Ethiopia and the Black Diaspora: The Career of Dr. Malaku Bayyan

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Greek in origin, the name "Ethiopia" has served for many centuries as a generic appellation for the darker races of the less known African landmass to the south of Egypt. It has also often had a particular resonance among Africans and peoples of African descent. This phenomenon has two origins. Firstly, it had its genesis in the Bible, more specifically in the oft-quoted lines: "Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto God". Not only have these words been enshrined as a national motto in the country that has now officially adopted that name, but they have also inspired amongst the downtrodden and the oppressed courage and faith in ultimate redress.

As it turned out, it also came to be identified historically with a country that was among the first to embrace Christianity, in the fourth century AD. As Africans who embraced Christianity discovered the glaring discrepancy between what was preached and what was practiced under white colonial rule, they began to seek alternative frameworks for the faith they had come to adopt. That was the genesis of the independent church movement that was particularly active in southern Africa. Not surprisingly, this movement came to be known by the term "Ethiopianism". A dramatic climax of this mass movement was the famous uprising of 1915 in present day Malawi led by John Chilembwe, which combined both religious and political motifs.

This brings us to the second, and political, basis of the resonance associated with the name Ethiopia. It arose from the unique status that Ethiopia came to acquire as the only African country to safeguard its independence from the colonial onslaught by force of arms. At Adwa in 1896, Ethiopian troops led by Emperor Menelik II scored a decisive military victory over Italy. That victory was important not only for Ethiopia but also for other Africans and peoples of African descent. It showed that white rule was not the norm, as it had seemed to appear by the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It sowed the seeds of hope for future liberation from white colonial or supremacist rule, as the case might be.

Although it took more than half a century, that hope was not in vain. Colonial rule did come to an end. Likewise, its worst manifestations — apartheid in South Africa and the color bar in the United States — have also now become things of the past, notwithstanding the lingering effects and scars. It is a measure of the powerful political symbolism exercised by the independence of Ethiopia that the flags of many independent states of Africa, beginning with the pioneer state of Ghana, who attained independence in 1957, show a variation of one

kind or another on the Ethiopian tricolor (green, yellow and red). It is also perhaps not an accident that the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, became in 1963 the venue for the historic conference of African heads of states that saw the signing of the charter of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), which continues to have its headquarters in Addis.

The OAU was the culmination of the Pan-African movement that had its genesis in the first quarter of the twentieth century. It was spearheaded by such luminaries in the history of African-American liberation as William Du Bois and Marcus Garvey. For some decades, it remained an African-American movement. But, as the emerging leaders of Africa — Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya and Kwame Nkrumah — joined the movement, it broadened to include the African homeland. And the thrust of its objective shifted from repatriation of the Diaspora to liberation from colonial rule itself, and eventually some form of continental unity.

Malaku Bayyan (1900-1940) stands out as the one Ethiopian who not only identified to the highest degree with the aspirations of the African Diaspora but also expended considerable energy in channeling its latent solidarity with the Ethiopian cause when the country fell under Fascist Italian rule in 1936. Malaku[1] belonged to a highly committed and articulate generation of Ethiopian intellectuals whose exposure to modern education had forcibly brought home to them the incongruence between the independence of their country and its backwardness. Determined to avert the twin dangers of internal disintegration and external invasion, they recommended an array of reforms ranging from improving the lot of the peasantry to separation of church and state.[2]

Two members of that generation had laid the foundation on which Malaku built the impressive African-American solidarity with Ethiopia that manifested itself in the late 1930s. The first of these was *Kantiba*[3] Gabru Dasta, who had developed a very close identification with the African-American cause since his first visit to America in 1919. Gabru had spent a good deal of his life abroad, either being educated under missionary auspices or serving in various missionary posts from Jerusalem to Zanzibar. Gabru led a second official Ethiopian mission to the United States in 1930. He was accompanied by Malaku, who had briefly come to Ethiopia after finishing his education in the United States. An important outcome of the mission was the securing of an American financial advisor for the Ethiopian emperor.

The strong links that Gabru developed with the African-American community are evident in a letter that he wrote to a certain Edna Jackson of Buffalo, New York. Responding to her expressed interest to emmigrate to Ethiopia, he wrote: "I hope God will protect all my brethren over there, until deliverance comes. I wish all who can come would come 'ere it be too late. Yours for the Race, Kantiba Gabrou". Gabru also leased his land in the outskirts of Addis Ababa to a R. W. Platt, whom he calls "my Afro-American friend".

The second was *Hakim*[4] Warqenah Eshate (alias Dr. Charles Martin). As someone who has spent a major portion of his formative period in white society, Warqenah was sensitive to the problems of racial discrimination. He had been picked up at the age of four from the battlefield at Maqdala (1868) by an officer of the British expeditionary force that had come to Ethiopia with the objective of punishing Emperor Tewodros (r. 1855-1868) for daring to hold Europeans captive. Warqenah's alias actually derived from the officer who adopted and

educated him, first in India and then in Scotland.

In 1927, Warqenah, accompanied by Gabru, had occasion to visit the United States to conduct official negotiations with an American company for the construction of a dam at the mouth of Lake Tana, with the objective of regulating its waters. He took that opportunity to visit the black community in Harlem, an event that was reported in the *New York World* of November 20. Not only did Warqenah convey to the community greetings from *Ras*[5] Tafari (the future Emperor Haile Sellassie, then still heir to the throne), but he also expressed interest in attracting African-American skill to Ethiopia. He had plans to recruit over fifty professionals but could not succeed in attracting even one.

Malaku was well placed to broaden and deepen this interest in and commitment to the African-American community of his illustrious predecessors. A relative of the emperor, he was one of the first three young Ethiopians to be sent to the United States for study. The royal patronage that they enjoyed earned them an audience with President Harding on their arrival and the close interest of his successor, President Coolidge, in subsequent years. They enrolled in Muskingum College in central Ohio in the early 1920s. Intimidated by their unfamiliar names, their fellow students conveniently labeled the three Ethiopians Luke, Mark and Matthew. Two of them, Malaku and Bashahwerad, managed to complete their studies successfully and even went into graduate studies at Ohio State University, the former specializing in chemistry, the latter in commerce and journalism.

Bashahwerad returned to his native Ethiopia on completion of his studies. He was instrumental in attracting a number of African-Americans skilled in music and various crafts. Malaku remained behind to continue his studies, relocating himself to Howard University in Washington DC, where he obtained a medical degree. But it was more than a degree that he acquired in Howard. He also got his wife, an African-American girl working at the Registrar's office. The choice involved a major decision, as he had to abandon his Ethiopian fiancée, who happened to be the daughter of the foreign minister, Heruy Walda-Sellassie, also the most prolific intellectual of that generation.

Like his colleague, Bashahwerad, Malaku also succeeded where Warqenah had earlier failed: drawing African-American talent to Ethiopia. Perhaps the most celebrated of these African-Americans was Hubert Julian, one of the most flamboyant aviators to fly the Ethiopian skies. Known as "the Black Eagle of Harlem", he had made a daring attempt to cross the Atlantic aboard an aircraft that he had baptized "Ethiopia I". The failure of that mission did not deter him from performing some breath-taking parachuting stunts to his Ethiopian audience. Decorated and richly rewarded though he was for these feats, a nearly fatal accident during a ceremony honoring the emperor's coronation incurred royal disfavor and his immediate dismissal.

His more sedate compatriots offered less spectacular but more meaningful service. These included: Colonel John Robinson, otherwise known as "the Brown Condor of Ethiopia", who served as instructor in aviation; John West, who served as a public health organizer and later earned an MD in Howard and was member of the Advisory Board of the Ethiopian World Federation founded by Malaku; and Cyril Price, an educator.[6]

But Malaku's, as well as his country's, real

test was yet to come. In October 1935, Fascist Italy, in a bid to erase the shameful memory of Adwa forty years earlier, opened a two-pronged military offensive on independent Ethiopia. Without any hesitation, Malaku rushed home to do his share in the defence of his country. He served in his professional capacity as a physician in both the southern and northern fronts. When Fascist victory became inevitable, he accompanied the emperor into exile in England. From there, he was dispatched to the terrain with which he was so eminently familiar, i.e. the United States.

Far from being cowed by the onslaught of Fascist arms that he had witnessed at first hand, he was bursting with energy and confidence when he arrived in New York City on 20 September 1936. In the first public address that he gave at the Rockland Palace, he asserted emphatically: "Ethiopia was not conquered and will never be conquered". He continued: "our soldiers will never cease fighting until the enemy is driven from our soil". Writing with even greater confidence in 1939, as the nation-wide resistance to the Fascist occupation picked up momentum, he was more assertive in his predictions: "It is now plain to the world that Ethiopia shall not suffer very much longer. We will not only drive every Italian from our country, but will also drive them out of every other part of Africa in the near future."[7] Given the fact that the Fascist occupation of Ethiopia was to terminate two years later and that it was indeed to signal the end of the Italian colonial empire in Africa (including Eritrea, Libya and Italian Somaliland), these words were to have the ring of prophecy.

Buoyed by such optimism, Malaku launched a vigorous campaign of solidarity with the Ethiopian cause. His target naturally was the African-American community. His major weapon in this respect was a weekly paper that he set up in January 1937, *The Voice of Ethiopia*.[8] An organization known as the United Aid for Ethiopia co-ordinated the collection of funds, primarily earmarked for the Ethiopian refugees scattered all over the world. In 1938, this was replaced by the Ethiopian World Federation: "An Organization Dedicated to the Cause of Right, Justice and the Independence of Ethiopia", as one can gather from the official letterhead. The Federation had as its President Dr. Lorenzo H. King, pastor of St. Mark's Methodist Church in Harlem. Malaku served as First Vice-President and his wife Dorothy Bayen as Executive Secretary. The Advisory Board included in its membership such eminent personalities as Dr. Arthur Schomburg, after whom the famous Schomburg Center in Harlem (New York) was to be named.

But these achievements in the realm of infrastructure belied the enormous difficulties that Malaku and his colleagues faced in their task. To begin with, the United States had not yet fully recovered from the Depression. As the ones who were naturally most hard-hit by it, members of the black community were hardly in a position to raise substantial funds for the Ethiopian cause. Malaku also had to struggle against the vested interests of a number of organizations and individuals who had been collecting funds earlier and saw the establishment of an official body like the Federation as a threat to their activities.

More unfortunately, Malaku was embroiled in a vitriolic and acrimonious polemic with the renowned African-American leader, Marcus Garvey, who had then been deported to England. The controversy presumably arose when Garvey wrote that the black community were under no obligation to come to the aid of Ethiopians as the latter did not consider

themselves black, let alone showing any concern for other blacks. According to Malaku, Garvey had even gone further and trivialized the national motto (which incidentally had also been adopted as the logo of the Federation) by writing: "Probably it is through Italy in Abyssinia that Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto God".

This aroused Malaku into a spirited defence of his country's record as well as a denunciation of Garvey as an instrument of "Fascist and Catholic propaganda" and "a victim of partisan bribe". More soberly, he wrote:

In these trying circumstances of racial history, when the sacred and natural heritage of your racial brothers is ravaged by a militant usurper ... anyone who would subvert the interest of the whole, whether by a cold indifference, plain self-interest, or injudicious aspirations, at once becomes guilty of the most consummate hypocrisy and treachery to the group.[9]

In the end, the fate of Ethiopia was determined on the battlefield in Ethiopia itself. In May 1941, the Italians were driven out of Ethiopia, much as Malaku had predicted. Unfortunately, he did not live to see that day. He had died of lobar pneumonia on May 5, 1940, a year earlier almost to the day before the liberation of his country.

Emperor Haile Sellassie, who had always been fond of Malaku and had watched his indefatigable spirit with keen interest, dedicated to his memory a ward in one of the hospitals of Addis Ababa. But few people are aware of the spirit and commitment embodied in that name.

NOTES

1. Ethiopians do not have a surname; instead they use the first name for both formal and informal identification. The second name is a father's name rather than a surname. Also, owing to the confusion that has always surrounded the transliteration of Ethiopian names, Malaku transliterates his second name as "Bayen", a form that is not adopted here as it is quite at variance with the Ethiopian sound.
2. My book on these intellectuals, entitled *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: The Reforming Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century*, (Forthcoming). It is being co-published by James Currey Publishers, Oxford and Addis Ababa University.
3. Title equivalent to Lord Mayor.
4. An Ethiopian equivalent of Dr. (physician).
5. The highest of political-military titles commonly used in Ethiopia.
6. For more on African-American immigrants to Ethiopia, see William R. Scott, "Going to the Promised Land: Afro-American Immigrants in Ethiopia," paper presented at the Fourteenth Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Denver, Nov. 3-6, 1971.
7. Malaku E. Bayen, ed., *The March of Black Men - Ethiopia Leads* (New York, The Voice of Ethiopia Press, 1939. p.7-8.)
8. It is of some interest to note here that the name of that paper was later continued in one of the papers that appeared in post-Liberation Ethiopia. It is not known, however, whether the continuity was conscious or accidental.
9. *The Voice of Ethiopia*, January 1937. The polemic continued into the next issue (3 February, 1937).