is typed in old English orthography. I am writing quotations from the book in modern spelling for ease of readability.

[6] Ludolf, *A New History of Ethiopia*, p. 2.
[7] Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 2, 3.

[8] Ibid, p.3.
[9] Ibid, p. 333.
[10] Ibid, p. 5.

separate identity of its own, an "inferior" culture but a culture nonetheless…"[11] French Africanists' representation of Africa did not even accept the latter as 'Other;' For them Africa is a space of 'nullity' devoid of culture and intellect. He notes "…it is only the black African that [Africanists] seek to depict as a pure "human machine," stripped of reasoning faculties and moved only by blind sensorial *desire*."[12]

Valentin-Yves Mudimbe is another post-colonial thinker who writes in the tradition of Edward Said by employing Foucauldian notion of discourse. His objective was to "interrogate Western images of Africa" and to trace the "processes of transformation of types of knowledge."[13] For Mudimbe the colonial moment "…signified a new historical form and the possibility of radically new types of discourses on African traditions and cultures..."[14] which ultimately "invented" modern Africa. Significantly, Mudimbe's project goes beyond revealing how European discourses represent Africa. He moves from an epistemological critique to explore the possibility of an alternative African epistemic order. Common among the papers is a search for an alternative; an alternative which seeks an "epistemic order" which is African. At the risk of oversimplifying Mudimbe's philosophical problem; I suggest that at least in the field of historiography (where Written European source holds privileged position) 'epistemic decolonailty' is not out of reach. And that alternative is a path to decolonisation (epistemological). And that decolonisation of alternative interpretations of conceptual categories can be found when we look at alternative categories, interpretations and explanations. The current essay is an attempt to that direction.

2. 'Moors' in the Horn: Making the Stranger Familiar

One consistent theme in *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia* is the characterization of the Muslims of Adal as foreign invading force. In the introduction, for example, Whiteway described the objective of the volume by noting that it brings together "the records of the history of the gallant band of four hundred Portuguese…who… slew the Imam Ahmad and drove the *invading Somalis out of Abyssinia*"[15] (emphasis mine). In this, Whiteway is simply regurgitating the characterization defined by his sources. In the eyewitness account written in 16th century (Which is now part of *Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia*), Castanhoso starts off his narrative as follows:

While D. Estevao da Gama, Governor of India, was anchored off Massawa with all the fleet…there came to him a captain of the Preste,[16] who was called the Barnaguais,[17] with letters asking him to consider that his kingdoms had been for fourteen years *occupied by the Moors*, and that the main of his people were in captivity;[18] (emphasis mine).

This first paragraph of Castanhoso's account set the tune in defining the Abyssinian-Adal military confrontation as a conflict between native Christians and invading Muslim foreigners. There is no

[11] Miller, *Blank Darkness*, p. 15.

[12] Ibid 18

[13] Mudimbe, *Invention of Africa*, pp. 9-10.

[14] Ibid, p.14.

[15] Whiteway et al, *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia*, p. xxiv.

[16] The reference of Ethiopian king as Preste John is a hangover from European Medieval legend about the existence of a powerful Christian kingdom far from Europe. I briefly discuss the legend in the next section.

[17] Barnaguais is a misspelling of a local title. The Geez name is *Bahri Negasi* which means 'King/governor of the Sea.

[18] Whiteway et al, *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia*, pp.3-4.

question that the war had a strong religious dimension, at least ideologically, and this goes both ways.[19] The presence of religious element in the war, however, did not mean that Muslims and Muslim polities were external elements to the premodern social and political configuration of the region where Abyssinian kingdom was a major player. As demonstrated later in this section, contemporaneous local sources did not share the representation of the Muslims as foreign 'moors' who invaded and occupied 'Christian' lands.

Throughout the text, the authors frequently use the term 'moor' to refer to the Muslim side of the warrying parties. And I argue that the term is key conceptual category which help establish the foreignness of the latter. When we look at the genealogy of the category 'Moor,' we learn that it was not an innocuous term; it had a history that originated in Europe and when used by Portuguese writers it was intended to invoke (perhaps reflexively) certain pre-existing conceptions.

2.1 The Genealogy of 'Moor' in European Discourse

In their recent article, decolonialty scholars Ramón Grosfoguel and Eric Mielants ask, in relation to 'inferiorization' of Muslims, how religious difference in premodern period morphed into racial difference in the modern period?[20] The question that I try to answer in this sub-section is slightly different: how does the term 'moor' which was an ethnic reference to Muslims in North Africa and Iberian Peninsula turned into a generalized term to refer all Muslims while mostly invested with negative connotation?[21] This is all the more daunting given the widely shared depiction of Moorish era in Europe as a period of tolerance and co-existence.[22] The turning point, as Grosfoguel and Mielants suggests, came in 1492: a double moment of *Reconquista* as well as 'discovery' of the Americas. The zeal of Reconquista established the notion of recovery of Christian lands from Muslim invaders and "the first marker of 'Otherness' in [Europe] was around religious identity. Jews and Arabs were characterized as 'people with the wrong religion.'"[23] After *Reconquista*, therefore, the term Moors seems to be associated with Muslim invaders "despite some modern efforts to see the Moorish presence in the Peninsula not as a foreign invasion, but as part of the very fabric of the Spanish state."[24] That does not mean the discourse of alterity had no medieval precedents. As Tofino notes "as optimistic as one would like to be about *convivencia* [the Moorish era], the fact is that literary portrayals often relied on stereotypes and caricatures…Muslims were described either as barbaric infidels and invaders or as exotic sybarites…."[25]

In Portugal, as the spirit of reconquest gathering pace against Muslim Kingdom in Iberia, literary discourse depicts that the "Moor is in fundamental 'politico-religious' …opposition to a presumed Ibero-Christian, historical status quo. In poetic texts…. Moors appear as the foe or foil to Christianity. These devotional lyrics… take specific historical events as their basis, sing the triumph of Christianity over

[19] De Lorenzi, "Red Sea Travelers in Mediterranean Lands," p.175.
[20] Grosfoguel and Mielants, "The Long-Durée Entanglement Between Islamophobia and Racism", p.2.

[21] Evidently, the former meaning did continue to exist along the latter as can be seen from the 16th century travelogue of Leo Africanus, who associated moors with Berbers of North Africa excluding Egypt while also using the term in its generalized import. Africanus, *The History and Description of Africa,*" pp. 20, 52, 108.

[22] For comprehensive coverage of the era see: Jayyusi, Salma K, and Manuela Marín. *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992.

[23] Grosfoguel and Mielants, "The Long-Durée Entanglement Between Islamophobia and Racism", p.2.
[24] Tofino, "Spanish Orientalism", p.141.
[25] Ibid.

Moors as the representatives of paganism or Islam." In some other literally works the Moors are also portrayed as sexually deviant. [26] As Blackmore shows the "Othering" of the Moor is not limited in literally context. Moorishness alongside Jewishness was also a 'legal demographic' with which Christian interaction is legally delimited. The latter include a prohibition of sexual intermingling. [27]

Those conceptions which have been subsumed in the category 'moor' and obtruded on the Horn of Africa had the effect of constructing local Muslims as foreign invaders with all the attendant negative undertones imported from Europe. The far-reaching consequence of that discourse is that the way it represented the conflict remained an orthodoxy in Ethiopian studies. Early on, Ludolf described Adal as ancient 'Muhammadan' enemy of 'Christian Abyssinia.'[28] The latter's understanding also has permeated the work of many modern Ethipianists who kept reproducing the essential opposition between Muslims and 'Abyssinian Christians.' Ullendorf, one of the prominent 20th century Ethiopianists, writes "although nearly half of the population of the Horn of Africa are Muslims, their impact on the character and substance of Ethiopia is as peripheral as is their geographical distribution all around the central highland plateau."[29] For him Islam and Muslims are "secondary importance to an understanding of the essential Abyssinia..."[30] As the following sub-section demonstrates, however, alternative sources show that even several centuries before the war, orthodox Christians and Muslims had been integral components of a broadly fused political and social formulation.

2.2 Beyond Discourses of Alienazation

My reading of alternative sources must be prefaced with one crucial note. There is no question that Abyssinian state's self- image was unequivocally Christian as Islam was propagated as state ideology in Muslim Sultanates. However, in the premodern setting of the region, how a particular polity identified itself religiously did not reflect neither the essential nature of its society nor did it define the political and social relations among the polities. In understanding Muslims as 'foreign invaders,' the authors of *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia* and their intellectual heirs in the field of Ethiopian studies mistook the self-identification of the state as an identity of the society. As Hussein notes "in spite of the preponderance of Christianity as a state religion and the dominance of the Semitic speaking group within a long narrow corridor stretching from the north to the central highlands, Abyssinia had historically been a heterogeneous society consisting of non-Semitic pagan and Muslim elements of equal historical standing."[31] Merid Wede-Argay confirms Hussien's statement in his study on the settlement patterns of the early 16th century and shows that both Christian and Muslim polities had a diverse population with different religious and ethnic affinities.[32]

The authors of *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia* recorded some empirical observations that supported the latter although it did not factor in their discursively defined representation of the region. For

[26] Blackmore, Moorings: Portuguese Expansion, pp.4, 6.

[27] Ibid, p.5.
[28] Ibid, 22.
[29] Ullendorf, Edward. "Habasha." *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol 3. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986.

[30] Quoted in Ahmed, "Historiography of Islam in Ethiopia", p.15.

[31] Ibid, p. 16.
[32] Asfaw, "Legacy of Merid", p.130.

Instance; Whiteway, in his description of how the first Portuguese Embassy came to Ethiopia following an invitation from Queen Eleni (a regent of King Lebna Dengel), notes that the Queen was a daughter of one of the Muslim rules in the region.[33] He then goes on to explain:

The policy of marrying as one of their wives (for `they were polygamists though Christians) a daughter of one of the Muhammedan chiefs of frontier states, was a very favorite one in Abyssinia…Alvarez indeed states that the Muhammedan wars of lebna Dengel's reign began when he refused to marry a daughter of the chief of Adea (Hadia), because her front teeth was too large. She could not return as she had become a Christian, and a husband was found for her among the nobility, her family never forgave the insult…"[34]

The value of engaging such narratives as earlier anthropologists and colonial administrators lies in the fact that they can allow for new interpretations on the meanings of some practices

If the implication of such an empirical observation should have been that the so-called "moors" and Abyssinians were internal players with complex political relations, Whiteway remained silent about it. Instead he used the story to imply the degeneracy of Abyssinian Christianity and the senselessness of the war itself.

Though steeped in the language of Jihad, Shehabeddin Ahmed, the chronicler of Adal campaign, also presented the commencement of Adal war, under the military leadership of Imam Ahmed ibn Ibrahim, as an act of rebellion saying "…in the time of Sa'd ad-Din, and in the time of those who governed Harar after him, and even up to the time of Garad Ablin, the infidels made incursions into the country of the Muslims and laid it waste many times; so that some of the Muslim towns even paid them the kariij."[35]

More importantly such internalizing discourses can also be found in local Abyssinian sources. The Chronicler of King Gelawdewos,[36] describes the king as a ruler of Ethiopia "…over all its rulers and slaves by defeating and chasing his enemies from the gate of Ajam to the Bar Sa'adadin [Adal] without resistance."[37] In describing the circumstances in which Gelawdewos took power, the chronicler writes "At that time victory was taken into the hand of Muslims of Sa'adadin and they had dominion over the Church of Ethiopia."[38] The fact that the Abyssinian Emperor had indeed no effective control over those rulers is a point fact which does not concern us in the essay. The chronicler's inclusion of Muslim and Christian principalities under one broad political configuration called *Ethiopia* is, however, notable. Unlike the Portuguese sources, the chronicle did not speak of Muslims as foreigners. In addition, many other sources show us that the relations between Christian and Muslim polities was not entirely conflictual. The polities had enjoyed times of peaceful (if not equal) economic and political interactions. Though his overall argument is framed in terms of Christian Abyssinia/ Muslim invaders binary; Taddesse Tamrat has noted cases of such peaceful co-existence.[39]

[33] Whiteway et al., *Portuguese Expedition*, p. xxvii.
[34] Ibid, p. xxviii.
[35] Shihab ad-Din et al., *Futuh Al-Habasa*, p.22.

[36] King Gelawdewos was the Son and Lebne Dengel. He came to power amidst of the Abyssinia-Adal war following the death of his father. During his reign (1540 –1559) he oversaw the defeat of Adal and the death of its rules Imam Ahmed.

[37] Beyene, "Chronicle of King Galawdewos", p.183.
[38] Ibid, 184
[39] Tamrat, "Ethiopia, the Red Sea and the Horn", p.142-143.

As I have tried to demonstrate in this section, the pre-existing conceptions which have been subsumed in the category 'moor' and obtruded on the context of Horn of Africa are partially attributable to Portuguese historical sensibilities drawn from the Islamic conquest of Iberian Peninsula. In contradistinction to those discourses which alienize Muslims, alternative local sources, cited above, establish the fact that for several centuries before the commencement of the war, Abyssinian Christians and Muslims of other polities constituted an integral component of a broadly fused political and social formulation which had its fair share of conflict and concord.

3. The Othering of Abyssinian Christianity: Between Discourses of Civilization and Theology

In *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia*, Bermudez narrates that soon after Portuguese soldiers enter Abyssinia, some of them "...began to murmur against the natives of that Country, saying that they were not good Christians, as they did not obey the Holy Apostolic See of Rome;" and that "both [the king] and his people were schismatics, because they used rites and ceremonies which were schismatical and heretical, different from the Romans." [40] Bermudez, who claims to be annotated Patriarch of Abyssinia, advised the soldiers to be patient as "it was necessary to temporise with the rustic Abyssinian people, as if we scandalised them they would make us over to the Moors, and we should attain no result, and do no service to God."[41] He added "a whole people cannot be cleansed from all the tares the, devil sows…It is just now sufficient to carry the main point, which is to get their obedience and submission to the Holy Mother Church; this is the source of all the rest, and from it follow all other circumstances."[42]

What clearly comes out from the accounts included in the book in general and that of Bermudez in particular is that the conversion of Abyssinia to Catholicism was one of the chief objectives of Portuguese intervention. A conversion from what Whiteway, in his introduction, called "a primitive and perhaps debased, form of Christianity." whose follower's "religious and social customs, bear signs of the influence of Judaism."[43]

Such a description of Abyssinian Christianity represents (to use Manuel Joan Ramos' phrase) the transformation of an "image of similarity into that of alterity"[44] - a far cry from the European medieval image of Abyssinia. During the late medieval period, the name Abyssinia in Europe was associated with a legend of Prester John. The legend has it that somewhere in the East surrounded by the lands of pagans and Muslims there is a powerful Christian Kingdom led by a priest-king known as Prester John. He was expected to be a powerful potential ally of Christian Europe in its struggle against Islam. The location of this Christian Kingdom in the Orient was a subject of intense speculation in medieval era. Indian sub-continent was a strong candidate for a long period of time. And beginning from 15th century the possibility that the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia could be the land of the Prester gained a wide currency. Andrew Kurt notes that when Abyssinian Church was invited to the famous Councils of Constance (1414-1418) and Council of Florence (1441) the Pope addressed the letter intended to Ethiopia "to none other

[40] Whiteway et al., *Portuguese Expedition*, p.147.

[41] Ibid, p. 148.
[42] Ibid, p. 179.
[43] Ibid, p. xxi.
[44] Ramos, Essays in Christian Mythology, p.114.

than Prester John."[45] At the same time rosy story about Abyssinia started to appear in different travelogue and scholastic treatise. The accounts include stories that Prester John rules 120 kingdoms; that "when the king goes into battle he leads a million men" and that "men living up to the age of 130 and 150 years." Abyssinia was also described as a centre of learning with "a university of many scholars" while the King was said to have a power to divert the Nile.[46]

A century later, with growing European knowledge of the World and increasing contact with real Abyssinia and Abyssinians; the fantastical medieval stories gave way to extremely negative discourses about the country and the form of Christianity practiced there.[47] Manuel Joan Ramos argues that the Accounts of Alvarez, a priest who travelled to Abyssinia with the first Portuguese Embassy in early 16th century, was particularly influential in demystifying the Christian kingdom.[48] In his observations, informed by both Catholic theology and civilization discourses of his time, Alvarez admits the religious devotion of Abyssinians but described them as "fraudulent, lazy, liars and thieves."[49] Alvarez also recorded that Abyssinians practice circumcision which Europe consider as un-Christian Jewish culture. As noted by Joan Ramos, Alvarez viewed certain aspects of Abyssinian Christian practices (such as baptism, liturgy, sacrament) as "highly irregular;" and their habits of eating raw meat as well as overspending as uncivilized.[50]

Being part of this discursive shift, the authors included in *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia*, attributed the defeat of Abyssinian Christians at the hands of the 'moors' to their 'sinfulness' and degeneracy, the successful intervention of Portugal in the war, on the other hand, confirms the righteousness and superiority of Catholic faith.[51]

As suggested above, the Portuguese discourse of religious difference carries with it a colonizing impulse to redeem and civilize Abyssinians. When the relations between Portuguese and Abyssinia deteriorated after the latter's refusal to join the Catholic Church, Portuguese writers launched radical attack which was framed in terms of barbarity and lack of civilization. Manuel de Almeida, a Jesuits historian whose work is considered as one of the foundational texts in Ethiopian studies in Europe, urges that "…we shall not depict them as they are unless we depict a chimera, not fictitious or imaginary but real, so that the whole world may know that this nation is the strangest monstrosity that Africa, the mother of monsters, has bred in her remote and savage jungles."[52] That way, Abyssinia, which had been an ally to Europe and later imagined as an Oriental Other, again became a subject of discourse which conceptualize Africa as space of "nullity" and land of monsters as discussed in Miller's *Blank Darkness*.

The earliest attempt to respond to the increasingly hostile discourse in Europe came from Saga Za'ab, an Abyssinian diplomat-cum- scholar, who was part of an Abyssinian embassy in Lisbon. In 1540, he wrote a book entitled *Fides, Religio Moresque Aethiopium* where he defended Abyssinian Christianity from the attacks of European writers. According to James De Lorenzi, in an attempt to refute the critics of his

[45] Kurt, "Search for Prester John", p.311.

[46] Ibid, p. 312.
[47] Ibid, p. 319.
[48] Ramos, Essays in Christian Mythology, p.116.
[49] Ibid, p. 11.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Whiteway et al., *Portuguese Expedition*; see, for example, pp. 22, 32, 43.

[52] *Ramos, Essays in Christian Mythology, p. 121.*

church, Saga Za'ab wrote an "outline of the main tenets of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, supported by scriptural and patristic proofs, and he continued with a critique of the Catholic position…"[53] The book was widely read in Europe despite Catholic Church's condemnation of it as heretical.[54] At the height of the dispute between Abyssinia and Portuguese Catholics, King Gelawdewos wrote his famous 'Confession of faith" where he outlines his "rebuttal of the Portuguese charge of the Hebraic mould of the Ethiopian Church."[55] For instance, he defended the practice of circumcision as unrelated to observance of Jewish customs as follows:

….the circumcision which we have is according to the custom of the country — like the scarification of the face (practised) in Ethiopia and Nubia; and like the perforation of the ears among Indians…What we do is not for the observance of the laws of the Pentateuch but rather in accord with the custom of the people.[56]

Remarkably, in the Abyssinian side, the debate was consistently framed in 'theological' terms and the language of 'civilizational difference' was not in the lexicon of this non-European discourse. Contrary to how Europe took it, it did not occur to Abyssinian Christians that their military weakness and technological backwardness would negatively reflect upon their belief system. As far as they are concerned the two are separate spheres of action.

4. Narrating the Battle Field: Orientalizing Abyssinia-Adal War

Military orientalism is a relatively new concept which deploys Edward Said's critique in deconstructing the Western discourse of war. For Barkawi and Stanski, two prominent pioneers of the concept, "war serves as a constitutive moment in orientalism and orientalism as a constitutive moment in war."[57] To them, beginning from Greco- Persia war of fifth century BCE down to the "War on terror" in twenty-first century, it is in the moment of conflict and confrontation that the "Western and Eastern identities are defined and come to be taken for granted, as truths about the essential nature of peoples."[58] On the other hand, orientalist discourse also provides a "regime of truth" an interpretative device on the nature and meaning of war.[59] Crudely stated, the Western 'regime of truth' about war favourably portrays Western 'way of war' as rational and superior; while the oriental war has consistently been depicted as irrational and backward. That is indeed not different from how Western orientalism represents the Self and the Other in general. But the contingent nature of war means that the above construction of self/other in the context of war is inevitably unstable. The Spector of defeat is ever present and "encounters with violent Eastern others can evoke enduring anxieties and uncertainties, as when these struggles with supposedly inferior enemies come to resemble past defeats and failures."[60]

The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia starts off by celebrating the Portuguese intervention (with small army of four hundred) as an affirmation of Western military superiority. In the preface Whiteway notes "the Portuguese Expedition was decisive in that Abyssinia has since remained Christian; it is

[53] *De Lorenzi, "Red Sea Travelers in Mediterranean Lands"*, p. 173.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ullendorf, "Confessio Fidei", p. 164.

[56] Ibid, p. 174.
[57] Barkawi and Stanski, *Orientalism and War*, p. 1.

[58] Ibid, p. 3.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid, p. 10.

seldom that results so momentous have been attained by means so disproportionate."[61] Bermudez who claims that it is impossible to condense (in one book) all the battles won by the few 'Courageous' Portuguese and "the kings and powerful princes they terrorised, the savage nations they tamed;"[62] goes on to asset "the Abyssinians, not content with calling the Portuguese valiant men and courageous…alleged that no human courage could compare with that of the Portuguese, for they seemed a natural prodigy, or else that God had miraculously created those men to succour and restore, on His behalf, that Empire…"[63]

In Europe, those Portuguese accounts of the war, once again, confirmed military superiority of the rising Europe. Edward Gibbon, a famous 18th century English and Whig historian, summarizes European representation of the War as follows:

[In 16th century] public danger soon called for the instant and effectual aid of arms and soldiers to defend an unwarlike people from the Barbarians who ravaged the inland country and the Turks and Arabs who advanced from the sea-coast in more formidable array. *Ethiopia was saved by four hundred and fifty Portuguese, who displayed in the field the native valour of Europeans,* and the artificial power of the musket and cannon…"[64] (Emphasis mine).

Yet, the course of the War, as narrated in Portuguese accounts was not all rosy. There were battles were Portuguese suffered devastating defeat at the hands of the Adal army. In the Portuguese accounts the narrative strategies used to explain victories and defeats in battlefields are different. Such differing narrative strategies to explain victory and defeat might not be unique to Portuguese (or the West); what is remarkable is the consistency of the categories used to explain one's victory and the victory of the Other.

A couple of anecdotes from Castanhoso's account may clarify the point. The first story came early in his narrative when the Portuguese army began to march into the interior of the country. Along the way Christavoa, the commander of the army, "learned that there was a hill standing in the middle of a plain which we had to cross that was held for the King of Zeila."[65] Castanhoso notes that not only did the hill was heavily defended, but also the landscape provides a natural defence. Two reasons are suggested on how, to begin with, the "Moors' took this Abyssinian hill if it had such natural defence: the 'treachery' of the "moors" and 'disloyalty' and weakness of the Abyssinian army.[66] These are, what I would call, two major 'interpretative parentheses' used to construct the locals 'way of war' as I discuss them below. To go back to Castanhoso's narrative, he tells us that despite the dangers, the commander decided to attack the hill. Even though the Abyssinian Dowager Queen, who was marching with the Portuguese army, and other Abyssinian officials pleaded with him not to do so; he was "determined not to go further without capturing the hill…saying that it did not appear to be right to advance, leaving these Moors behind, passing their very gate. That it would seem a cause for mockery, and that they refused to fight them through fear; that it would greatly hearten the Moors and greatly depress the Portuguese."[67] As he promised the commander faced the 'moors' in a frontal attack and captured the hill.[68]

[61] Whiteway et al., *Portuguese Expedition*, p. xviii.
[62] Ibid, p. 255.
[63] Ibid, p. 254.
[64] Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* Chapter XLVII.

[65] Whiteway et al., *Portuguese Expedition*, p.30.
[66] Ibid, p. 31.
[67] Ibid, p. 32.
[68] Ibid, pp. 34-39.

The second anecdote is about an Abyssinian Commander whom Castanhoso described as trusted captain of the Abyssinian king. Castanhoso narrates, "when the Moor saw how brave our Captain was, he determined to make a great effort to kill him by treachery. He sent for one of his cavaliers, and told him to send the Captain a message bearing the air of a challenge: a message to summon him to one side of the camp where was a small stream, he remaining on one bank and the Abyssinian on the other; that, while the message was being delivered, they might fire their matchlocks at him and kill him."[69] The plan was successful and the Abyssinian commander was killed.

The two stories above illustrate a ubiquitous binary that animate the narratives in *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia*: Portuguese fight and win openly and directly while the Moors win, if at all, by treachery. Fast forward to 21th century, those 16th century orientalist narrative strategies are repeated almost verbatim in the theoretical posturing by a British military historian John Keegan. In a newspaper commentary, at the heat of 9/11, the latter argues "Westerners fight face to face, in stand-up battle, and go on until one side or the other gives in…Orientals, by contrast, shrink from pitched battle…preferring ambush, surprise, treachery, and deceit as the best way to overcome an enemy."[70] Hence, the narrative that the Portuguese army was by far superior and that the Abyssinian and Adal armies were weak with inferior fighting skills is just one example of a well-entrenched military orientalism in the West.

Interestingly, notwithstanding the extremely acrimonious language that the local contemporaneous sources use to refer to 'enemy' party; such generalized assessments are conspicuously absent. In Chronicle of Galawdewos, while the Adal army were accused of destruction, pillage and cruelty; its military strength is painted in a very positive light. That can be illustrated by the following passage:

Imam Ahmed, son of Abrahim, whose soldiers were numerous like locusts …. They were ready for combat being as strong as the lion and as swift as the eagles…There were those who were hurling stones with slingshots. None of all these warriors had the habit of fear of combat and at the time of the battle, they rushed with their ardour like a hunting dog that sees wild animals for the first time.[71]

Similarly, in the Shehabeddin Chronicle of the Adal campaign, we find no attempt to essentialize particular 'ways of war' as a quality of particular cultural community.

Unlike what the Portuguese accounts claim; Abyssinian sources, judging from the royal chronicle, did not seem to be particularly impressed by the fighting valour of the Portuguese army nor did they seem to readily accept the superiority of Portugal. Even before the Adal-Abyssinia War, Abyssinians were more interested in acquiring Portuguese military technology than its protection. In one of his writings Alvarez notes that at one point Emperor Lebne Dengil asked to the members of the fist Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia if they "could make powder. [. . .] He said that sulphur could be found in his kingdoms, even that there were craftsmen to make saltpeter. All his armies lacked was the use of artillery and someone to teach them to work it, because he could marshal innumerable carabineers with whom he would subdue all the neighbouring Moorish kings."[72]

[69] Ibid, p. 78.
[70] Keegan, "In this War of Civilizations."
[71] Beyene, "Chronicle of King Galawdewos", p. 194.

[72] Quoted in Salvadore, "Ethiopian Age of Exploration", p.624.

In Western construction, oriental wars are always irrational and senseless; Western wars, in contrast, are rational and are fought with higher objective at heart, (spreading Christianity and civilization or preventing terror and tyranny). The narratives in *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia* tell us Portuguese soldiers were in Abyssinia for "the faith of Christ and the salvation of that kingdom."[73] We are also told that the "Moors' were fanatics motivated by looting and are bent on destruction. In the words of whiteway, Abyssinia characterized by "continual record of civil wars, waged on no principle; wars in which too often thousands have been killed merely to determine which, of equally worthless adventurers, shall obtain the chief power."[74] Such a discourse is what animates the historiography of the period as can be illustrated by the writing of Spencer Trimingham. The latter is an authoritative colonial anthropologist of Islam in Africa, and described Imam Ahmed Gragn, the leader of the Adal army, as someone who "organized and trained this heterogeneous mass of tribes with remarkable skill into a powerful striking force, inflamed with fanatical zeal for the jihad by the personality of the leader and greed for booty."[75]

Beyond narratives of 'irrationality', however, we can find writings that give nuanced explanation on the factors that led to outbreak of the War. Merid Welde-Aregay, for instance, writes an article entitled, "Population Movements as a Possible Factor in the Christian Muslim Conflict of Medieval Ethiopia." In the article, he moves away from religious explanation and argues that key factor for the commencement of the War in such a scale was the dramatic population growth among the pastoral community which constituted the largest part of Imam Ahmed's core constituency.[76] There is no denying that religion was ideologically important and was at times overshadowing the underlying causes for the war; yet, many other alternative explanations show that the war was anything but 'senseless fanaticism.'

5. By Way of Conclusion: Reading *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia* with Yosufu Bala Usman

I should start my conclusion with a brief note of what the essay does not do. The fact that I have analysed one text (with unsystematic reference of other sources) out of the vast tradition of Ethiopian studies would mean that the essay could not adequately qualify as a comprehensive critique of 'cultural representation' in Ethiopian Studies. This is not my intention either. Instead I treat *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia* as an influential historical source within the tradition and I attempt to unpack its 'framework of explanation' following the insights of Yosufu Bala Usman. The latter argues that decolonizing history begins with treating all types of sources as equally biased and make use of them with the awareness about "the basic categories and assumptions underlying…" their production.[77] Hence, 'grasping the essence and form of historical process' is dependent on penetrating analysis and interpretation of the primary source that "goes beyond the assessment of their reliability and accuracy, right into their basic conceptual framework and the world outlook which informs them."[78]

My epistemological critique of *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia* is an attempt to that direction. I aim at challenging the orientalist assumptions that the authors of the text held about societies of the Horn

[73] Whiteway et al., *Portuguese Expedition*, p. 20.
[74] Ibid, p. xxii.
[75] Trimingham, Islam *in Ethiopia*, p. 8.

[76] Asfaw, "The Legacy of Merid", p. 129.

[77] Bala Usman, *Beyond Fairy Tales*, p. 20.
[78] Ibid, 2.

and the categories they have imposed over them. Thus, if the authors of the text assume that the Adal-Abyssinia war was between indigenous Christians and invading Muslim foreigners; I look at the specific category they deploy to make this distinction. The key conceptual category which help establish the foreignness of the Adal Muslims is the reference of them as 'Moors.' Through a genealogical analysis of the category 'moor,' I try to show how the term was used to impose pre-exiting Portuguese conception of Muslims, as 'foreign invaders' and 'exotic sybarites,' on the local Muslims who fought under the banner of Adal.

The essay does not stop at identifying categories and assumption but it goes on searching for alternative to the orientalist historical emplotment (to use Hayden White's concept)[79] of the war. For instance, the Portuguese narratives depicts the local participants of the war as religious fanatics who were backward in 'ways of war;' and I present different alternative empirical observations which provide nuanced explanation about the causes and the conduct of the war.

The broader argument I intend to drive home is that Ethiopian Studies need to decolonize itself by critiquing, subverting and if necessary dismissing certain categories and assumptions that emanate from orientalist and colonial sources such as The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia.

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[79] White, *Meta History*.

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