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Modern Ethiopian History: Two Schools of Thought

Erving E. Beauregard

“Man is an infinitely plastic entity of which one may make what one will . . .”, wrote José Ortega y Gasset.¹ And so humanity has in the consideration and reconsideration of modern Ethiopian history. There, indeed, is Janus; one side, orthodoxy, the other side, revisionism.

First, since it was the mighty bastion so long, a glance at the orthodox school. Understandably, the invocation of St. Augustine of Hippo reverberated: “Everything must be referred to divine providence.”² Thus the incantation of the cosmic drama, the eternal struggle of good and evil, virtue and vice, saintliness and devilry. So, on the right hand, the hosts of the Holy Trinity, the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Michael, St. George, St. Pontius Pilate, St. Frumentius and St. Taklé Haymanot.³ On the left hand, the minions of Satan, Beelzabub, Arius, Nestorius, Muhammad, the latter’s son-in-law Ali and Ahmed Gran.⁴

For the orthodox viewers the cosmic drama is the magnificent tableau, violent and gory necessarily, but, by divine fiat, ending gloriously in salvation for the just and damnation for the diabolical. It is the medieval church portico in macrocosm. Verily, it is the earthly progression of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Fittingly, the scenario begins in the “Time of Troubles” in the mid 18th century. Fittingly, because we are reminded of the first three lines of Canto I of the *Divine Comedy*:

In the Midway of this our mortal life
I found me in a gloomy mood astray
Gone from the path direct . . .⁵

Fittingly, because the “Time of Troubles”, i.e., 1769-1855, meant the triumph, although momentarily, of the unholy triumvirate of disorder, paganism and Moham-medanism; the demeaning of the imperial House of Solomon (seventeen different men held the office of emperor during twenty-six reigns; one emperor, Tekla Giorgis, was restored to the throne on five occasions); the insulting of the imperial presence; the swashbuckling power of kingmakers; the blasphemous advance of Islam; and the barbarism of Galla intrusion. This period is reminiscent of the ninth gulf of the eighth circle of Dante’s *Inferno*:

and the others all,
Whom here thou seest, while they lived, did sow
Scandal and schism, and therefore thus are rent.⁶

The era 1855-1868 arrived. The divine plan has raised up Theodore II. Reputedly of the House of Solomon, his youth resembled that of David, striking at the Philistines, i.e., Muslims. Malcontents and adventurers joined his band and he overcame the rulers of Tigré, Begemder, Gojjam, and Shoa, they who held only nominal

allegiance to the emperor of Ethiopia. Like the anointed David replacing Saul, Theodore overthrew the decadent Emperor John III and was acclaimed by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as the "Chosen of God." But megalomania came to grip Theodore II; like Saul he sank; dissolute, he "disgusted 'even the Gallas'; losing his control over the army, Theodore II was reduced to killing and burning alive thousands in a desperate attempt to save his face by his frightfulness."⁷ Finally his *folie de grandeur* drove him to imprison British officials. Thereupon, as Divine Providence had once raised up Assyria to humble erring Israel, so now the cosmic plan included the dispatching of a British army from India which overcame Theodore who then committed suicide, using a pistol which had been a gift from Queen Victoria. And so conceivably we could find Theodore II's soul in the seventh circle of Dante's Inferno (Canto XIII):

. . . there sprouting as a grain of spelt,
It rises to a sapling, growing thence
A savage plant. The harpies on its leaves
Then feeding,⁸

The scenario, thereupon, opened on the earthly purgatory. This was the reign of Emperor John IV, 1872-1889. Here was the warrior-emperor, the repeller in 1875 and 1876 of the invasions of the Egyptians and their American mercenaries (late of the Union and Confederate forces of the Civil War), the crusher of the Italian army in 1887, the defender of holy Ethiopian soil against the Mahdists whose stray bullets in battle slew him in 1889. Yet withal, not having the Solomonic blood, John IV was a usurper. So consign him to the celestial Purgatory in the words of Dante's Canto XI:

This arrogant neck is tamed . . .⁹

Next the cosmic drama ascends to the earthly paradise. This was the reign of Emperor Menelik II, notably the years 1889-1908. Menelik II, a true son of the House of Solomon through its branch in the Kingdom of Shewa. Menelik's success was threefold: war, diplomacy, internal improvements. Menelik was the architect of the immortal victory over the Italians in 1896 at the Battle of Adowa, the greatest victory of Africans over Europeans; moreover, his armies restored the original boundaries of the Christian Empire of Ethiopia by vanquishing Somalis, Gallas, and Boran. In international affairs Menelik II negotiated the recognition of Ethiopia's independence and integrity by Great Britain, France and Italy. Internally he promoted governmental efficiency, public works, educations and health. Yet Menelik's last years were clouded by a series of increasingly severe strokes, evidence that Divine Providence decrees that the most exalted must be laid low lest the deadly sin of pride doom them eternally. Death came in 1913 and Menelik's soul, we may surmise, entered the fifth heaven of Dante's Paradise (Canto XVIII):

On this fifth lodgment of the tree, whose life
Is from its top, whose fruit is ever fair
And leaf unwithering, blessed spirits abide

That were below, ere they arrive in heaven,
So mighty in renown, as every muse
Might grace her triumph with them.¹⁰

But now the upward surge of the cosmic drama stopped. An aberration appeared. There came a monstrous, hideous plunge. Satan was at the helm. The era was 1913-16, the reign of Lij Jasu, the abominable teenager, *the enfant terrible*, who became a Muslim, who claimed descent from Muhammad, not Solomon, who consorted with the "Mad Mullad of Somaliland," the Turks, Austrians and Germans; Lij Jasu who debauched womanhood, manhood, the flag and the only true religion. Verily Lucifer sat on the millenia-old Solomonic throne. However, the Ethiopian Orthodox clergy and nobility made short shrift of this anti-Christ, desposing him in 1916. When he died in 1935, the utterly licentious Lij Jasu, we may be certain, was hurled headlong into the fourth and last round of the ninth and final circle of Dante's Inferno (Canto XXXIV):

... That emperor who sways
The realm of sorrow, at mid breast from the ice
Stood forth;
Upon his head three faces: one in front
Of hue vermilion, the other two with this
Midway each shoulder join'd and at the crest;
... At six eyes he wept: the tears
Adown three chins distill'd with bloody foam.¹¹

Whereupon the cosmic drama moved to the summit. This epoch is inextricably intertwined with one man, he who is first Ras Tafari and then Emperor Hailé Sellassié I. During the reign of Menelik II's daughter, Empress Zauditu, 1916-30, Ras Tafari was the sage, unselfish, progressive power behind the Solomonic throne. He had, with the support of France and Italy, brought Ethiopia into the League of Nations in 1923, notwithstanding Great Britain's opposition. In 1928 he secured a twenty-year Treaty of Friendship with Italy. In 1923 he ordered the abolition of slavery.

When Zauditu died in 1930, Ras Tafari became Emperor Hailé Sellassié I. Reform was accelerated. The Emperor issued a more advanced decree abolishing slavery. He appointed better men to provincial governorships, granted a constitution, created a Parliament, carefully hired competent foreign advisers, instituted compulsory education for children and improved the system of justice. Upon Italy's dastardly attack in 1935, Hailé Sellassié rallied the nation, fought valiantly and then made his eloquent speech to the League of Nations at Geneva. In exile 1935-41 he still was his people's symbol of patriotic resistance and then, with universal acclaim, returned in victory in 1941. Since then he has been truly ubiquitous both inside and outside Ethiopia; modernizing; westernizing; crushing the treacherous forces of the Adversary; dealing with border disputes; annexing Eritrea; having an Ethiopian for the first time appointed the Archbishop of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; becoming a founding father of the continent-wide Organization of African

Unity and building its impressive headquarters, Africa Hall, in his own capital, Addis Ababa; making state visits to Washington, Moscow, Peking, London, Paris, Teheran, Brasilia, etcetera. No mere mortal indeed is he, as his title further attests: His Imperial Majesty, the Conquering Lion of Judah, the Elect of God, the Defender of the Faith, the Head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the King of the Kings of Ethiopia, the Emperor Hailé Sellassié I. Assuredly all this will merit for him the sixth heaven of Dante's Paradise (Canto XX):

How well is loved in heaven the righteous king;
Which he betokens by his radiant seeming.¹²

Such is the cosmic drama of modern Ethiopian history that one may construct by relying on Guèbré Sellassié, James Bruce, Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, A.H.M. Jones and Elizabeth Monroe, S. Pierre Pétridès, Christine Sandford and Leonard Mosley.¹³

Let us turn to the other side of Janus, revisionism. The grand design of the cosmic plan has vanished. Certain historians invoke the pithy phrase of Henry Adams: ". . . simplicity is the most deceitful mistress that ever betrayed man."¹⁴ The complexity of human motives and actions has entered into diagnosis. Another school of inquiry and thought has emerged. Indeed, the historian-metaphysicians are being thoroughly challenged by the historian-physicians who are probing the body politic. The Ethiopian Taklé Tsadik Mekuria, the Italian Enrico Cerulli, the Israeli Mordechai Abir, the Englishman Richard Greenfield, the American Donald Levine and the Scandinavian Sven Rubenson are leading revisionists.¹⁵ Moreover, the young generation of Ethiopians will no longer imbibe the holy writ of untarnished heroes and one-dimensional villains.

So now, under the banner of revisionism, we shall survey modern Ethiopian history. First, the "Time of Troubles," 1769-1855. This should be styled the *Zamana Masafint*, i.e., the "Era of the Judges" in the Biblical sense, the period when the regional rulers held the real power in the realm. There were creative efforts by the Christian Tigréans, both monarchy and nobility, and the Christian Amharas, likewise monarchy and nobility, to work, together at times, separately at other times, against the Gallas. Truly Tigréan-Amharan cooperation forced the Gallas to turn for help to the Pasha of Egypt, Muhammad Ali, but the Egyptian objectives remained limited and were still mainly economic. Furthermore, the *Zamana Masafint* contained the newly revived spirit of Islam in its appealing Sufi interpretations, a marked contrast to the dead formalism of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.¹⁶ In addition, the advance of Islam was intimately linked with an economic upswing. This was the activity of the caravans of the Muslim merchants, which penetrated deeper and deeper into the interior.

Concerning Theodore II, preferably called Tewodros II, undeniably there have been several captivating developments. He has become the subject of dramas and a historical novel. Tewodros II may be viewed as the "long awaited Ethiopian 'Messiah', who as tradition predicted, would reunite the Christians, conquer Jerusalem, Mecca and Medina, put an end to Islam, punish the Gallas, and bring the kingdom of peace."¹⁸ Tewodros II did reunify the empire and then sought to

change and develop it. He attempted to modernize the country and to maintain a large army which would not live off the land, as was the custom in the past, but which would be fed and paid by the central government. These plans required tremendous funds and so Tewodros turned to two solutions: confiscating the vast properties of the Ethiopian Orthodox monasteries and churches; and a reformed system of land and property taxation. These tactics inevitably aroused the clergy and nobility who won the support of the masses of farmers, whose hopes Tewodros had at first revived; Tewodros, sadly, alienated the peasants because of his failure to feed his huge army which reverted to the old custom of plundering the farmers. Rebellions flared. Desertions occurred on a vast scale. Thus the moment, 1868, was ripe for the successful British invasion. Nevertheless, Tewodros had promoted literature, tried to abolish slavery, and initiated road building; in addition, according to Richard Pankhurst, whose life has been devoted to the study of Ethiopian history, Tewodros' efforts in the domain of manufacturing modern firearms and artillery constituted an "attempted Industrial Revolution."¹⁹ Finally, if Tewodros were mad, his madness was within the context of the universal neurosis of mankind as Jonathan Swift wrote in his "Digression concerning the Origins, the Use and Improvement of Madness in a Commonwealth," *A Tale of a Tub*. Here, as Norman O. Brown reminds us, "Swift attributed to Madness 'the greatest Actions that have been performed in the World, under the Influence of Single Men; which are, *the Establishment of New Empires of Conquest; the Advance and Progress of New Schemes in Philosophy; and the contriving, as well as propagating, of New Religions*'."²⁰

Revisionism has treated John, preferably Yohannes IV, in both a kind and unpleasant spirit. Tubiana has proved Yohannes' blood connection with the Solomonic dynasty.²¹ Yohannes' reputation for personal prowess remains but there is, properly, recognition of the skill of his great general, Ras Alula. Moreover, with the appearance of British envoys and Greek consuls, the reign augured ill for the future. As Richard Greenfield asserts, "The era of diplomatic missions and intrigue so typical of the ensuing reign was beginning."²² Equally significant was the revival of feudalism which had contributed much to the weakness of Ethiopia before the reign of Tewodros II. Unlike Tewodros II, Yohannes IV acknowledged the local feudal rights of tributary kings provided they accepted his senior status as the King of Kings of Ethiopia. For a time this worked in regard to the most prominent vassals, King Menelik of Shewa and King Taklé Haymanot of Gojjam. Ultimately as Yohannes IV's fatal year, 1889, approached, Taklé Haymanot, encouraged by Menelik, rose in rebellion, and Menelik gave no support to Yohannes when the Mahdists invaded Ethiopia in 1889.

With the reign of Menelik II there heightened the criticism of the revisionists. One view holds that Menelik was actually a participator in the "Scramble for Africa", first as King of Shewa and then as the King of Kings of Ethiopia. Thus he was able between 1872 and 1896 to double the area under his rule. The wars against the Gallas have led to charges of treachery being hurled at Menelik but the truth is impossible to discern yet, since the Ethiopian government still refuses

to unlock the archives. Furthermore, the lands of the conquered—Gallas, Somalis, Boran and others—were given by Menelik to his retainers who formed a new class for whom the peasants were obliged to work. This landholding system has persisted in much of Ethiopia to the present day. Strongly condemned also has been Menelik's feudal practice of maintaining stability through the calculated balance of disunities. The searchlight of damning inquiry has even moved in on that holy of holies, the Battle of Adowa. Ras Alula is now acclaimed as the masterly organizer of victory. Menelik is presently blamed for stopping his troops from exploiting their overwhelming triumph at Adowa by marching into Eritrea and driving the Italian garrisons into the Red Sea. Additionally, mirabile dictu, for many contemporary intellectuals in Ethiopia, March 1, 1896, the day of Adowa, has contributed immeasurably to the fossilization of Ethiopia, i.e., the country has been so mesmerized by that event that it has refused to move into the twentieth century; the Battle of Adowa is the opiate of the people. Empress Taitu, who accompanied her husband Menelik into the Battle of Adowa, also has been sharply analyzed. Her intrigues during Menelik's lingering illness (1908-13), her reactionary position, her nepotism, all have been fervently trumpeted.

Extremely interesting, probably illuminating, is the new outlook on Lij Jasu, more properly Eyasu, the maternal grandson of Menelik II and his designated successor. He was the uncrowned Emperor Eyasu V, 1913-16. In international affairs he was pro-Central Powers, the reasons being two-fold. Italy joined the Allies in World War I on the understanding she would be rewarded with territorial gains in, among other places, Africa. "To Eyasu this meant the resumption, with Anglo-French assistance, of the Italians' scheme to link their Somalian and Eritrean possessions—that is, the dismemberment of the Ethiopian Empire."²³ Moreover, Eyasu thought that in alliance with the very able General von Lettow-Vorbeck in German East Africa and the capable Sayed Muhammad Abdullah Hassan al-Madhi, the so-called "Mad Mullah of Somaliland," he might further expand Ethiopia at the expense of British, French and Italian occupied Africa. This ambition has been called the principal cause of Eyasu's downfall. Alliances with the Turks and the Mullah were influences drawing Eyasu into Islam but certainly significant in that regard was his closeness to his father, Negus Mikael of the Wello Galla, who had been forcibly converted from Islam to Christianity by order of Yohannes IV. Eyasu figured he could count on the support of Ethiopia's Muslim population which is at least as numerous as its Christian population. Eyasu also relied on the backing of the regional forces who opposed the centralizing tendencies associated with Menelik. Furthermore, by matrimonial alliances Eyasu sought to breed a new aristocracy dependent upon himself. His plans alienated the Christian nobility, the Ethiopian Orthodox clergy and the army who combined, with Allied assistance, to depose him. At the Battle of Segalé, October 27, 1916, Ras Mikael's cavalry was mowed down by Shewans using French machine-guns; Eyasu had sent a messenger to warn his father not to fight before the arrival of reinforcements but the messenger appeared after the battle, having been attacked by a swarm of bees and collapsing badly stung. Nevertheless,

the dauntless Eyasu fought on until captured in 1921, his ally, the Mullah, having died in the fight in 1920.

With the advent of Ras Tafari, the future Hailé Sellassié I, reappraisal mounts to a resounding crescendo. His roles in the overthrow, imprisonment and death of Eyasu have raised devastating questions. Was Tafari a disinterested person in the conspiracy which dethroned Eyasu? Eyasu and Tafari had been boyhood companions and had frequent clashes; Eyasu the tall, jovial grandson of Menelik; Tafari the diminutive, reserved, second cousin of Menelik; moreover, Tafari was the son of Ras Makonnen whom Menelik had first selected as his successor; when Makonnen died in 1906, Ras Tafari, as his father's heir, might have felt he should have been designated the imperial successor. Also during his reign Eyasu sought no counsel from the sensitive Tafari. There was the imprisonment of Eyasu, first in golden chains, then in iron chains at Ras Tafari's orders. Finally there were the mysterious circumstances of Eyasu's death in 1935 on the eve of the Italian invasion; indeed, allegations that he was murdered by agents of the Ethiopian government. There is some puzzlement about Tafari's other activities as Regent in the reign of Zauditu, 1916-30. Did he always represent the centralizing, progressive forces in the Byzantine politics of that era? Is there any substance to charges that Zauditu's death was not natural? Was she strangled?

Concerning the Italian invasion of 1935, certain writers argue that Hailé Sellassié I, as he had become in 1930, should have better prepared Ethiopia; that he should have learned from Menelik II who, in anticipation of an Adowa, obtained war materials from France and, paradoxically, from Italy. Additionally, a number of Ethiopians, the lowly as well as highly placed, were upset, really scandalized, by the Emperor's flight from the country in 1936; like Menelik II, he should have been the warrior-emperor; veritably, in the final analysis, like Yohannes IV, he should have fought and died in battle. Writers have also affirmed that while Hailé Sellassié I lived in ease abroad 1936-41, the Ethiopian liberation forces, the Patriots as they are called, bled and died. Furthermore, when Hailé Sellassié returned in 1941, certainly not all segments of the population favored his restoration.

Next is the disillusionment with the last thirty years of Ethiopian history. The Emperor's paternalism, involving such as his having to approve individual public works in the humblest village, has been castigated. Extremely strong denouncements have appeared of Hailé Sellassié's policy of *shum-shir* (appoint-demote). "This system consists of a constant shuffling of political appointments, whereby every Ethiopian official has been kept continuously anxious about any appearance of disloyalty and so has been prevented from acquiring a significant following in any position. Hailé Sellassié's appointments have been made in such a way that the officials in any ministry would be constantly spying on each other."²⁴ There has been intense indignation over the regime's failure to institute fundamental reform in the all important areas of landholding and taxation. Progressive-minded officials have been shunted to obscure posts. The frustration of one of these, Girmané Neway, was a determining factor in his leading the revolt of December,

1960. The ephemeral success of that event has been shattering to Hailé Sellassié's image as the beloved "Little Father." Actually the December coup, a movement of intellectuals and the Imperial Guard, probably would have been a permanent triumph except for Hailé Sellassié's backing by the American Ambassador and the American Air Force. The summary trials of the rebels of 1960, the public executions, the exposure of the bodies of the defeated, both the slain and the executed, have made substantial inroads into the haloed legend of the Emperor as a humane, forgiving monarch. Moreover, the government's heavy hand has increasingly fallen on intellectuals and students; spies, agents provocateurs, police brutality, censorship, interference with academic freedom, the closing of Hailé Sellassié I University—all of these are of more than infrequent happening. Finally, there is the inevitable question of the future. Having reached eighty years of age, has the King of Kings of Ethiopia prepared the realm for his eternal farewell? For decades there has been the thorny question of the situation within the dynasty. For years the relations of the Emperor and his son, Crown Prince Asfa Wossen, have been strained. Perhaps we are reminded of the treatment Emperor-King Francis Joseph I of Austria-Hungary meted out to his son, Crown Prince Rudolph. The continual stability and integrity of the Christian Empire of Ethiopia assuredly are in grave doubt.

In conclusion, be it orthodoxy or revisionism, be it the resplendent masterpiece of the cosmic plan or the pedestrian workmanship of the secular world, the final judgment on modern Ethiopian history awaits, for at last in the closing words of Dante's Paradise:

"My tongue shall utter now, no more."²⁵

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NOTES

- 1 *History as a System* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1961), pp. 203-204.
- 2 As quoted in Page Smith, *The Historian and History* (New York, Vintage Books, 1964), p. 18.
- 3 George is the patron saint of Ethiopia. Pontius Pilate was canonized by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Frumentius was the first Christian missionary to Ethiopia. Taklé Haymanot was a famous prelate of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the 13th century.
- 4 Ahmen Gran in the 16th century led a mighty Muslim holy war against the Ethiopian monarchy and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.
- 5 *The Divine Comedy*, translated by Henry Francis Cary, revised edition (New York, P. F. Collier and Son, 1901), p. 1.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- 7 A. H. M. Jones and Elizabeth Monroe, *A History of Ethiopia* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 131.
- 8 *The Divine Comedy*, Cary's translation, p. 53.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 359.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 139.

- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 368.
- ¹³ Guèbrè Sellassié, *Chronique du Règne de Ménélik II: Roi des Rois d'Éthiopie* (Paris, 1930); James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Sources of the Nile* (Edinburgh, 1790); Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, *A History of Ethiopia, Nubia and Abyssinia* (Oosterhout N. B., 1966); A. H. M. Jones and Elizabeth Monroe, *A History of Ethiopia* (Oxford, 1968); S. Pierre Pétridès, *Le Héros d'Adowa: Ras Makonnen, Prince d'Éthiopie*, (Paris, 1963); Christine Sandford, *The Lion of Judah Hath Prevailed* (London, 1955); Leonard Mosley, *Hailé Sellassié: The Conquering Lion* (Englewood Cliffs, 1965).
- ¹⁴ *The Education of Henry Adams: an Autobiography* (Boston, Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1918), p. 441.
- ¹⁵ Taklé Tsadik Mekuria, *History of Ethiopia from Tewodros to Hailé Sellassié* (Addis Ababa, 1946); Enrico Cerulli, *Studi etiopici*, 4 vols. (Rome, 1936-63); Mordechai Abir, *Ethiopia: the Era of the Princes* (New York, 1968); Richard Greenfield, *Ethiopia: A New Political History* (New York, 1965); Donald Levine, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* (Chicago, 1965); Sven Rubenson, *King of Kings: Tewodros of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, 1966).
- ¹⁶ Abir, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
- ¹⁷ Rubenson, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
- ¹⁸ Abir, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
- ¹⁹ Richard Pankhurst, "Firearms in Ethiopian History," *Ethiopian Observer*, Vol. VI, No. 2 (1962) as quoted in Greenfield, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
- ²⁰ Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (New York, Vintage Books, 1959), pp. 195-196.
- ²¹ Joseph Tubiana, "Quatres généalogies royales éthiopiennes," *Cahiers d'etudes Africaines*, Vol. 2, No. 3, (Paris, 1963), p. 499.
- ²² Greenfield, *op. cit.*, p. 92.
- ²³ Leo Silberman, "The 'Mad' Mullah: Hero of Somali Nationalism," *History Today*, Vol. X, No. 8, (August, 1960), p. 532.
- ²⁴ Donald Levine, "Haile Selassie's Ethiopia-Myth or Reality?," *Africa Today*, Vol. VIII, No. 5, (May, 1961), p. 13.
- ²⁵ *The Divine Comedy*, Cary's translation, p. 422.

