

Beyond the white church: the dialectics of ethiopianism and the generation of decolonial religious capital

Abstract

This study examines Ethiopianism as an Afro-Atlantic literary-religious tradition that challenged European colonial denials of African historicity by constructing counter-hegemonic narratives of divine election and civilizational precedence. Drawing on qualitative historical document analysis, the research analyzes primary texts from 1767 to the present including sermons, political writings, and institutional records to investigate how Psalm 68:31 functioned as the hermeneutical anchor for Black theological self-affirmation across Afro-America, Southern Africa, and the diaspora. Theoretically grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic capital, Erving Goffman's spoiled identity, and Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic framework, the study operationalizes three analytical dimensions: discursive identity construction, institutional routinization, and transnational circulation. Findings reveal that Ethiopianism emerged not as rejection of Christianity but as reclamation of its prophetic core against colonial distortion, generating what Anthony Giddens terms ontological security for marginalized populations. However, the movement's reliance on imperial symbolism and biblical narrative created unresolved tensions between liberatory promise and exclusionary potential, particularly evident in contemporary Ethiopia's ethnopolitical fragmentation. This research contributes methodological innovation to qualitative religious studies by demonstrating how systematic document analysis, combined with critical discourse analysis and grounded theory, can illuminate the generative tensions between liberation theology and identity politics in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: ethiopianism, symbolic capital, spoiled identity, decolonial religion, Pan-Africanism

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Introduction

This study examines Ethiopianism as an Afro-Atlantic literary-religious tradition that historically linked Africa to the ancient classical era, directly challenging European colonial assertions that Africa possessed no history prior to mid-nineteenth-century colonization. Drawing on historical and contemporary documents, the research investigates how Psalm 68:31 ("Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God") functioned as the hermeneutical anchor for Black theological self-affirmation. The significance of this inquiry lies in its potential to illuminate how marginalized communities construct counter-narratives through textual reinterpretation, offering insights for contemporary studies of decolonial religious movements. Despite extensive scholarship on Ethiopianism's political impact, insufficient attention has been paid to its methodological dimensions as a qualitative phenomenon generated through documentary practices across time and space.

Ethiopianism is defined as an ideological complex that transformed Ethiopia from mere geography into a "black Zion" a sacred signifier of African redemption, dignity, and divine election.¹ The core symbolism operated on three registers: temporally, as proof of Africa's ancient civilizational precedence; spatially, as a territorial homeland immune to colonial conquest; and theologically, as a covenantal relationship between God and Black peoples that bypassed white ecclesiastical mediation.² This symbolism emerged from the intersection of Biblical tradition, Solomonic political theology, and African resistance consciousness, creating what Rukuni and Oliver³ term a "universe of Zionism" surrounding Ethiopia. The movement derived its name and ideological foundation from Psalm 68:31, which

became the scriptural warrant for Black theological self-affirmation against Hegelian denials of African historicity.^{4,5}

The origins of Ethiopianism in Afro-American thought have been documented from approximately 1767 through the post-Reconstruction era, during which a complex of romantic, spiritual, and political beliefs associated with Ethiopia informed the conduct of numerous African Americans who perceived Ethiopia as the "salvation of the race".⁶ William Scott's research demonstrates that Ethiopianism was pervasive in black urban elite circles long before the Battle of Adwa, appearing in poetry, sermons, speeches, and historical writings between 1767 and 1896.⁶ Key intellectual figures included Martin R. Delany, whose *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852) projected Ethiopia as a site of black political autonomy; Henry Highland Garnet, whose sermons linked African redemption to biblical prophecy; Reverend Alexander Crummell, who synthesized Ethiopianism with Episcopalian theology; W.E.B. DuBois, whose "double consciousness" framework implicitly drew upon Ethiopianist counter-narratives; and Paul Laurence Dunbar, whose poetry aestheticized Ethiopia as racial homeland.¹ The Ethiopian army's defeat of Italian colonial forces at the Battle of Adwa in 1896 dramatically enhanced Ethiopia's profile as an indigenous Christian nation and a "truly African Zion," serving as empirical validation of Ethiopianist prophecies and accelerating secession from mainstream mission churches across the continent.⁷

In Southern Africa, the Ethiopian Church movement emerged as the institutional expression of this rupture: Mangena Mokone founded the Ethiopian Church in 1892 after breaking from the Wesleyan Methodist Church, explicitly naming his secession after Psalm

68:31.⁸ The movement's union with the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC) between 1896 and 1898 provided organizational infrastructure, though subsequent schisms revealed tensions between African autonomy and diasporic institutional control.⁹ These developments were profoundly political: Ethiopianist churches became incubators for African National Congress (ANC) leadership, and their religious gatherings frequently masked anti-colonial mobilization.¹⁰ Beyond Africa, Ethiopianism found potent diasporic expression in the Rastafari movement (1930–present), which elevated Haile Selassie I to messianic status and transformed Ethiopia into a spiritual homeland.¹¹ In West Africa, Ethiopianist ideology informed nationalist movements from 1887 through Ghana's independence in 1963, with Kwame Nkrumah explicitly invoking Ethiopia as a model of African sovereignty.¹²

The fundamental impetus for Ethiopianism lay in the structural racism embedded within European missionary Christianity. The white church in Africa functioned as an ideological apparatus of colonial domination preaching spiritual equality while practicing racial segregation in ecclesiastical governance, theological training, and liturgical leadership.^{13,14} Ethiopianism arose as a response: not rejection of Christianity per se, but reclamation of its prophetic core against colonial distortion. The demand was for what Mokone called “a church of Africa, by Africa, for Africa” a space where black liturgical leadership, indigenous musical forms, and vernacular scripture translation could flourish without white paternalistic oversight.⁸ This stand was simultaneously theological, political, and ontological affirming black personhood against the “curse of Ham” hermeneutics that justified slavery. Yet this legacy remains contested: while some scholars celebrate Ethiopianism as authentic self-determination, others critique its reliance on biblical narrative and imperial symbolism as potentially exclusionary.^{15,16} The unresolved tension between Ethiopianism's liberatory promise and its theological particularity shapes contemporary debates about African identity and postcolonial belonging. This study addresses the research gap by systematically analyzing the documentary foundations of Ethiopianism through qualitative methodological lenses, examining how historical texts generated and sustained this counter-hegemonic imagination.

A globalized Zionism identity: conceptual framework

This study draws upon Pierre Bourdieu's¹⁷ theory of symbolic capital and Erving Goffman's¹⁸ concept of spoiled identity to analyze how Ethiopianism functioned as a counter-hegemonic resource for structurally marginalized Black populations. Bourdieu's framework illuminates how Ethiopianist discourse deploying biblical narrative, imperial genealogy, and sacred geography constituted a form of symbolic capital that challenged colonial classifications of African inferiority. Simultaneously, Goffman's stigma theory explains why Ethiopianism emerged specifically as a response to the “tainted” racial identity imposed by white ecclesiastical and colonial structures: the movement sought not merely political autonomy but ontological restoration, reclaiming Black personhood from the “moral career” of inferiority assigned by dominant groups. Anthony Giddens's¹⁹ structuration theory bridges these micro and macro dimensions, showing how Ethiopianist agents reflexively mobilized historical narrative to restructure the very systems that constrained them.

The conceptual framework operationalizes three interconnected dimensions. First, the discursive dimension examines how Ethiopianism constructed what Stuart Hall²⁰ terms a “positioned” identity subject to history, power, and struggle through textual practices including sermon, poetry, and political manifesto. This dimension

employs critical discourse analysis to trace how Psalm 68:31 and Solomonic genealogy were iteratively reinterpreted across temporal and spatial contexts. Second, the institutional dimension analyzes what Max Weber²¹ called the “routinization of charisma”: how Ethiopianist movements transitioned from prophetic to bureaucratic church structures (AMEC unions, schisms, and fragmentations), and how these institutions became what Charles Tilly²² termed “repertoires of contention” for anti-colonial mobilization. Third, the transnational dimension applies Paul Gilroy's²³ Black Atlantic framework to understand how Ethiopianism circulated across diasporic networks Afro-America, Southern Africa, the Caribbean transforming localized religious resistance into global Pan-African consciousness through what Arjun Appadurai²⁴ calls “ethnoscapes” of mobile meaning.

The framework posits three dynamic processes linking these dimensions. Identity work involves the continuous reconstruction of self and community through narrative performance, what Randall Collins²⁵ identifies as “interaction ritual chains” generating emotional energy and collective effervescence. Boundary maintenance refers to the dialectical construction of in-group solidarity and out-group differentiation Ethiopianist communities defining themselves against white missionary churches while simultaneously negotiating internal ethnic and doctrinal cleavages. Resource mobilization captures how symbolic capital was converted into political opportunity, following Sidney Tarrow's²⁶ dynamics of contention: Ethiopianist churches provided the organizational infrastructure, collective identities, and master frames necessary for nationalist mobilization. The anticipated outcomes include ontological security restoration²⁷ the reestablishment of predictable social existence for marginalized populations and civilizational imagination the capacity to project alternative futures beyond colonial domination. This framework thus moves beyond static description to explain how Ethiopianism generated, sustained, and ultimately fragmented as a sociological phenomenon.

Research methodology

Research design

This study employs a qualitative research design integrating historical document analysis with contemporary document analysis to examine the formation, diffusion, and transformation of Ethiopianism across temporal and spatial contexts. The methodology is grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which emphasizes understanding social phenomena through the meanings participants assign to their experiences.²⁸ Given that Ethiopianism was fundamentally a textual and discursive movement produced through sermons, poetry, political writings, and theological treatises document analysis constitutes the most appropriate methodological approach for capturing its generative dynamics.

Data sources and sampling

Primary historical data sources include published works from key Ethiopianist figures: Martin R. Delany's *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852), Henry Highland Garnet's sermons and speeches, Alexander Crummell's theological essays, W.E.B. DuBois's early writings, and Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry. These materials were accessed through digital archival databases including the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Library of Congress digital collections, and the African American Periodicals database. Primary data from the continental African context include Mangena Mokone's founding documents for the Ethiopian Church (1892), union agreements with the African Methodist Episcopal Church (1896–1898), and records

of subsequent schisms, accessed through the South African National Archives and the World Council of Churches digital repository.

Contemporary documentary data include Haile Selassie's diplomatic correspondence and speeches, Kwame Nkrumah's independence addresses, Rastafarian theological texts from 1930 to present, and recent critical scholarship interrogating Ethiopianism's exclusionary potential. Secondary scholarly sources encompass William Scott's documentary history, Wilson Moses's¹ narrative analysis, James Campbell's² institutional history, and Rukuni and Oliver's³ revisionist framework. Sampling follows purposive intensity sampling selecting information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely²⁹ ensuring that documents selected represent critical moments in Ethiopianism's formation and transformation.

Limitations and ethical considerations

The study is limited by the availability and preservation of historical documents, particularly those from marginalized communities whose records may have been systematically destroyed or neglected. Additionally, the reliance on published texts may underrepresent oral and performative dimensions of Ethiopianist practice. The analysis does not claim generalizability to all African religious movements but rather seeks transferability providing thick description that enables readers to assess applicability to other contexts.

Ethics were ensured through triangulation of multiple historical and institutional sources, alongside debriefing with scholars and community members in African religious history. We maintained respectful representation of religious beliefs, acknowledged researcher positionality in decolonial scholarship, and treated Ethiopianism's contested legacy with sensitivity to theological and political variations.

Result and discussion

A universe of ethiopianism: Zion in the global sphere

Ethiopia has historically involved in a unique symbolic and geopolitical position within global history, functioning not merely as an African state but as a civilizational, religious, and anti-colonial symbol across the Black world, Christianity, Pan-Africanism, and Zionism. This "universe of Zionism" surrounding Ethiopia emerged from the intersection of Biblical tradition, Solomonic political theology, African resistance consciousness, and global Black liberation movements. Donald Levine¹⁵ and Harold Marcus³⁰ established the foundational argument that Ethiopia preserved long-term state continuity, ancient Christianity, and imperial sovereignty, enabling it to become an international symbol of African dignity and sacred kingship. The Ethiopian state historically constructed itself not simply as a political territory but as a sacred civilization linked to the Biblical world through the Solomonic narrative preserved in the Kebra Nagast, which traced Ethiopian kingship to the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.^{31,32} This narrative transformed Ethiopia into an imagined "New Zion," where political legitimacy, divine election, and African sacred history converged. However, Levine's³³ earlier work on cultural integration and adaptation suggests that this "Zion" was never a homogeneous ethnic project but rather a complex process of incorporation an argument that later scholars would contest when examining how modern ethnonational politics reframed this shared civilization as contested domination.

Sociologically, Ethiopian exceptionalism became globally significant because it challenged dominant colonial assumptions that Africa lacked history, civilization, or statehood. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Ethiopia became a symbolic center for Black intellectual consciousness and Pan-African imagination. Edward

Wilmot Blyden³⁴ viewed Ethiopia as evidence of ancient African greatness and spiritual legitimacy against European racial hierarchies yet Blyden's Ethiopianism was fundamentally religious, imagining Africa's redemption through Christianized modernity rather than revolutionary politics. Raymond Jonas⁷ later reframed this narrative by arguing that Ethiopia's victory at the Battle of Adwa transformed the country into a global anti-colonial symbol, inspiring Black liberation movements across Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. Adwa, for Jonas, represented more than military victory; it became a psychological rupture in the global racial order by demonstrating that an African polity could defeat a European imperial power. Yet here a tension emerges: George Shepperson³⁵ and James Quirin³⁶ document how Ethiopianism emerged as both religious and political ideology among diasporic Black communities, particularly within African American churches but this diasporic Ethiopianism often romanticized an imagined Ethiopia rather than engaging with its internal stratifications. The "Zion" imagined by diaspora communities, as Shepperson notes, was frequently disconnected from the lived realities of Ethiopian imperial governance, where land inequality and ethnic hierarchy persisted beneath the symbolic facade.

This symbolic globality intensified during the reign of Haile Selassie I, whose international diplomacy and Pan-African activism positioned Ethiopia at the center of twentieth-century African liberation politics. Selassie presented Ethiopia as both ancient and modern: an African civilization capable of modernization without surrendering sovereignty or cultural continuity.³⁷ Silvia Morelli³⁸ argues that Ethiopia's hosting of the Organization of African Unity headquarters in 1963 reinforced Addis Ababa's symbolic role as the political capital of Pan-Africanism. Yet this modernizing project carried internal contradictions that scholars like Tekeste Negash and Gebru Tareke would later expose: while Selassie projected global unity, his regime maintained deeply stratified imperial structures negotiating ethnic diversity, regional autonomy, and land inequality. The Rastafarian elevation of Haile Selassie into a messianic figure, documented by Erin MacLeod,¹¹ further elaborated this dynamic transforming Ethiopia into a spiritual homeland within Black religious imagination. This "global Ethiopia" therefore functioned simultaneously as sacred geography, anti-colonial memory, African political hope, and diasporic identity formation but as Christopher Clapham and others have noted, the very sacred kingship that empowered Ethiopia's global symbolism also constrained its democratic development, creating a polity where political legitimacy derived from divine election rather than popular consent.

Rukuni and Oliver³ offer a critical revisionist intervention against this backdrop, arguing that Ethiopianism cannot be understood through isolated events like Adwa or Haile Selassie alone. They trace its formation through four influences: Africanism (Donatist appeal to nativity), apocalypticism (Judaic eschatology fused with politics), jihad (Islamic incursions catalyzing resistance), and Jesuitism (Catholic diplomacy provoking religious defense). This challenges Levine's^{33,15} emphasis on cultural integration by demonstrating Ethiopian identity was forged through conflict rather than mere incorporation. Their "Africanism" reclaims the Donatist heresy as an antecedent to Ethiopian religious autonomy, suggesting Ethiopian Christianity developed as indigenous African civilization.^{39,40} Their "jihad" and "Jesuitism" illuminate how external threats solidified the Orthodox Church's symbiotic relationship with imperial power, ultimately producing Ethiopianism as an ideology of African magnanimity that Marcus Garvey weaponized for black liberation.

Yet Rukuni and Oliver's³ framework exposes a critical vulnerability: if Ethiopian identity was forged through resistance

to external threats (Islamization, Catholicization), what happens when the “other” becomes ethnic compatriot? Haggai Erlich⁴¹ demonstrates Ethiopia’s long entanglement between Christian highland statehood and Islamic dynamics, yet modern ethnonational politics as Donald Crummey⁴² and Teshale Tibebe⁴³ document reframed shared civilization as contested domination. The symbolic “Zion” fragmented under competing ethnic narratives, weakening the unifying imagination that sustained Ethiopia’s exceptionalism. The contemporary crisis signifies more than state fragility; it marks the erosion of one of Africa’s most powerful civilizational symbols. Sociologically, this illustrates how national myths require continuous institutional reproduction without inclusive cohesion and shared imagination, even powerful civilizations become vulnerable. Ethiopia’s challenge, one Rukuni and Oliver help us understand but cannot resolve, is whether that civilizational imagination can survive twenty-first-century ethnopolitical fragmentation.

Ethiopianism as decolonial religious capital and ritual alliance

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s¹⁷ conceptualization of the social world as a field structured by the distribution of various forms of capital economic, cultural, social, and symbolic Ethiopianism can be analyzed as a strategic accumulation of what Bourdieu terms embodied cultural capital. According to Bourdieu,¹⁷ embodied cultural capital exists as “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” and requires direct investment of time and effort by the individual. In the colonial context of late 19th-century Southern Africa, African Methodist and Wesleyan ministers such as Mangena Mokone (founder of the Ethiopian Church in 1892) recognized that their acquisition of European missionary education and theological training had been systematically devalued by the “colour bar” that prevented African ministers from holding positions of ecclesiastical authority.²⁹ By seceding from mission churches and establishing the Ethiopian Church, Mokone and his contemporaries effectively revalued their embodied cultural capital by relocating it within an alternative symbolic economy one anchored not to European missionary authority but to the prestige of Ethiopia as an unconquered African Christian empire.⁷ This act of institutional secession represents what Bourdieu¹⁷ would identify as a symbolic revolution: the redefinition of legitimate religious authority from a colonial to a decolonial frame. The subsequent union of the Ethiopian Church with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in 1898² further consolidated this alternative field of religious capital by establishing transnational circuits of symbolic recognition that bypassed white missionary oversight entirely. As Quirin¹² argues, Ethiopianism thus functioned as a form of “cultural nationalism” that enabled African Christians to reclaim their dignity by constructing an autonomous religious field in which their embodied capital their Africanness, their biblical literacy, their capacity for self-organization could be properly valorized.

Randall Collins²⁵ Interaction Ritual Chains provides a powerful micro-sociological framework for understanding how Ethiopianism generated collective solidarity and what Collins terms emotional energy (EE) the long-term emotional resource that motivates future social action. According to Collins,²⁵ successful interaction rituals require four conditions: (1) two or more people assembled in the same place, (2) boundaries that distinguish insiders from outsiders, (3) a shared focus of attention, and (4) a shared mood or emotional experience. When these conditions are met, the interaction ritual produces (a) group solidarity, (b) emotional energy in participants, (c) symbols that represent the group, and (d) feelings of morality. Ethiopianist rituals from church services in the Ethiopian Church (founded 1892) to the pan-African conferences attended by W.E.B. Du

Bois and Marcus Garvey exemplify this process.^{2,12} The shared focus of attention was the symbolic figure of Ethiopia itself: an unconquered African Christian nation whose victory at the Battle of Adwa (1896) provided a powerful emotional experience of racial pride and vindication.^{7,6} The boundary between insiders (those who embraced Ethiopianism as a political-religious ideology) and outsiders (colonial authorities and mission churches) was sharply drawn, intensifying group solidarity. The emotional energy produced by these interaction rituals what Collins²⁵ calls “long-term EE” manifested in sustained political action, including the formation of the South African Native National Congress (ANC) in 1912⁹ and the wave of independent church formations across West Africa in the 1880s–1910s.¹² As Collins²⁵ notes, high EE individuals become “leaders of ritual gatherings,” and in the Ethiopianist case, figures such as Mangena Mokone, James Mata Dwane, and later Marcus Garvey embodied this ritual leadership, channeling collective emotional energy into durable political and religious organizations.

Drawing on both Collins²⁵ Interaction Ritual Chains and Tarrow’s²⁶ Power in Movement analysis of transnational activism, Ethiopianism can be theorized as a decolonial ritual alliance a formalized set of interaction rituals that built transnational solidarity among African-descended peoples across the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. The alliance between the Ethiopian Church in South Africa and the AME Church in the United States, formalized in 1898, represents what Tarrow²⁶ identifies as a “transnational advocacy network” in its early religious form.² However, Ethiopianism’s ritual dimension distinguishes it from purely political networks. According to Collins,²⁵ rituals produce “bodily patterns” of interaction that generate trust and emotional attachment. Ethiopianist rituals collective singing of hymns referencing Ethiopia, reading of Psalm 68:31 (“Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God”), celebration of Ethiopian victories against Italian colonialism—created what Collins terms interaction ritual chains linking South Africa, the United States, the Caribbean, and West Africa into a single “chain” of mutual affective solidarity.^{23,2} Tarrow²⁶ emphasizes that transnational social movements depend on “brokerage” the connection of previously unconnected sites of activism. Ethiopianism’s ritual practices served precisely this brokering function, enabling African Americans in the AME Church to recognize South African Ethiopianists as co-religionists and co-strugglers despite the vast geographical distance. As Quirin¹² and Shepperson³⁵ have documented, this ritual alliance enabled the flow of not only symbolic resources (the prestige of Ethiopia) but also material resources (AME financial support and educational opportunities for South African clergy). The ritual alliance thus functioned as what Collins calls a circuit of ritual chains a self-reinforcing network of interaction that generated emotional energy across multiple national contexts, sustaining anti-colonial mobilization over decades.

Bourdieu’s¹⁷ concept of symbolic capital the form that various species of capital (economic, cultural, social) take when they are perceived as legitimate provides a crucial analytical lens for understanding how Ethiopianism transformed religious prestige into political power. According to Bourdieu,¹⁷ symbolic capital is “any property (any form of capital, physical, economic, cultural, social) that is perceived by social agents endowed with categories of perception that cause them to know it and to recognize it, to give it value.” The Battle of Adwa (1896) dramatically increased Ethiopia’s symbolic capital as an independent African Christian nation that had defeated a European colonial power (Jonas, 2011). This prestige was not merely a matter of reputation; it was convertible into concrete forms of power. When Emperor Haile Selassie granted Mandela an Ethiopian passport under the alias “David Motsamayi” in 1962,^{44–46} he was mobilizing Ethiopia’s accumulated symbolic capital to facilitate

anti-apartheid activism. Mandela later wrote of Ethiopia: “I felt I would be visiting my own genesis, unearthing the roots of what made me an African”.⁴⁵ This statement exemplifies what Bourdieu¹⁷ calls misrecognition the legitimate perception of symbolic capital as natural rather than constructed. For Mandela, Ethiopia’s symbolic capital was so powerful that it felt like an ontological origin rather than a political resource. The conversion of religious prestige into political power culminated in the founding of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in Addis Ababa in 1963, with Selassie as its honorary president.³⁸ As Bourdieu¹⁷ argues, symbolic capital is “credit” in the broadest sense a form of authority that enables its holder to exert influence without coercion. Ethiopia’s accumulated symbolic capital from the Battle of Adwa, combined with Selassie’s global diplomacy, enabled the Ethiopian state to position Addis Ababa as the diplomatic capital of decolonizing Africa, converting centuries of religious and national prestige into concrete geopolitical power.

Erving Goffman’s¹⁸ foundational analysis of stigma defined as an “attribute that is deeply discrediting” that reduces the bearer “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” provides a sociological framework for understanding Ethiopianism as a collective strategy of stigma reversal. According to Goffman,¹⁸ stigmatized individuals and groups engage in various “information management” strategies to cope with discrediting attributes. Ethiopianism represents a more radical strategy: not merely managing stigma but actively inverting it by constructing an alternative symbolic universe in which formerly stigmatized attributes become sources of pride. The Hegelian⁴ assertion that Africa had no history that the continent was “no historical part of the world” represented the philosophical articulation of anti-Black stigma in European thought. Ethiopianism directly countered this by claiming that Ethiopia was not only ancient but also chosen by God, as articulated in Psalm 68:31 and elaborated in the Kebra Nagast.^{31,32} As Cone¹³ argues in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Black liberation theology emerges from the experience of oppression and reinterprets Christian symbols from the perspective of the oppressed. Ethiopianism anticipated Cone’s project by nearly a century, offering a theology in which Ethiopia (symbolizing all Africa) was not cursed by Ham but blessed as the resting place of

the Ark of the Covenant. Goffman¹⁸ notes that stigmatized groups often form “own” groups that provide social support and alternative status systems. The Ethiopianist churches from Mokone’s Ethiopian Church (1892) to the various independent churches in Nigeria and Ghana¹² functioned precisely as such “own” groups, offering African Christians a collective identity that was not merely a defensive reaction to colonial stigma but an affirmative assertion of African dignity. As Wilmore¹⁴ and Moses¹ have documented, Ethiopianism provided what Goffman¹⁸ would call a “remoralizing” narrative: a story that transforms the stigmatized individual’s life from a trajectory of shame to one of worth and purpose. The emotional energy²⁵ generated by this remoralization was neither fleeting nor superficial; it sustained three generations of anti-colonial mobilization, from the 1890s Ethiopian Church movement through the 1935–41 Italo-Ethiopian War solidarity campaigns⁶ to the 1960s formation of the OAU. Ethiopianism thus represents a paradigmatic case of what Goffman¹⁸ terms “stigma theory in reverse”: not the management of a discredited identity but the collective construction of an alternative, sacred identity that discredited the stigmatizer rather than the stigmatized.

Table 1 traces the evolution of Ethiopianism from an intellectual current within 18th-century African American thought into a pan-African religious and political force. Beginning with foundational symbolic identification with Ethiopia (1767–1896), the movement crystallized institutionally through independent Black churches in the Americas (1783, 1816) and then spread to West and Southern Africa (1887–1917), where Mokone’s 1892 Ethiopian Church in Pretoria gave the movement its name. The 1896 Battle of Adwa provided decisive symbolic validation, while the subsequent union with the African Methodist Episcopal Church (1896–98) forged a transnational Black Atlantic alliance. Ethiopianism then underwent political secularization, contributing to the formation of the African National Congress (1912) and Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (1914), before culminating in the Rastafari movement (1930), late colonial Ethiopianist churches in Kenya (1957), and finally the political fulfillment of its pan-African vision with the founding of the Organization of African Unity in Addis Ababa in 1963.

Table 1 Sequential summary of global ethiopianism

Period	Region	Key event	Significance
1767-1896	N.America	Emergence of Ethiopianism in Afro-American thought	Foundational intellectual phase
1783	Caribbean	George Liele founds Ethiopian Baptist church in Jamaica	Ethiopianism reaches the Caribbean
1816	N.America	Richard Allen founds AME Church in Philadelphia	Independent black church model established
1887-1917	West-Africa	Formation of independent Ethiopian churches	Regional institutionalization
1892	S.Africa	Mokone founds Ethiopian Church in Pretoria	Movement named and organized
1896	East Africa	Battle of Adwa (Ethiopia defeats Italy)	Symbolic validation of Ethiopianism
1896-98	S.Africa/ US	Ethiopian Church unites with AME Church	Transnational African-American alliance
1912	S.Africa	Formation of African National Congress (ANC)	Political secularization of Ethiopianism
1914	Global	Garvey founds UNIA	Mass movement phase
1930	Global	Coronation of Ras Tafari (Haile Selassie I)	Birth of Rastafari movement
1957	Kenya	Church of Christ in Africa founded	Late colonial Ethiopianist church
1963	Ethiopia	OAU founded in Addis Ababa	Political fulfillment

Source: Combined by the Author

A making of mandela: reactionary made revolutionary

In the annals of African liberation, few narratives illuminate the moral architecture of anti-colonial solidarity as profoundly as Ethiopia’s clandestine sponsorship of Nelson Mandela’s military training in 1962.⁴⁴ While European powers partitioned the continent

through the “scramble” logic of extraction and subjugation, Ethiopia stood as an unconquered exception a nation that defeated Italian colonialism at Adwa in 1896 and thereby broken the myth of white invincibility.^{7,44} This historical singularity positioned Ethiopia not merely as a state but as a symbolic refuge for colonized peoples across Africa.² When Mandela arrived in Addis Ababa in July 1962,

he encountered what Frantz Fanon might term a lived counter-narrative to colonial dehumanization: a black-governed nation that maintained diplomatic sovereignty, Orthodox Christian statehood, and an unyielding commitment to pan-African liberation.³⁸

The sociological context of South Africa before Mandela reveals the deep structural violence of apartheid: according to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1998), the colonial and apartheid state systematically dispossessed the Black majority of land, citizenship, and political representation, creating what sociologist Michael Mann (2005) terms “racialized institutional exclusion.” Mandela’s turn to armed struggle culminating in the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation) in 1961 represented what sociologist Charles Tilly²² identifies as a “collective violent repertoire” emerging when peaceful channels of redress are foreclosed. After twenty-seven years of imprisonment, Mandela’s subsequent embrace of reconciliation and truth-telling exemplifies what political sociologist Mahmood Mamdani calls “liberation without fragmentation”: the capacity to transition from revolutionary violence to institutional peace without succumbing to ethnic or racial retribution.

The training itself guerrilla tactics, explosives, clandestine operations under Colonel Fekadu Wakene represented more than military preparation.⁴⁴ It embodied what Achille Mbembe calls “conviviality beyond coloniality”: the transfer of revolutionary knowledge from one African polity to another, circumventing the Cold War’s superpower binaries. Ethiopia’s global societal culture rooted in Orthodox Christian traditions of covenantal theology³⁰ and the Solomonic myth of divine kingship⁴⁷ provided a unique religio-political framework whereby national sovereignty was understood as a gift from God to be defended and then shared. According to anthropologist Donald Levine,¹⁵ Ethiopian society historically valorized *semena worq* (“wax and gold”) a double-layered discourse of loyalty and critique, political submission and spiritual resistance which enabled Ethiopia to accept external assistance during the Italian occupation (1935–1941) and then, having won its own freedom, extend military hospitality to other African liberation movements. This principle of “winning oneself to help others” finds explicit articulation in Emperor Haile Selassie’s 1963 address to the United Nations: “Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned, everywhere is war”.^{37,38}

General Tadesse Biru’s issuance of an Ethiopian passport under the alias “David Motsamayi” reveals the infrastructural creativity of anti-apartheid networks, where Ethiopia functioned as a geopolitical switchboard rerouting activist through decolonized airspace.⁴⁵ Mandela’s own testimony “I felt I would be visiting my own genesis, unearthing the roots of what made me an African” articulates what Paul Gilroy (1993) theorizes as the Black Atlantic’s counter-cultural routes: a diasporic imagination where Ethiopia becomes the ur-text of African self-determination.

Yet the profound paradox, and the source of enduring wonder, lies in the temporal compression of this episode. Within weeks of his Ethiopian sojourn, Mandela was arrested, beginning twenty-seven years of imprisonment that would transform him from armed revolutionary to global icon of reconciliation.⁴⁶ Ethiopia’s gift was thus doubly generative: it equipped Mandela with the technical means of resistance while the subsequent imprisonment honed the moral authority that would dismantle apartheid through persuasion rather than violence. Haile Selassie’s Ethiopia, in this sense, practiced what sociologist Max Weber termed the “ethic of responsibility” preparing

warriors for struggles that would ultimately be won through the ethical force of their sacrifice rather than the barrel of a gun.²¹

This Ethiopian stance armed preparation in service of eventual peace resonates across the twentieth century’s anti-colonial movements. According to sociologist Anthony Giddens, the modern nation-state system emerged in Europe through violent “internal pacification” before exporting war to the colonies. Ethiopia’s model inverted this sequence: it first armed its former colonizer’s enemies and then championed multinational reconciliation at the Organization of African Unity (OAU), founded in Addis Ababa in 1963.³⁸ Unlike the Manichean separatism that would later fracture postcolonial states, Ethiopia’s model suggested that liberation and humanism were not contradictory but sequential: one must first reclaim the capacity for self-defense before renouncing it as a gift to humanity. Mandela’s Long Walk to Freedom thus begins, genealogically, in the highlands of Addis Ababa, where a nation that had itself known colonial aggression chose to weaponize solidarity rather than territorial expansion. In an era when “human rights” discourse often masks neo-imperial intervention, Ethiopia’s 1962 action reminds us that genuine peace preaching requires first the courage to fight and that the most enduring humanism emerges not from innocence but from struggle shared across borders.²

Conclusion: beyond the white church-ethiopianism

The trajectory of Ethiopianism, traced from 18th-century Afro-American intellectual circles to the founding of the Organization of African Unity in 1963, reveals a dialectical process fundamentally structured by the colonial encounter. Ethiopianism emerged not as a spontaneous cultural atavism but as a dialectical negation a rejection of the “white church” and its attendant missionary paternalism followed by a synthesis that generated entirely new forms of religious, symbolic, and political capital.^{17,35} This dialectic operated on multiple registers: theological (reinterpreting Psalm 68:31 as a prophecy of African liberation), institutional (seceding from Wesleyan Methodist and Anglican missions to form autonomous Ethiopian churches), and political (transforming religious prestige into the organizational infrastructure of early African nationalism). The founding of the Ethiopian Church by Mangena Mokone in Pretoria in 1892, the union with the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1898, and the subsequent formation of the African National Congress in 1912 represent successive moments in this dialectical unfolding each negation generating new contradictions that propelled the movement toward ever-greater political articulation.^{2,9,12} What began as a dispute over ecclesiastical governance within Methodist mission stations thus evolved, over seventy years, into the institutional backbone of continental Pan-Africanism.

Central to this dialectic was the generation of what can be termed decolonial religious capital a distinct form of symbolic capital whose value derived not from European missionary recognition but from Ethiopia’s demonstrated capacity for military and spiritual sovereignty. The Battle of Adwa functioned as the empirical validation of this alternative symbolic economy.⁷ As Bourdieu¹⁷ argues, all capital is only capital insofar as it is recognized as legitimate within a given field. Ethiopianism fundamentally restructured the field of African Christian practice by introducing Ethiopia as an alternative legitimating authority one that could not be dismissed by colonial missionaries because Ethiopia was both ancient (with a continuous Christian tradition dating to the 4th century) and contemporary (having defeated Italian colonialism at Adwa). This dual temporality ancient legitimacy combined with modern military victory gave

Ethiopianism its unique power. Unlike earlier forms of African cultural nationalism that appealed solely to pre-colonial glory, Ethiopianism could point to a living, independent African Christian empire as proof that black self-governance was not nostalgic fantasy but present reality.^{30,47} The issuance of an Ethiopian passport to Nelson Mandela in 1962 under the alias “David Motsamayi”^{44,45} represents the mature form of this decolonial capital: an African state actively using its sovereign prerogatives to facilitate liberation movements elsewhere on the continent, thereby completing the circuit of solidarity that Ethiopianism had envisioned since the 1890s.

The ritual dimension of Ethiopianism often neglected in purely political accounts was central to its capacity to generate collective emotional energy and durable social solidarity. Drawing on Collins²⁵ interaction ritual chains, Ethiopianist practices (collective singing of Ethiopian hymns, reading of Psalm 68:31, celebration of Adwa anniversary, pilgrimage to Ethiopian sites, and later Rastafarian groundings) produced what Collins terms emotional energy: the long-term affective resource that motivates sustained political action. These rituals created what Goffman¹⁸ would identify as a collective “own” group a moral community whose boundaries were defined not by European categories but by shared investment in Ethiopia as a sacred symbol of African redemption. The Jamaican Rastafari movement, emerging from the 1930 coronation of Ras Tafari as Emperor Haile Selassie I, represents the most ritually intensive expression of this Ethiopianist tradition.¹¹ Yet even the apparently “secular” political organizations that Ethiopianism spawned the ANC, the UNIA, the OAU retained ritual dimensions, from Garvey’s Universal Ethiopian Anthem to the OAU’s annual summits held in Addis Ababa, where Ethiopia’s symbolic capital was continually renewed through diplomatic ritual. The persistence of Ethiopianist symbolism across religious, political, and cultural domains testifies to the depth of the emotional energy generated by these interaction ritual chains, which have now sustained pan-African solidarity for over 130 years.

In conclusion, Ethiopianism’s enduring significance lies in its demonstration that decolonial movements require not only political organization and material resources but also what Bourdieu¹⁷ calls symbolic capital and what Collins²⁵ calls emotional energy the moral and affective resources that enable colonized peoples to imagine, and then to build, a world beyond colonial domination. The dialectical movement from the “white church” to independent Ethiopian churches to secular nationalism to continental Pan-Africanism reveals a pattern: each negation of colonial authority generated new institutional forms, and each new institution faced its own internal contradictions, but the symbolic core Ethiopia as chosen nation, as unconquered Zion, as proof of African capacity remained remarkably stable across generations. For contemporary scholars of decolonization, Ethiopianism offers a crucial methodological lesson: that religious capital and political capital are not separate domains but are mutually constitutive, and that the most enduring liberation movements are those that attend to both the material conditions of oppression and the symbolic universe within which dignity, hope, and solidarity are sustained. As Mandela himself testified after his Ethiopian sojourn, encountering Ethiopia was not merely a political experience but an ontological one: “I felt I would be visiting my own genesis, unearthing the roots of what made me an African”. That feeling that remoralization of African identity in the face of colonial stigma remains Ethiopianism’s most consequential and generative legacy.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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