


RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘The first step towards racial equality’: The Kuroda-Araya engagement and the dream of a transnational non-white alliance

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Abstract

In 1934, the much-publicized engagement of Japanese noblewoman Kuroda Masako to Ethiopian nobleman Araya Abebe made headlines worldwide, epitomizing the transnational dream of a racially anti-hierarchical world. Starting from this unrealized wedding, this article showcases the voice of Kuroda Masako, a racially equal imperial feminist who tried to foster her vision of women participating in the empire-building process even in new settings like Ethiopia. By featuring her practices, we are able to understand why they resonated not only in the women’s press but also in a much larger intellectual scene that comprised Pan-Asian and Pan-African activists. Because of such significant resonance across various non-governmental actors worldwide, the Kuroda-Araya engagement became dangerous to state-endorsed agendas in many countries, which were unwilling to countenance an unprecedented alliance between Ethiopia, Japan, and the African American community at the expense of Western and white civilization discourse. As a result, the engagement created a rupture between popular sympathy and the state, eventually resulting in Japan’s official disengagement from Ethiopia well before the Second Italo-Ethiopian War.

Keywords: Japan; Ethiopia; Kuroda Masako; Araya Abebe; transnational history

Introduction

In April 1936, a Japanese magazine reflected on how Ethiopia, at the time being brutally invaded by Italy, was first known in the archipelago with these telling words: ‘Even the name of the Ethiopian Empire was first known throughout Japan under that of Kuroda Masako. You can forget the Prime Minister’s name, but everyone knows Kuroda Masako.’¹ In an earlier issue, Kuroda was even defined as the one who had ‘made the Japanese general public aware that a place called Ethiopia existed on the face of the earth’.² Albeit hyperbolic statements, these words testify to the extraordinary amount

¹Ueda Yasunario, ‘Kuroda Masako-jō ie de no shinsō’, *Hanashi*, April 1936, p. 80.

²Suzuki Tokuji, ‘Mondai ni natta josei no sono go’, *Hanashi*, December 1935, p. 181.

of attention that noblewoman Kuroda Masako received in 1934 from the Japanese general public. Besides being a much-publicized popular phenomenon, Kuroda's engagement to Ethiopian nobleman Araya Abebe also connected non-governmental actors from three continents, eventually escalating into worldwide diplomatic tensions.

Although the Kuroda-Araya engagement constituted at once the 'number-one topic of 1934'³ and a pivotal moment in defining Japan's international standing, it is today a rather understudied story. In Japanese scholarship, the encounter between Ethiopia and Japan has been framed by either considering Ethiopia as a new economic market or focusing on individuals who discovered Africa through the West, mainly interiorizing Western prejudices even after setting foot on the African continent (in the rare cases when that actually happened).⁴ Furthermore, great emphasis has been placed on the diplomatic aspect of such a relationship in the first decades of the twentieth century, as exemplified by the studies of scholars like Jay Calvitt Clarke III and Fujita Midori, while overlooking the fundamental role of non-governmental actors in the diplomatic fallout.⁵ Those few who have analysed the Ethiopian-Japanese relationship less from a diplomatic and more from an intellectual perspective have done so as Africanists, like Sara Marzagora,⁶ or Americanists, like Taketani Etsuko, who elucidate the African American reaction to such a union.⁷ Still, thus far, neither the non-governmental side of this story nor the Japanese actors involved have been brought to the forefront.

This article, instead, will only briefly address the diplomatic denouement of the Kuroda-Araya engagement. This is because by focusing on the diplomatic aspect of the incident, one fails to grasp how such an unprecedented relationship tried to contest from below the Western civilization discourse, heavily imbued with concepts of masculinity, Christianity, and whiteness. In contrast, I present an account of transnational history that challenges this paradigm. Using previously untapped Japanese sources like Kuroda Masako's writings, I do so by revealing the history of non-governmental actors who directly interacted with each other, unmediated by (if not in contrast with) Western powers. Through this engagement, albeit unrealized in the end, the actors involved hoped to create a racially equal and anti-hierarchical world order,

³Nanjō Shin'ichi, 'Kagayaku "kisasi no za ni" erabareta Kuroda-shi reijō', *Tōkyō nichinichi shimbun*, 30 January 1934, evening edition, p. 1.

⁴See, for instance, Aoki Sumio, *Nihonjin no Afurika hakken* (Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppansha, 2000).

⁵Calvitt Clarke has published many works on the Japanese-Ethiopian relationship before the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, including one unpublished article on the Kuroda-Araya engagement: Joseph Calvitt Clarke, "'Strange and Sweet is how the Knot of Love is Tied": A Marriage Alliance of Ethiopia and Japan?', unpublished article, January 2009. However, his angle is mainly diplomatic and more Eurocentric. Fujita Midori, *Afurika hakken: Nihon ni okeru Afurikazō no henshin* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2005) dedicates some space to the Ethiopia 'fever', as she calls it, but particularly in regard to the 1931 diplomatic visit. In the pages of *Afurika hakken* devoted to the wedding, Fujita gives a press perusal of the incident, only mentioning in passing the account by Kuroda Masako, in *Akeyuku Echiopia* (Tokyo: Kokusai keizai kenkyūjo, 1934).

⁶Sara Marzagora, 'Refashioning the Ethiopian Monarchy in the Twentieth Century: An Intellectual History', *Global Intellectual History*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2022, pp. 533–557; <https://doi.org/10.1080/23801883.2020.1796237>

⁷Etsuko Taketani, *The Black Pacific Narrative: Geographic Imaginings of Race and Empire Between the World Wars* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2014).

actively trying to divorce the core pillars of the Western civilization discourse. Just the existence of the educated-yet-dark-skinned, African-yet-monogamous, Christian Araya challenged the union of whiteness and Christianity as a fundamental component of progress, while Masako tried to use her influence to erode the predominance of masculinity in the imperial project.

In discussing Kuroda and Araya's ideas and practices, this article showcases their voices and agency for the first time. Araya wrote less on his engagement, focusing instead on his war efforts, but by using Kuroda's articles and interviews, I analyse in depth what I call her racially equal imperial feminism, which she used to better the position of women in the Japanese empire-building process. Here, I refer to Kuroda as an 'imperial feminist' because she used her writing to illustrate to women that her future role in Ethiopia—and hopefully every woman's role in any setting—went beyond the institution of marriage. While she did not explicitly mention Ethiopian women, Kuroda, the 'number one bride of the moment', showed little interest in racial difference when interviewed, often explaining that she did not have any lingering racial prejudice and was 'simply stimulated by patriotism'.⁸ While Kuroda's feminism was heavily nationalistic and framed as mainly focused on Japanese women's responsibilities in the imperial project, I add 'racially equal' because of this race-blind approach and of the symbol she came to be in the struggle against racial hierarchies worldwide.

By examining Kuroda's feminist commitment and her representation in various media, I elucidate how her practices catalysed interest not only from the general public but also from a larger intellectual scene. Her followers were not only women who were 'burning from curiosity [to know] what kind of woman Kuroda Masako [was]'.⁹ Because of Kuroda's approach towards race and the ethnicity of the betrothed, the engagement made some fringes of Pan-Asianists and Pan-Africanists trust that an anti-hierarchical alternative world was possible. In their engagement, these intellectuals found the first and most spectacular step of a racially equal mapmaking project that transcended the nations involved.

In just a few months, the Kuroda-Araya engagement made headlines worldwide because of these new racial possibilities but quickly escalated into diplomatic incidents. In this article, I show how the intellectual and popular enthusiasm for the union of Ethiopia and Japan, epitomized by the impending nuptials, grew so unexpectedly as to become a danger to the state-endorsed ideology and agenda, which was not limited to Japan. In 1934, Ethiopia and Japan shared some similarities that were not lost on many spectators: both were non-white countries, uncolonized, and had proudly defeated two Western powers in the previous decades.¹⁰ What Ethiopian Foreign Minister Heruy Wolde Sellase (1878–1938) wrote in 1931, the year of the first Ethiopian diplomatic mission to Japan—that it was 'really astonishing that two countries like Ethiopia and Japan, so similar in their national spirit, so similar for the courage of their citizens, have gone so long without knowing each other'¹¹—resonated with many observers worldwide. As I show later, not only the Japanese public but also

⁸Nanjō, 'Kagayaku "kisasi no za ni" erabareta Kuroda-shi reijō', p. 1; Kirsten Ziomek, *Lost Histories: Recovering the Lives of Japan's Colonial Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), p. 283.

⁹Sugiyama Heisuke, 'Mame senkan'. Part. 3, 'Sangatsu no zasshi', *Asahi shimbun*, 2 March 1934, p. 9.

¹⁰Ethiopia defeated Italy in 1896, while Japan won over Russia in 1905.

¹¹Heruy, *Dai Nihon* (Tokyo: Eibunpō tsūron hakkōjo, 1934), p. 59.

the African American community were heavily invested in the project, as Ethiopia and Japan both held a unique position in it in the 1930s.

Although (or perhaps precisely because it was) unrealized, eventually this marriage caused a rupture between such widespread popular sympathy towards Ethiopia and the statal vision of Japan's international position. This distance between popular sentiment and the government agenda erupted in a series of protests in Japan and elsewhere against the annulled engagement, which only escalated with Italy's invasion of Ethiopia. The general populace was quite sensitive to topics such as racial solidarity and thus was very sympathetic to Ethiopia, as opposed to the Japanese government, which soon realized Ethiopia was not worth pursuing as an ally. As a result of this popular enthusiasm, which transcended continents and challenged the state vision, I suggest that the engagement ultimately unveiled the true commitment (or rather lack thereof) of the Japanese government towards the Ethiopian one and, more generally, the non-white cause. In the literature, the process of Japan disavowing its image as 'the champion of the darker races' is usually associated with the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, where the Japanese state did not commit itself. Here, I contend that it was a process already enacted by rumours of a Japanese-Ethiopian alliance, personified by Kuroda and Araya, which eventually contributed to a realignment of Japanese governmental stances towards race, gender, and worldwide power dynamics. Lastly, I suggest that the Second Italo-Ethiopian War constituted the last phase of Japan's bureaucratic disengagement from Ethiopia and the first step towards realigning with Fascist Italy, ironically Ethiopia's nemesis in the 1930s.

Japan and Ethiopia's first encounters

The 1931 mission allowed the Ethiopian delegation to study the Japanese model of modernization, which was not only successful, but primarily non-white and non-Western. Such was the admiration of the newly crowned Ethiopian emperor for Japan that he demanded the 1931 Ethiopian Constitution be modelled after the 1889 Meiji one, as he reportedly dreamed 'of Ethiopia as the Japan of Africa'.¹² Ethiopian elites' scions too looked at the Japanese path of modernization with keen interest. Their parents had witnessed with enthusiasm Japan's victory over Russia in 1905, and they too were not immune to the Japanese charm. Some youngsters admired Japan to the point that they earned the moniker of 'Japanizers'. As Marzagora shows, this young generation of Ethiopians educated overseas (also nicknamed the Young Ethiopians), critical of their country's appeasement towards Western countries, tried to vouch for a racialized alliance with Japan, perceived to be the safer option to maintain independence.¹³

On the Japanese side, the mission also permitted the Japanese population to see first-hand the 'uniqueness' of Ethiopia. The African country was then mainly attractive as a new economic market, especially after the 1929 crisis and in light of the

¹²Joseph Calvitt Clarke, 'Mutual Interests? Japan and Ethiopia Before the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-36', *Selected Annual Proceedings of the Florida Conference of Historians*, February 2000, pp. 91, 92.

¹³Sara Marzagora, 'Political Thought and Struggle for Sovereignty in Ethiopian-Japanese Relation (1927-1936)', *International History Review*, vol. 45, no. 1, April 2022, pp. 95-113.

perceived 'yellow peril' of Japanese economic dumping. At a time when Japanese immigration was banned in the United States and when the perceived overpopulation of the archipelago 'needed' to be diverted somewhere else, Ethiopia seemed a suitable candidate as a possible new outlet for both Japanese people and goods. Conversely, in Ethiopia, Japan was perceived as the perfect commercial partner: a non-white country, far away enough to be innocuous, and with cheaper goods, which were by 1931 much more commonplace than Western ones.¹⁴

Although, as we will see, Ethiopia was actually never represented as equal to Japan, initially the Japanese press took pains to describe how Ethiopia, albeit a faraway country with an aura of exoticism, could be compared to Japan. The first element of similarity lay in the fact that the two countries had never experienced a foreign invasion, in particular from the West. Then Ethiopia had national sovereignty, an almost unique case in the African continent at the time, and Japan had colonies, a unicum in East Asia. That could have already been sufficient to ignite anti-Western activists, but additionally Japan and Ethiopia had defeated respectively Russia in 1905 and Italy in 1896. As many scholars have argued, these two victories gave Japan and Ethiopia a pre-eminent position in non-white and non-Western circles all around the world. On the one hand, following the victory over Russia and its failed attempt to introduce an equality clause at Versailles, many Asians and African Americans saw in Japan the liberator that would free Asia and the darker races from the Western yoke. Conversely, after the battle of Adwa, Ethiopia was brought to the forefront and visited by many protagonists of the black diaspora.¹⁵ Ethiopia, for African Americans and the Pan-African movement, also gained a religious significance: it was a sacred land, the icon of black sovereignty, the only Christian bulwark in Africa.¹⁶

Besides, both countries boasted an unbroken imperial lineage. The *Asahi* newspaper, for instance, remarked that there were 'no other empires in the world as noble as those of Ethiopia and Japan'.¹⁷ As Baron Shidehara Kijūrō (1872–1951), then Minister for Foreign Affairs, put it at a welcome party for the Ethiopian delegation in 1931: 'The most indolent imagination must be impressed by the spectacle of the meeting for the first time of the two Sovereignties of immemorial antiquity unbroken through all ages.'¹⁸ The notion of an 'unbroken imperial line'—in Japanese, *bansei ikkei*—was a pillar of Japanese state orthodoxy in the 1930s which confirmed Japan's

¹⁴Japanese interest in Ethiopia began after the meeting of the respective delegations in Geneva, which culminated in the Treaty of Friendship and Commerce in November 1930. A treaty had already been signed in 1927, but in Japanese and French, and the 1930 treaty was finally ratified after Japanese interpreters and experts in Ethiopia had been trained. See Morikawa Jun, 'The Myth and Reality of Japan's Relations with Colonial Africa, 1885–1960', *Journal of African Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, Spring 1985, p. 44; 'Japan-Abyssinia Pact Now to be Ratified', *Province*, 21 July 1929, p. 15; Okakura Takashi, '1930–nendai no Nihon-Echiopia kankei', *Afurika kenkyū*, vol. 37, December 1990, p. 60.

¹⁵Fikru Negash Gebrekidan, 'From Adwa to OAU: Ethiopia and the Politics of Pan-Africanism, 1896–1963', *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1/2, 2012, p. 74.

¹⁶William Scott, 'The Ethiopian Ethos in African American Thought', *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, Winter/Spring 2004, pp. 41–42.

¹⁷'Echiopia kara kyō tōreishi kuru', *Asahi shimbun*, 6 November 1931, evening edition, p. 2.

¹⁸Heruy, *Dai Nihon*, p. 47. Shidehara's speech is reported in both Japanese (translated) and in the original English.

cultural superiority.¹⁹ Using phrases like *bansei ikkei* in connection with Ethiopia thus helped bring together two distinct racialized populations on the level of political history.

To many with Pan-Asian and Pan-African sympathies, an alliance between Ethiopia and Japan, with the Kuroda-Araya engagement as its most spectacular step, represented the best move to bring together Pan-Asianism and Pan-Africanism against the Western civilization ideology. Despite their internal variety and clearly different geographic scopes, these two movements shared a common enemy: Western and white countries. The activist and lawyer Sumioka Tomoyoshi (1873–1943) had penned an article about Ethiopia in his magazine *Daidō* titled ‘Get to Know Abyssinia!’ even before the 1931 mission.²⁰ A friend of the renowned ultranationalist activist and thinker Tōyama Mitsuru (1855–1944), Sumioka had then made a name for himself by defending in court, with ‘empassioned rhetoric’ (*netsuben*), some of the country’s most notorious ultranationalist activists in an era that saw repeated incidents of right-wing terror.²¹ Conscious of what Ethiopia could represent for Japan, in 1931 Sumioka had additionally hosted the Ethiopian delegation at his house, where his guests would don Japanese garments and he and his wife would dance Ethiopian dances (see [Figure 1](#)).²² When Sumioka came to know Araya’s intention regarding a Japanese wife, he saw a concrete possibility of achieving the union between Ethiopia and Japan, and immediately offered his services. Araya, understanding the Japanese custom of prearranging conjugal unions in the 1930s, was eager to appoint him as a matchmaker, although Sumioka’s experience of the field was nil.

Araya’s search for a Japanese bride

The 1931 mission also had the unintended effect of launching into the public sphere the figure of Araya Abebe, ‘the most handsome man in Ethiopia’.²³ Born in 1909, he was brought up in a noble Ethiopian family: he had the honorific title of Lij²⁴ and his father was a relative of Emperor Haile Selassie.²⁵ His upbringing had an international breadth, and he had come to admire Japan’s modernization, hoping to facilitate the investment of Japanese firms in Ethiopia.²⁶ He found in Japan a non-white exemplar

¹⁹Every schoolchild in 1930s and 1940s Japan would have known about the empire’s mythical foundation by Emperor Jimmu, a descendant of the sun goddess Amaterasu, and how the supposedly unbroken line of succession from Jimmu to the present-day emperor constituted Japan’s cultural superiority. See Kenneth J. Ruoff, *Imperial Japan at Its Zenith: The Wartime Celebration of the Empire’s 2600th Anniversary* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 31–35.

²⁰This article is mentioned in the article by Sumioka Tomoyoshi, ‘Echiopiya to watakushi’, *Dainichi*, vol. 38, September 1932, p. 64.

²¹‘Yamu ni yamarenu “sokoku bōeiken” kōshi’, *Asahi shimbun*, 22 August 1933, evening edition, p. 2.

²²Sumioka, ‘Echiopiya to watakushi’, p. 65.

²³Kōun no denpō!, *Yomiuri shimbun*, 20 January 1934, p. 7.

²⁴Lij was an honorific title for the aristocratic youth who frequented the court.

²⁵Fikru Negash Gebrekidan, *Bond Without Blood: A History of Ethiopian and New World Black Relations, 1896–1991* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005), p. 105.

²⁶Joseph Calvitt Clarke, *Alliance of the Coloured Peoples: Ethiopia and Japan Before World War II* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2011), p. 83.



Figure 1. The Ethiopian delegation with Sumioka and his wife. From left to right: (standing) Sumioka Chōko, Sumioka Tomoyoshi; (seated) Daba Birrou (interpreter), Lij Teferi Gebre Mariam (Ethiopian consul at Djibouti), Heruy, and Araya Abebe. Source: Heruy, *Dai Nihon*, pp. 92–93.

that could unify all coloured²⁷ races successfully, and thus provide a valid alternative to the Western threat to Ethiopia. Once in Japan, Araya devised a quixotic plan to connect the Asian and the African nations: he would seek a Japanese wife, hoping his wedding would inaugurate more interracial marriages between the two empires. When he appointed Sumioka as the go-between, he most likely had little idea of the proportions his desire was to assume, but he certainly had in mind that his marriage would not be exclusively a private matter between two individuals. He would later remember how his wish for a Japanese wife was primarily for practical concerns he already held in 1931: ‘Since I had the desire to build a friendship between Ethiopia and Japan, already on the ship back home I was secretly thinking how I wished a Japanese lady as a wife.’²⁸

As the *nakōdo*, Sumioka decided to publish Araya’s announcement in the *Asahi shimbun* to elicit a ‘great sensation’, which in the event was the result he obtained.²⁹ In composing his initial announcement, Sumioka tailored his appeal for broad public consumption, nowhere specifying the class or social status of the future bride, so long as

²⁷This article uses terminology, such as ‘coloured’, that reflects the discourse in Japan and elsewhere in the world at that time.

²⁸Yamada Kazuhiro, *Masukaru no hanayome: maboroshi no Echiopia ōjihi* (Tokyo: Asahi shimbunsha, 1998), p. 113. More than simply a romantic penchant for Japanese women, it is likely that Araya had in mind the marriage of his friend Malaku Bayen, nephew of Haile Selassie and his personal physician, who in 1931 had broken his engagement to marry an African American woman in the hope that a link with African Americans could enhance Ethiopian connections overseas.

²⁹‘Echiopia: wakaki denka no hanayome kōho’, *Asahi shimbun*, 16 November 1933, p. 11.

the candidate was a 'Japanese woman, beautiful and fluent in English with age between 19 and 24 years'.³⁰ Noteworthy, too, is that Sumioka addressed his invitation not to figures of authority within the household or to community leaders but directly to a wide audience of female newspaper readers. Indeed, as the case of Kuroda herself demonstrates, applicants sometimes sent their resumé and photos unbeknownst to their parents.

As it had been with the press coverage of the 1931 mission, coverage of Araya's announcement also tended to highlight Ethiopia and Japan's divine origins and their shared 'grand destiny'. Additionally, with the topic being a marriage, a third theme loomed large: the interracial character of the union. Although some non-governmental actors wished to create a non-white connection, the Japanese press was heavily influenced by state-sanctioned views of race and, in some cases, it expressed anxiety over a 'black' man desiring a Japanese woman.³¹ Far from being an atemporal 'fairytales-like story' (*otogibanashimeita monogatari*), the Kuroda-Araya engagement was in fact deeply entangled in contemporary ideologies of race.³² Fortunately for scholars, mainstream journalism, albeit a form of popular discourse then censored and controlled, holds the potential to reveal aspects of everyday racial thought and practice in 1930s Japan in ways that official records do not always disclose. At times a single sentence of popular print can yield a treasure trove of unspoken assumptions. One such telling utterance may be found in a *Yomiuri* newspaper article of November 1933. In the words of the anonymous *Yomiuri* journalist: 'One would think that being the wife of a prince with a dark face would naturally only appeal to the unattractive, but in fact only beautiful girls applied.'³³ One can hardly imagine a more loaded statement.³⁴

To make a dark-skinned Ethiopian bridegroom more attractive to the general readership, the Japanese press engaged in various forms of whitewashing, some of them quite literal. A 1933 report from the conservative *Yomiuri* summarized a frequently expressed view: 'Ethiopians, when compared to Japanese, are much darker, but not as dark as Japanese would imagine when talking about "blacks"'. The same reporter noted that 'their eyes, noses, mouths and so on are incredibly similar to ours in shape', displaying a classic symmetry popularly ascribed to King Solomon's union with the Queen of Sheba, a connection to Christianity the Ethiopian ruling classes

³⁰Shitoyaka na Nihon fujin wo okisaki ni to goshobō', *Asahi shimbun*, 19 May 1933, p. 11.

³¹By state-sanctioned views of race, I refer to the reframing and interiorizing of discourses of race after Western models of racial hierarchy from the Meiji period onwards, positing the supposed inferiority of dark-skinned ethnicities. See John G. Russell, 'Excluded Presence: Shoguns, Minstrels, Bodyguards, and Japan's Encounters with the Black Other', *Zinbun*, no. 40, 2008, pp. 20–21.

³²'Un conte de fée', *Le Grand écho du Nord de la France*, 12 February 1934, p. 2; Sugiyama, 'Mame senkan', p. 9.

³³'Echiopia no hana to saku ōhi kōhosha', *Yomiuri shimbun*, 2 November 1933, evening edition, p. 2.

³⁴Kirsten Ziomek tells the similar story of a Palaun imperial citizen, Ngiraked, who wished to be incorporated fully into the Japanese empire by trying to marry a Japanese woman. His announcement caused a sensation because it followed (in October 1933) Araya's announcement. Although their goals were completely different, there ensued a similar anxiety towards a 'brown' man looking for a Japanese wife. Ten hopeful applicants applied, but in that case too no engagement followed. See Ziomek, *Lost Histories*, pp. 278–284.

were particularly proud of when championing their country's exceptionalism.³⁵ As one French newspaper remarked, conscious of the ambiguous position that Japan held in contemporary racial discourse,³⁶ the engagement represented 'the first time that a member of the Japanese nobility had thought of an alliance with a man whose race—despite him being part of the Imperial family—could in Japan only be considered inferior'.³⁷ But in this regard the internationally educated Araya Abebe, a 'monogamous Christian with lighter complexion than expected',³⁸ was even called the 'Gloucester of Ethiopia' in the Japanese press, in effect removing him from a perceived backward continent and placing him alongside a noble European gentleman (see Figure 2).³⁹

³⁵'Soromon-ō ga netsuai shita utsukushii joōsama no shison', *Yomiuri shimbun*, 11 November 1933, p. 9. The whitewashing of Araya—and in general the singular position of Ethiopia in Japanese minds—can be better appreciated if we compare it with another report in July 1934. The *Yomiuri* newspaper announced that the young Sudanese Nikola G. Kalogeros was looking for a Japanese beauty to become his wife, and had written a letter to the Japan Tourist Bureau asking for advice. The young gentleman resided in what was at the time Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. *Yomiuri's* reporting drew explicit parallels with the Kuroda-Araya betrothal, claiming in the headline that Japanese beauties (*Yamato nadeshiko*) were 'popular with black people'. Ultimately, however, it was not the similarities but rather the contrasts between Kalogeros and Araya, and between the two neighbouring countries, Sudan and Ethiopia, that the *Yomiuri* reporter chose to emphasize. The journalist pointedly described Kalogeros as 'pitch black' (*makkuroke*) and noted that he was a commoner (*heimin*), rather than a fair-skinned prince from a sovereign empire. Describing Sudan as a 'land of naked people and bare feet with no need for *geta* sandals or kimono', the journalist implied that there were few Japanese women who would wish to live in such a place. See 'Kondo wa Echiopiya no ringoku kara hanayome no chūmon', *Yomiuri shimbun*, 28 July 1934, p. 7.

³⁶As Yukiko Koshiro states, Japanese people had a 'dual racial identity', being 'colored yet modern'. See Yukiko Koshiro, 'From Peripheries to Transnational: African Americans in Japan's Identity Formation, 1872–1940', in *Black Transnationalism and Japan*, (eds) Natalia Doan and Sho Konishi (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2024), pp. 49–91. Racial discourses surrounding Japan shifted both internally and internationally from the Meiji period: many Japanese intellectuals at the turn of the century tried to assign Japan a sort of 'honorary' whiteness to justify imperialism. However, despite Japan being accepted as a civilized Western nation-state, its victory over Russia in 1905 and its push for a racial equality clause in Versailles after the First World War made the Asian country a beacon of hope, a 'champion of the darker races', for colonized countries. The 1930s were also the years of the 'yellow peril', denouncing the supposedly unjust economic practices Japan pursued in South America and Africa.

³⁷'Les mésaventures matrimoniales d'un prince abyssin et d'une jeune japonaise', *Le Journal*, 28 April 1934, p. 3.

³⁸'Prince Advertises for Bride in Japan', *New York Times*, 18 February 1934, E8. In regard to his religion, the Japanese press informed the audience that the wedding rites would be with grand celebrations in both Ethiopia and Japan, but in Christian churches. Kuroda also bought a Bible to prepare herself for the Christian ceremony. The mainstream press's insistence on Araya being a Christian in a non-Christian country like Japan stemmed from the widespread association that the early twentieth-century Japanese public made between the Christian faith, the white race, and Euro-American civilization. With Ethiopia neither a Western nor a white country, its historical connections to Christianity both created a suitable match for the wedding between members of the two empires but at the same time challenged the paradigm that saw Christianity as the religious basis for the white West. 'Araya-denka go-rainichi', *Asahi shimbun*, 25 January 1934, evening edition, p. 2; Yamada, *Masukaru no hanayome*, pp. 176–185, 209.

³⁹Nanjō, 'Kagayaku "kisaki no za ni" erabareta Kuroda-shi reijō', p. 1. The Duke of Gloucester (1900–1974) was well-known among the Japanese public, having visited Japan in 1929 to confer the Garter, a prestigious order of chivalry, on Hirohito.



Figure 2. The formal photograph of Araya Abebe that he asked Sumioka to show his fiancée. Source: 'Hanayome ni misete hoshii to', *Asahi shimbun*, 7 February 1934, p. 11.

Kuroda Masako's pioneering mission

If Araya's marriage plans also aimed to save Ethiopia from its belligerent European neighbours, his fiancée had even grander goals for their engagement, endeavouring not only to uncouple the Western tenets of whiteness and Christianity, but also challenging the civilization discourse in regard to gender. Selected in January 1934 (see Figure 3), the 21-one-year-old Kuroda Masako⁴⁰ soon became instrumental in an imagined transnational connection between Ethiopia and Japan, but she had her own ideas about the future of the Japanese empire. She soon realized that her ideas could be heard by far more people than she had ever imagined, given the extraordinary amount of attention she received in the first months of 1934. Kuroda received dozens of letters a day from correspondents, both male and female, wishing for a position in her future retinue, whether as ladies-in-waiting, nurses, court physicians, maidservants, or bodyguards.⁴¹ Businessmen asked her to promote their firms in Ethiopia, hoping to uncover new commercial opportunities.⁴² Others even travelled great distances to meet her in person, including a journalist couple, the Wells, who 'came all the way from the US to meet Kuroda Masako, who is to become an Ethiopian princess'.⁴³

Kuroda quickly made it clear that her application, initially stymied by even her family, was only the first step in vocally promoting her pioneering journey to Africa on behalf of her country. First, she was interviewed by many mainstream newspapers, but male journalists were more concerned with racial and gendered issues, describing her as 'on the front line' in all her undertakings, 'despite being female'.⁴⁴ One *Yomiuri* interviewer candidly identified the 'most worrisome question for him as a Japanese man' when contemplating Kuroda's future marriage: 'Are you in some way dissatisfied with Japanese men?' Kuroda, disregarding the racial prejudice towards her fellow country people she so vehemently condemned in the United States, politely denied the suggestion and stated merely that 'Ethiopia and Japan share the same national spirit',

⁴⁰Born in September 1912, Kuroda was 21 by the Western count at the time of her engagement. However, because age-reckoning practices differed in early twentieth-century Japan, domestic newspapers reported her age as 23, and the international press unknowingly followed suit. On changing standards of age calculation, see Sayaka Chatani, 'A Man at Twenty, Aged at Twenty-Five: The Conscription Exam Age in Japan', *American Historical Review*, vol. 125, no. 2, April 2020, pp. 427–437.

⁴¹Just as was the case with Araya's announcement, some of Kuroda's correspondents wrote in blood, an act that the *Yomiuri shimbun* described as a reflection of 'modern women's psychology', although it was not only women who did so. 'Echiopia kōsei homare no kisaki kimaru', *Yomiuri shimbun*, 20 January 1934, p. 7.

⁴²Yamada, *Masukaru no hanayome*, p. 148.

⁴³'Hanashi no minato', *Yomiuri shimbun*, 13 March 1934, p. 7. The attention lavished on Kuroda took many forms, from gifts and merchandising to azuki beans and Chichibu-Meisen silk. On the occasion of the Girls' Day Festival (*hina matsuri*) she also received a complete set of dolls, and some *hina* dolls whose faces were those of the couple themselves. See 'Echiopia ōhi ni Chichibu meisen wo okuru', *Yomiuri shimbun*, 7 February 1934, p. 8; 'For Their Ethiopian Home', *Japan Times*, 23 February 1934, p. 8; 'Shukufuku no tsurukame ningyō', *Yomiuri shimbun*, 27 February 1934, p. 8.

⁴⁴'Nihon to Echiopia wo musubu mono', *Sandē mainichi shimbun*, 18 February 1934, pp. 14–15. These were the words of her foster parent in Sapporo, Takeshita Hiroshi, with whom she had lived between the ages of 12 and 16 as a result of her family's financial struggles.



Figure 3. Clockwise from top: Kuroda Masako, the 19 January 1934 telegram from Addis Ababa stating Araya's top two preferences, Tabata Shigeko, and the two candidates' resumés. Source: 'Hanayome kôho wo meguri', *Asahi shimbun*, 20 January 1934, p. 7.

so she did not see the difference between the two countries, thus dismissing the man's attitude towards her interracial wedding.⁴⁵

Conversely, in her disavowal of 'ethnic prejudice' (*minzokuteki henken*), she was praised by the feminist critic Kamichika Ichiko (1888–1981), who devoted a lengthy column to the impending engagement in the 20 January 1934 edition of the daily *Yomiuri* newspaper. A long-time champion of women's rights, Kamichika praised the 'modernism' of the young women who had applied to become Araya's bride. What was most remarkable, according to Kamichika, was that women of the 'wealthy classes' (including both Kuroda and the wealthy bourgeois second-placed Tabata) stood at the cutting edge of change in dismantling such prejudices, and women of future generations would one day thank them for their 'courage and determination'.⁴⁶

As a woman writing in mainstream newspapers, Kamichika represents the link to the opposite side of the media spectrum—the women's press—which portrayed Kuroda Masako's life and experiences as examples to follow.⁴⁷ Whether in the form of reportage, interviews, or roundtable discussions, coverage focused squarely on Kuroda, leaving Araya a somewhat blurry presence, while in the mainstream press the two names were inevitably linked and rarely appeared separately. Women's magazines emphasized the bride's subjectivity and agency with regard to the challenges of marriage and domestic life, issues of special relevance to female readers, but Kuroda used such an arena to subvert women's public role in the empire. While in truth, the significance of the engagement of the women's press lay less in its geopolitical consequences than in its domestic implications, Kuroda used women's magazines as an arena to passionately discuss her ideas on the pioneering role of women in the colonies, and felt free to express her views about Ethiopia and, more generally, the role of Japanese women in the imperial effort.

One of the ways in which the women's press constituted a better arena for Kuroda was by providing her with a space to express herself in writing, thereby allowing her to be represented not only in the third person as a public icon, but also in the first person as a thinking—and gendered—subject. A six-page essay by Kuroda titled 'I'm Off to Ethiopia to be Married' appeared, for example, in the March 1934 issue of *Fujin kōron*, a women's magazine that targeted relatively educated readers.⁴⁸ Around the same time, she penned another 20-page account in which she elaborated further on the themes

⁴⁵Ryōshintachi wo settoku', *Yomiuri shimbun*, 20 January 1934, p. 7.

⁴⁶Kamichika Ichiko, 'Gendai josei no hiyakuteki modanizumu', *Yomiuri shimbun*, 20 January 1934, p. 7.

⁴⁷I follow Mia Moody's definition of 'mainstream' journalism as 'targeting the general population', producing content 'specifically conceived and designed to reach and appeal to a large audience', and 'representing the prevalent attitudes, values, and practices of a society or group'. See Mia Moody, *Black and Mainstream Press' Framing of Racial Profiling: A Historical Perspective* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008), p. 16. It is important to note that periodicals' mass audience had a distinctly gendered topography. While women, too, read newspapers, the mainstream press was largely the domain of male journalists, who often framed the issues they raised from a male-centred perspective. As to women's press, here I refer to the great variety of magazines targeting Japanese women in the 1930s. Such journals varied both in content and in political aim but, collectively, provided a tool that women could use to interpret and navigate contemporary life. They often portrayed particular women's lives and experiences as examples to follow. See Sarah Frederick, *Turning Pages: Reading and Writing Women's Magazines in Interwar Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).

⁴⁸Kuroda Masako, 'Echiopiya e totsugu watashi', *Fujin kōron*, March 1934, pp. 112–117.

tackled in her *Fujin kōron* article, titled ‘When I Become a Woman of Ethiopia [literally, a Person of Ethiopia]’. Tellingly, Kuroda chose to title one section of her essay ‘To the Women Who Sympathise with Me’ (*Watashi ni godōjō kudasaru josei e*), knowing that her audience was predominantly female.⁴⁹

In both pieces of writing, Kuroda indeed viewed herself in explicitly gendered terms. Bolstered by love for her nation and her wish to become an integral part of the imperial project, she always imagined Japanese pioneers in Africa as almost exclusively women. She wished to highlight that, in Japanese colonies or controlled territories like Manchuria, women had an important role to play in their nation’s ‘valiant leap’ (*yūhi*) overseas.⁵⁰ In Kuroda’s words, now was the time for women to ‘acknowledge clearly and forcefully our “national” existence’ (*sekkyokuteki ni kokkateki josei to shite no sonzai o hakkiri ninshiki shinakereba naranai*), while admiring those Japanese women who were doing ‘great courageous deeds overseas’.⁵¹

Nevertheless, she realized that, in territories controlled by Japan, the empire was still mainly a masculine enterprise, and she tried to actively disengage empire-building from the male sex, envisioning new possibilities for women. ‘Although [colonial] development (*kaitaku*) is a responsibility assigned to men,’ she wrote, ‘I do not think it impinges on men’s prerogatives if women too, to the extent they are able, seek out new horizons and engage in development activities as women.’⁵² Therefore, in promoting the hitherto unknown Ethiopia as equal to Japan, Kuroda envisioned a transnational role for women, not within the protected territory of the home islands, but in a new space where men and women could be more equal. While she was a staunch supporter of the Japanese empire, she had to come to terms with the fact that, as a woman, she was not the ideal actor her nation envisioned to start a new enterprise in Africa. Trying to overcome the ideological impasse between her belief in women’s equal role in the imperial enterprise and imperial chauvinistic foundations, she firmly expressed her intention to become a ‘good bridge’ between Ethiopia and Japan, with the African country becoming ‘literally a sister country’ (*shimaiikoku*) for Japan, in effect trying to advocate for her country in a new land where Japanese women could have more liberties and freedom of action.⁵³ Even though only nine Japanese lived in Ethiopia at the time,⁵⁴ Kuroda went so far as to predict that the distant African nation would someday become a ‘second homeland for us all’ (*minasama no daini no kokyō*), envisioning Ethiopia as a unique opportunity for Japan.⁵⁵

⁴⁹Kuroda Masako, ‘Watashi ga Echiopiya no hito to nattara’, in *Akeyuku Echiopia*, p. 18.

⁵⁰Kuroda, ‘Echiopiya e totsugu watashi’, pp. 113–114.

⁵¹Kuroda, ‘Watashi ga Echiopiya no hito to nattara’, p. 16; ‘Sabishikeredo igi ari Masako-jō no reinetsugo’, *Tokyō nichinichi shimbun*, 3 April 1934, evening edition, p. 1.

⁵²Kuroda, ‘Echiopiya e totsugu watashi’, pp. 116–117.

⁵³‘Echiopia kōsei kisaki ni kakuteishita Kuroda Masako-san to kataru’, *Fujin no tomo*, vol. 28, no. 3, March 1934, p. 126.

⁵⁴There was only one woman among them: Enomoto Murako, the wife of Enomoto Kiyoshi, both employed at the Ethiopian court as chef and maid. In December 1935, an article about her life at the Ethiopian court appeared but, although she had met Araya (the photo of the encounter was attached to the article), she refused to talk about the engagement. ‘Echiopia kōtei-zuki nyokan to shite hōshisareta Enomoto Murako-san wo tazunete’, *Fujokai*, vol. 52, no. 7, December 1935, p. 197.

⁵⁵Kuroda, ‘Echiopiya e totsugu watashi’, p. 117.

In choosing Ethiopia, Kuroda showed an acute awareness of the international situation in the 1930s. Like many of her contemporaries, she pointed to the racialized legal restrictions that many countries in the world placed on Japanese immigration. 'If we look around us today, which are the countries that open their doors and truly welcome us?' she asked pointedly. 'Aside from part of South America and the newly emerging nation of Manchuria [Manchukuo], it is the Ethiopian empire alone.'⁵⁶ From 1924, as a matter of fact, the United States had banned Japanese immigration, and Kuroda's vision of Ethiopia was a consequence of such exclusion.

While she did not explicitly acknowledge Ethiopian women, Kuroda's vision of imperial feminism promoted diverse roles within a context of overall equality between Ethiopia and Japan. Unsurprisingly, then, her wedding and subsequently sharing of Japan's cultural knowledge with Ethiopia were opposed by the Japanese state. It is important here to clarify that Kuroda, while initially hoping to serve her state, always remained a non-governmental actor, ironically becoming, in fact, what I define as a counter-state actor, going *against* the interests of her nation within just a few months. Her words challenged the innate patriarchal architecture of empire-building, and for Japanese women she became a symbol of a dauntless modern girl who defied patriarchal authority, disregarded Japanese racial superiority, spoke English fluently, and declared that she had not dreamed of marriage but rather of adventure overseas.⁵⁷ Even more dangerous than her words was that parties other than feminist groups viewed her as the symbol of interracial union and alternative alliances in the non-white world. Although Kuroda's focus was mainly on Japanese women attaining liberty elsewhere, her lack of reticence about interethnic marriages, a feature almost unique amongst noble people,⁵⁸ became a call for racial equality worldwide, as Kuroda was narrating a utopian history based on equality despite the differences between Ethiopia and Japan.

A coloured and 'royal' wedding

Kuroda and Araya's status further complicated their 'marriage problem' (*kekkon mondai*), as it was defined in much of the Japanese media. Takie Sugiyama Lebra writes, 'what would have occurred among commoners without drawing public attention was sensationalised if a *kazoku* woman was involved', and that applied to Kuroda too.⁵⁹ In the international press, due to her noble status, she was dubbed a 'Japanese princess', her father even becoming a 'member of the Imperial family'.⁶⁰ In some reports, the

⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 115–116.

⁵⁷Reportedly, Kuroda did not like the label of modern girl for herself, but she admittedly did many things connected to modern girls in the 1930s imagination, including living with a female friend after being expelled from her family's *koseki*, working, and going to dance halls and nightclubs in disguise.

⁵⁸As Takashi Fujitani notes, just as marriages between African American men and white American women only happened in the lowest social strata, the Japanese aristocracy also showed a strong resistance to marrying people from different ethnicities. Takashi Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 50.

⁵⁹Takie Sugiyama Lebra, *Above the Clouds: Status Culture of the Modern Japanese Nobility* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 240.

⁶⁰'Un mariage', *Madagascar*, 24 February 1934, page no. not available; 'Candidate fiancée no. 1', *Les Dimanches de la femme*, 15 April 1934, p. 15.

Japanese emperor had personally given his consent for the 'royal' marriage.⁶¹ In contrast, in the case of the Japanese press, where Kuroda was clearly depicted as a minor member of the peerage, it was Araya whose rank more typically received a rhetorical boost.⁶² Headlines usually identified Araya as a member of Ethiopia's 'imperial family' (*kōzoku*) or an 'imperial nephew' (*kōsei*), referring to him respectfully as 'his highness' (*denka*). While such designations were not necessarily incorrect, they tended to magnify the degree of Araya's proximity to the throne. An ordinary reader in Japan could be forgiven for assuming, nevertheless, that by wedding this princely figure, Kuroda might one day ascend the throne as empress of Ethiopia herself.

Pan-Asian and Pan-African supporters were galvanized by such reports about the royal and coloured character of the union. In the words of the foreign correspondent Shōji Yūnosuke, who had spent almost a year in Ethiopia in 1932, the marriage was clearly a matter of the 'unity of Oriental peoples', in effect including Africans and African Americans in such a group. To many like him, the 'Ethiopian marriage issue' had to constitute 'the first practical step toward racial equality and the unity of Oriental peoples'.⁶³ Even an actor as involved with the state and the West as Nitobe Inazō was reportedly very pleased with the project of uniting Ethiopia and Japan, even offering to adopt the future bride.⁶⁴

To be sure, it was mainly for her noble status that Sumioka and his wife had chosen Kuroda for Araya. Already by October 1933, the lawyer imagined the bride 'to be the daughter of a baron, an office of dignity to be given only to some blood relations of the Royal family'. Regarding the details of the wedding ceremony, the lawyer-cum-*nakōdo* imagined that 'it would be advisable to take to H.I.M. the Emperor of Japan a small present in the shape and type of some leopard or lion skins of the best quality'.⁶⁵ Kuroda was the best option among the applicants to fulfil his lofty ideal of a non-white alliance, while trying as much as possible to tie together the two imperial families, an enterprise he knew had no precedent in Japan.⁶⁶ He was not the only one trying to involve the Japanese emperor but also circumventing Japanese bureaucrats.

⁶¹'Un mariage'.

⁶²'Ryōshintachi wo settoku', p. 7.

⁶³Clarke, *Alliance of the Coloured Peoples*, pp. 89–90.

⁶⁴Nitobe was consulted by Sumioka when he published Araya's announcement. Nitobe had previously met Haile Selassie in Geneva, but he died in October 1933 without knowing the outcome of the announcement. Hoshi Hajime, 'Nitobe-sensei to Echiopia', in *Nitobe hakushi tsuikushū*, (eds) Maeda Tamon and Takagi Yasaka (Tokyo: ko-Nitobe hakushi kinen jigyō jikkōinkai, 1936), pp. 553–555.

⁶⁵Details of a letter from M. Sumioka to M. Yamauchi, 6 October 1933 by Heruy, Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (the Italian Historical and Diplomatic Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) (hereafter ASMAE), Volume I (1857–1939), Etiopia, pos. 54/17, fasc. 53, 'Relazioni con Giappone'.

⁶⁶While Ethiopian royalty had enjoyed a long history of ethnic intermarriage to extend and maintain its rule, Japan's sealing of international alliances through marriage was close to zero. Japan had been the object of an attempt at a royal wedding when, in 1881, the Hawaiian king Kalākaua (1836–1891) had sought to arrange a union between his niece Ka'ūlani (1875–1899) and the Japanese prince Yamashina Sadamaro (1867–1922) in order to strengthen the insular kingdom's ties with its Pacific neighbour, a rapidly rising non-white power. The Meiji bureaucracy, however, more eager to develop ties with Europe and the United States, politely refused the offer in 1882. See Mariko Iijima, "Nonwhiteness" in Nineteenth-Century Hawai'i: Sovereignty, White Settlers, and Japanese Migrants', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 47, no. 3, July 2020, pp. 9–10.

In December 1933, special correspondent for the *Ōsaka mainichi* newspaper, Yamauchi Masao, based in Ethiopia since 1931 and from then on always in touch with Sumioka, assured his sovereign that this particular marriage would guarantee Japan a special place in Ethiopia's political and economic panorama:

The intended marriage of Lidj [sic] Araya will help us to secure this loan [from the Japanese government to the Ethiopian one, 'to cover the expenses and output on the purchase of a plant for the purpose of iron-works, which is the cradle of civilization'] without any difficulty, on the understanding that Your Imperial Majesty may be willing [to] give a warrant of security in any manner desired. As Your Imperial Majesty is quite aware, I am always trying to cultivate a good link and existing friendship between Japan and Ethiopia on the formation of strong foundations. I understand that the Ethiopian delegates sent on mission to Japan [in 1931] were refused a loan of this type owing to the lack of introducing the greatness and wealth of Ethiopia into the knowledge of the people of Japan. But now since the situation of Ethiopia is such, I assure Your Imperial Majesty to be able to get this important loan of money, of which we shall strive and endeavour to keep it quite secret in any way possible.⁶⁷

A union between Africa and Asia, Yamauchi wrote, would make Japanese industries ready to invest in Africa and help Ethiopia secure weapons, hence the need for secrecy from European powers. While it is unclear whether this letter ever reached the Japanese emperor, it highlights how the actors most involved with the Kuroda-Araya wedding were conscious of the reluctant bureaucratic position towards Ethiopia, which was to be fully revealed with the debacle of the wedding. Therefore they tried to create a web of alternative supporters, even attempting to mirror Haile Selassie's sympathy for Japan in Hirohito.

Whether due to these actors' efforts or Japan's image as the 'champion of the darker races', the influence of the Kuroda-Araya wedding went well beyond Asia and Africa. The possible union of such symbolically powerful countries was felt particularly by the African American community in the United States, whose enthusiasm for Japan and Ethiopia was further ignited by the news of the engagement. The likely alliance of the two countries, 'among the oldest empires in the world',⁶⁸ and the 'first non-European peoples [...] to defeat the white race at arms', had already been hailed by an elated African American press, which considered Japan as the 'logical leader' of 'all coloured peoples'.⁶⁹

The African American press, more than any other, tended to highlight less the economic advantages for both Japan and Ethiopia and more the couple's noble character. The *Afro-American* underscored the fear that the union 'of royal houses of darker races'

⁶⁷Letter from Yamauchi to the Japanese emperor, December 1933, ASMAE, *Affari Politici (1931-45)*, Etiopia, b. 24, fasc. 3, 'Rapporti tra Etiopia e Giappone'.

⁶⁸Quoted in Etsuko Taketani, *The Black Pacific Narrative: Geographic Imaginings of Race and Empire Between the World Wars* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2014), p. 213.

⁶⁹DuBois' quote is found in Marc Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan and China: Black Internationalism in Asia, 1895-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 71.

caused in international circles in Europe.⁷⁰ In an internal war clearly defined by racial boundaries, African American journalists and intellectuals took issue with the white American press which they judged guilty of having diminished the significance of the marriage. So, the *Chicago Defender* charged: 'American newspapers, in seeking to cast reflection on the proposed marriage, referred to the father of the prospective bride as a "somewhat impoverished viscount"'.⁷¹ The article then pompously (and erroneously) defined Viscount Kuroda as a 'wealthy landowner and outstanding figure in the high councils of state affairs'. It also exaggerated Kuroda Masako's attributes: 'Miss Kuroda is exceptionally intelligent, having been graduated from one of the most aristocratic colleges in Japan, which outranks Vassar college in America.'⁷²

As this internal strife within the American press demonstrates, the wedding was to seal more than ever coloured solidarity against white power.⁷³ The *Chicago Defender* announced: 'This marriage is seen as a move to cement more thoroughly the bond between the black and yellow races, which has been watched ever since the Japanese obviously sought to resist white supremacy and the encroachments on their rights and territory.'⁷⁴ George Schuyler (1895–1977) wrote in the *Pittsburgh Courier* that 'associated with Japan, the Ethiopian kingdom will doubtless become a power in Africa'. Taking swipe at the racial segregation enacted in the United States, he continued: 'It would seem that inter-racial marriage is not the deplorable thing that some Negroes and most white folks would have us believe.'⁷⁵

While Schuyler was critical of the imperialist stance he saw in Japan, anthropologist J.A. Rogers (1880–1966) was more enthusiastic, giving his wholehearted acceptance of race-mixing:

a growing bond of sympathy among the darker people of the world is inevitable under present conditions. [...] The mention of marriage between a Japanese and an Ethiopian will also cause a racial flutter among Americans, regardless of color, so wrapped are they in the stupid and entirely false belief that race is a matter to be worried about [...] All people, no matter how pure they seem, are mixed. The darkest race was once very likely white, and the whitest race was once black [...] Therefore, except to ignorant folk, the news of a union between Japanese and Ethiopian royalty will mean little, racially. Economically and socially, however, it is of great significance.⁷⁶

⁷⁰'Wedding May Join Japan and Abyssinia', *Afro-American*, 27 January 1934, p. 3.

⁷¹'Japanese Girl Announces Her Engagement to African Prince', *Chicago Defender*, 27 January 1934, pp. 1–2.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³The African American press was generally favourable to the Japanese presence in the United States. When in 1924 Japanese immigration was banned, while some hoped that restrictions could mean more jobs and better treatment of the African American community, the black press tried to warn its readers that any anti-Japanese policy would only be detrimental to equality campaigns. See David J. Hellwig, 'Afro-American Reactions to the Japanese and the Anti-Japanese Movement, 1906–1924', *Phylon*, vol. 38, no. 1, 1977, pp. 93–104.

⁷⁴'Japanese Girl Announces Her Engagement', pp. 1–2.

⁷⁵George Schuyler, 'Views and Reviews', *Pittsburgh Courier*, 3 February 1934, p. 10.

⁷⁶J. A. Rogers, 'Coming Royal Nuptials of African Princess and Japanese Prince will Help Seal International Bond', *Pittsburgh Courier*, 3 February 1934, A3.

For a minority much vexed racially and to whom interracial marriage was virtually impossible, that the two most prominent non-white countries conceived an alliance through marriage represented an ironic twist of an instrument that had a distinct old-world flavour to it. The proposed union of Kuroda and Araya—and generally an alliance between Ethiopia and Japan—thus offered these actors an arena for further articulating and contesting prevailing Western-based ideologies about interracial marriages and racial segregation, which they suffered daily. In sum, Kuroda and Araya's engagement demonstrated that divorcing race from Western civilization discourse was possible, even as they challenged every pillar of it.

The 1934 shift

These subversive opinions endangered the respective governments' agendas, be it racial hierarchy in the United States, or Ethiopia's appeasement of its European neighbours. Although the reason why the marriage did not come to pass was a combination of Italian (and generally Western European) pressure and Ethiopian fears that it would displease its neighbours, on the Japanese side there were undoubtedly race and gender-based hesitations, which were fully concretized in just three years. What in 1931 had been considered a surprising brotherly commonality between Ethiopia and Japan ironically contributed to the Japanese government's ultimate disengagement from Ethiopia in 1934. The *Osaka jiji shinpō* best summed up the widespread sympathy for Ethiopia up to the spring 1934, writing that the Ethiopian 'national character (*koku-minsei*) is similar to ours', with Ethiopia being 'the most unique country in Africa, [...] said to be as old as Egypt, considered the oldest country in the world', with 'marriage customs [that] are strikingly similar (*kokuji*) to those of Japan'.⁷⁷ However, conscious of political directions and the repercussions that insisting on the similarities with Ethiopia would have brought, from 1934 newspapers and various printed accounts assured the readers that, in truth, Ethiopia had never been fully equal to Japan.

The timing of the shift was hardly a coincidence. In 1931, when Ethiopian delegates disembarked in Kōbe, the Japanese popular welcome was reportedly warm and enthusiastic. Heruy recalled that everywhere they went they were fêted and welcomed by hundreds of young students with small flags; it was a pity that it was a spectacle he 'could not show to all Ethiopian citizens'.⁷⁸ That first diplomatic encounter started some groups' fantasies, in Japan and worldwide, of non-white alliances and eventual supremacy. By 1934, however, these dreams grew out of control, with the wedding talks, and what government officers saw did not fit the imperial agenda. Following a 1926 Japanese enquiry on the Ethiopian response to Japanese goods and the 1931 Ethiopian mission, business interest in the country had grown, but already by 1932 a report on Japanese migration overseas stated that it would be troublesome for Japanese entrepreneurs to flourish in the Ethiopian agricultural products market.⁷⁹ The Japanese government was also very hesitant about opening a legation in Addis

⁷⁷'Echiopia wa yobikakeru!' *Osaka jiji shinpō*, 25 January 1934.

⁷⁸Heruy, *Dai Nihon*, pp. 16, 80.

⁷⁹Nihon shokumin kyōkai, *Imin kōza* 4 (Tokyo: Nihon shokumin kyōkai hen, 1932), p. 348.

Ababa, only consenting to an honorary consulate-general in Osaka to help those interested in doing business, despite the difficulties.⁸⁰ Regardless of the propaganda on the shared cultural links with its colonies, for Japan's state imperialism the way proposed by a female subject like Kuroda with equality as a foundation of future progress was simply unfathomable, even with a non-colony like Ethiopia.

The press, increasingly censored and controlled, followed suit. For instance, the booklet that followed Kuroda's 20-page account, issued by the government's Institute of International Economics (Kokusai keizai kenkyūjo) and titled *Akeyuku Ethiopia* (Ethiopia dawns), presented Ethiopia merely as a backward country with interesting economic openings for Japan. The Institute recognized the extreme curiosity of Japanese citizens, whose 'interest in Ethiopia could not be understated', but never mentioned an affinity between Japan and Ethiopia—a country that moreover still practised slavery.⁸¹ Instead, Japan was portrayed, unsurprisingly, as the more advanced and civilized country of the two. Unlike in Ethiopian accounts, where Ethiopia considered itself to be approximately level with Meiji-period Japan in terms of progress, 1930s Ethiopia was continuously compared to Tokugawa Japan.⁸² One sentence states: 'Japan had such a society during the Tokugawa period, but in Ethiopia still now there exists, astonishingly, a class of warriors.'⁸³ The press also became more prone to highlight the most exotic aspects of the 'mysterious' African country, such as the presence of lions, to reinforce the image of a savage Ethiopia, a 'faraway black country with widespread lions and venomous snakes'.⁸⁴ Finally, the account that Heruy penned about Japan was uncoincidentally translated into Japanese only in 1934 because it reinforced the idea, in Ethiopian eyes too, that Japan was superior—even the title had been changed in Japanese to *Dai Nihon* (Great Japan) to underscore such grand imagery.⁸⁵

Unsurprisingly, then, on 3 April 1934, the *Tōkyō nichinichi shimbun* announced that the engagement between Kuroda Masako and Araya Abebe had been broken, and not by themselves. The article, penned by the special correspondent to Ethiopia Nanjō Shin'ichi, reported that 'a certain country' had fiercely interfered.⁸⁶ The culprit was

⁸⁰The consulate-general was inaugurated in 1933, while the legation was only set up in January 1936, after the Italian invasion.

⁸¹*Akeyuku Ethiopia*, second part, p. 13.

⁸²There was a consensus in the Amharic print culture on the 60-year gap distancing Ethiopia from Japan. It was roughly calculated on the fact that approximately 60 years had passed since the beginning of the Meiji period, thus positing Ethiopia as 'lagging behind' just as Japan was before the so-called 'opening'. See Marzagora, 'Political Thought'.

⁸³*Akeyuku Ethiopia*, p. 21.

⁸⁴'Ethiopia kōsei'. Also see 'Hokurikusen no daichi suberi-Ethiopia fuzoku', *Asahi shimbun*, 19 February 1934, evening edition, p. 8.

⁸⁵The 1932 original Amharic version had a title that still exalted Japan but in a relatively more neutral way: *Mahdara berhan hagara Japan* (The Source of Light: The Country of Japan). It is worth noting that the book was translated into Japanese by Enko (Elisa) Vaccari, who was not fluent in Amharic. She had the notes of the voyage first translated into English by her Italian husband Oreste Vaccari, who had studied Amharic at the Royal Oriental Institute of Naples, reinforcing the notion that before Kuroda, few Japanese were interested in Ethiopia, considered to be pertinent to Italy.

⁸⁶Shin'ichi Nanjō, 'Kuroda Masako-jō to no endan: Echiopia-gawa de kaishō', *Tōkyō nichinichi shimbun*, 3 April 1934, evening edition, p. 1.

soon explicitly recognized as Italy, which still bore the scar of its 1896 defeat and suffered intense economic competition from Japan, both in Africa and in South America.⁸⁷ When the Italian dictator was accused of being mainly responsible for breaking the 'curious episode of the current Japanophilia disease in Ethiopia',⁸⁸ the allegation soon became an international incident that diplomatic circles attempted to rectify. Italian diplomats ceaselessly tried to protect their country's international image, denying any possible involvement and trying to shift the blame onto the Japanese government. As one fascist newspaper put it, 'It is instead the Imperial Japanese Court that, boastful of its ancient traditions, did not allow the wedding with the Abyssians, with a certain tone lacking deference to the natives of the Negus Empire.'⁸⁹

Italian diplomacy was undoubtedly anxious to downplay Italy's role at the expense of the Japanese bureaucracy, but after thorough investigation, it seemed the Japanese aristocracy, keen to retain their status as 'honorary' whites in Western powers' eyes, were less than eager to consent to the marriage. In regard to the Kuroda engagement already by January 1934, the *Tōkyō nichinichi shimbun* had reported the opinion of the historian Honda Tatsujirō (1868–1938), then affiliated with the Ministry of the Imperial Household. According to Honda, there was 'no precedent for a member from a foreign royal family to marry a member of the Japanese aristocracy'. 'Since Masako is a noblewoman,' he continued, 'she will naturally have to apply for the Ministry of the Imperial Household to approve her engagement prior to her marriage.' Honda did not want to discard the option altogether, however, but 'we need to consider the prestige of the noble families of this country'. The matter, he explained, would be carefully taken care of once the Kuroda family applied for a marriage licence, foretelling future hindrances to the engagement.⁹⁰ Additionally, in a March 1934 Imperial Diet discussion regarding Ethiopia, when committee member Hattori asked what the Ministry of Foreign Affairs thought about the marriage of Kuroda, government commissioner Matsumoto vigorously stated that the marriage was 'not related in any way to the work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' and that the Ministry had 'never touched on that subject', trying to downplay the 'proportions of the matter'.⁹¹

While the Japanese and Italian governments were frantically trying to avoid any mention of the marriage, the Ethiopian government is another suspect in sabotaging the engagement. Some days after attacking Italy, the *Tōkyō nichinichi shimbun* claimed that the marriage had instead been cancelled on the Ethiopian side. Apparently, Haile

⁸⁷See Sidney Xu Lu, *The Making of Japanese Settler Colonialism: Malthusianism and Trans-Pacific Migration, 1868–1961* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 166.

⁸⁸These were the words of Giovanni Battista Guarnaschelli, a senior officer of the Department of Mediterranean Affairs. Circular n. 202253, from Guarnaschelli to Corporations Ministry, Italian Embassy in Paris, Italian Embassy in Tokyo, Italian Embassy in London, Italian Embassy in Washington, legation in Cairo, National Institute for Export, Office of Economic Affairs, General Office of Political Affairs IV, 22 January 1934, ASMAE, Affari Politici (1931–45), Etiopia, b. 24, fasc. 3, 'Rapporti tra Etiopia e Giappone'.

⁸⁹Mario Pigli, 'La realtà sui rapporti fra il Giappone e l'Etiopia', *Azione coloniale*, undated, ASMAE, Affari Politici (1931–45), Etiopia, b. 24, fasc. 3, 'Rapporti tra Etiopia e Giappone'.

⁹⁰'Kunaishō de mo zensho suru', *Tōkyō nichinichi shimbun*, 30 January 1934, evening edition, p. 1.

⁹¹'Teikoku gikai shugiin', *Kengi iinkaigiroku*, 22 March 1934, p. 16, available at <https://teikokugikai-i.ndl.go.jp/#/detailPDF?minId=006510803X01619340322&page=16&spkNum=161¤t=4>, [accessed 13 January 2025].

Selassie was outraged by the Japanese press's confusing Araya with the Crown Prince.⁹² Reportedly, the much publicized wedding had received little attention in Ethiopia. The cold reaction to the engagement was confirmed by later interviews with Heruy and Haile Selassie. In his later autobiography, the Ethiopian emperor claimed that the Italian press published the 'even worse story' of the marriage between a Japanese princess and the Crown Prince of Ethiopia.⁹³ He did not spare the Japanese press too, which had so enthusiastically received Heruy's delegation in 1931. It had, in fact, written too much and in too romanticized a way about the proposed marriage, provoking Mussolini and worsening Ethiopia's international standing.⁹⁴ In 1935, when asked about the talk of a proposed marriage between a 'Japanese princess' and 'an Ethiopian prince', Heruy, too, burst out: 'Fairy tales! Goodness knows where they sprang from!'⁹⁵

The most disappointed by the outcome of the marriage were, unsurprisingly, those actors to whom the marriage meant a new racial alliance, in clear contrast with their governments' wishes. Kuroda, by now fully aware of her country's aversion to her project, expressed publicly her new-found opposition to Japan's ruling elites: 'I will go to Ethiopia even in the capacity of a private citizen, if the Imperial Household authorities should disapprove.'⁹⁶ Sumioka gave an interview after the announcement of the failed engagement talks, explaining to the press that he had tried to ask both Heruy and the Japanese Ministry of the Imperial Household when Araya would travel to Japan, but he had received no response. However, he did not blame only the Italian government: 'I suspect that other countries may have been pressuring Ethiopia rather than only a certain country.' He also polemically stated that it was 'impossible for Ethiopia to have cancelled the wedding without taking into consideration the desires of the Japanese government', thus claiming that 'there was an air of opposition from the [Japanese] Ministry of Foreign Affairs', accusing it of being 'weak'.⁹⁷

These counter-state actors continued to promote the Ethiopian cause regardless. Educator Itō Kan'ichi (1911–1996), just a few months before Ethiopia's defeat in 1936, continued to stress Ethiopia's similarity to Japan and the country's high status, writing about Ethiopians' 'superior facial features, courageous nature, and good intelligence' among African populations.⁹⁸ Yamauchi kept covering topics of interests from Ethiopia, from architecture to history. Sumioka continued telegraphing slogans such as 'We love Ethiopia'.⁹⁹ Alongside Tōyama, he also founded the 'Friends of Ethiopia Group' to support the African country.¹⁰⁰

⁹²See 'Ethiopia is Promising Market for Japanese', *Japan Times*, 22 April 1934, p. 2; 'Keizai shinshijō toshite kiwamete yūbō', *Asahi shimbun*, 20 April 1934, p. 3.

⁹³Haile Selassie I, *My Life and Ethiopia's Progress, 1892–1937: The Autobiography of Emperor Haile Selassie* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 209.

⁹⁴Joseph Calvitt Clarke, 'An Alliance of the "Coloured" Peoples: Ethiopia and Japan', in *Collision of Empires: Italy's Invasion of Ethiopia and Its International Impact*, (ed.) G. Bruce Strang (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 243.

⁹⁵Ladislas Farago, *Abyssinia on the Eve* (London: Putnam, 1935), p. 128.

⁹⁶'Miss Kuroda will Visit Ethiopia Even Though Trip is Disapproved in Japan', *Japan Times*, 25 February 1934, p. 1.

⁹⁷'Waga gaimushō no yowagoshi ga han'ei?', *Tōkyō nichinichi shimbun*, 3 April 1934, evening edition, p. 1.

⁹⁸Itō Kan'ichi, *Bankoku kokki monogatari* (Tokyo: Nankōsha, 1936), p. 83.

⁹⁹Clarke, *Alliance of the Coloured Peoples*, p. 89.

¹⁰⁰Reto Hofmann, *The Fascist Effect: Japan and Italy, 1915–1952* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 93.

The African American press, largely oblivious to Japan's own imperial project, initially only blamed white and fascist Italy. The 'reason for the disapproval of the Italian government is said to be based upon the fact that an alliance between Ethiopia and Japan would jeopardize the Italian Somaliland [*sic*], a strip of land bordering Ethiopia'.¹⁰¹ Even a year after the cancellation of the engagement, the *Chicago Defender* reported 'objections of Mussolini to union of Japan and Ethiopia', which 'shattered the international planned romance'.¹⁰² The African-American press, hopeful that Japan would not abandon Ethiopia, nourished subsequent rumours about the marriage and a future alliance between the two most important non-white countries. The *Chicago Defender* eagerly announced, at the end of 1936, that 'rumors are persistent now that the couple plan to marry in November. Indication that there is a close relationship between Japan and Ethiopia is shown in the fact that Japan is training 500 Ethiopian pilots'.¹⁰³ Again, the main culprit for the annulled wedding, a 'historic union', was the Italian Duce:

While Abyssinia was making preparations for the wedding, Italy was shaping her military plans for a fascist conquest of Ethiopia. To have allowed two of the oldest empires to be united by sentimental ties would have complicated, if not completely ruined the Italian designs. Mussolini made it clear to Japan that such a union would greatly disturb the cordial relations existing between Italy and Japan, and that his government would look with disfavor upon any further continuance of such negotiations. It is rumored, however, that the prince proposes to marry Mademoiselle Kurade [*sic*] in November of this year. Japan, it was learned from reliable sources, will interpose no objections to the union.¹⁰⁴

Initially convinced that Japan would help Ethiopia in the Second Italo-Ethiopian War because of the failed marriage,¹⁰⁵ the African American press eventually had to begrudgingly accept Japan's official indifference—if not hostility—towards the cause of the coloured races. The *Chicago Defender*, in an article titled 'Japan and the Negro', used scathing words against the former 'ally':

The popular fallacy that Japan—by reason of its non-Nordic classification—is interested in the black races should be discarded by all those who entertain such sentimental bunkum. Throughout their long history the Japanese have systematically avoided any association with the Negro race that might cause the white world to identify them with the descendants of the dark continent. They, like their German partners, look upon Negroes as inferior people.¹⁰⁶

One last attempt to rekindle Ethiopian-Japanese intimacy on the Ethiopian side was made by Daba Birrou, who had participated in the 1931 mission. Sent by Haile

¹⁰¹'Wedding Plans Halted', *Chicago Defender*, 7 April 1934, p. 1.

¹⁰²'Japanese Remember Shattered Romance', *Chicago Defender*, 13 July 1935, p. 1.

¹⁰³'Marriage Rumored Again', *Chicago Defender*, 24 October 1936, p. 1.

¹⁰⁴'Rumors are Revived as Japs Train 500 Ethiop Students', *Chicago Defender*, 24 October 1936, pp. 1-2.

¹⁰⁵'Japanese Remember Shattered Romance'.

¹⁰⁶'Japan and the Negro', *The Chicago Defender*, 16 August 1941, 14.

Selassie to Japan in the autumn of 1935 to obtain help against the Italian menace, he found Sumioka and thousands of non-governmental actors willing to welcome him.¹⁰⁷ However, the Japanese government did not commit itself.¹⁰⁸ In fact, it first informed the Italian embassy of its intention not to send arms, munitions, or soldiers, regardless of (or perhaps precisely because of) Kuroda's and other pro-Ethiopian activists' declarations about the beginning of a racial war which would push Italy and Japan to the verge of a diplomatic incident.¹⁰⁹

Nevertheless, Sumioka and the main promoters of the wedding tried to back Ethiopia after the Italian invasion too. A letter sent to the Italian dictator Mussolini by the Dai Nippon Turan Young Men's Association to protest against the invasion bore the headline 'Arise, all coloured brothers! And slay the white wolf in the Mediterranean which tries to pounce upon the black lamb in East Africa!' The first paragraph of the pamphlet clearly reaffirmed their racial solidarity with Ethiopia, considered a sort of 'honorary' Asian country:¹¹⁰

If it is a theory in anthropology that the world's mankind is to be divided into two big groups, the white and the coloured races, all the coloured peoples in the world with us Japanese included are naturally the brothers of the dark, brown-complexioned Ethiopians. And the rivalry of these two big groups of mankind is a fact that we cannot deny. History proves that this rivalry has always made a cause of the world's racial conflicts. The rivalry between Italy and Ethiopia, therefore, seems to forebode a racial conflict between the whites and the coloured. In other words, Italo-Ethiopian controversy is deemed to be a prelude to the racial war between the whites and the coloured, possibly becoming an incensitive [*sic*] to another World War.¹¹¹

Scholar Hasegawa Satoru aptly recapitulated the contradictory Japanese position at the outbreak of the war, torn between Japan's popular sympathy to non-white peoples and its own anti-Euro-American endeavour:

[Japan] has adopted a wait-and-see (*seikanteki*) attitude [...] Japan is similar to Germany and Italy in its desire to break with the status quo, and [...] in its acute need for overseas development it is similar to Italy, so the Italian position is understandable. On the other hand, when it comes to the question of race, however, we are in a very difficult position, because we cannot agree with Italy's

¹⁰⁷Okakura, '1930-nendai', p. 62.

¹⁰⁸Joseph Calvitt Clarke, 'Dashed Hopes for Support: Daba Birrou's and Shoji Yunosuke's Trip to Japan, 1935', in *Proceedings of the XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, (ed.) Siegbert Uhlig (Hamburg: Harrassowitz, 2006), p. 227.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, p. 230.

¹¹⁰Rogers even reported a racial theory according to which the Ethiopians were Asiatics. Quoted in Taketani, *The Black Pacific Narrative*, p. 213. Additionally, see William Scott, 'The Ethiopian Ethos in African American Thought', *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, Winter/Spring 2004, pp. 41–42.

¹¹¹Letter to Mussolini from the Dai Nippon Turan Young Men's Association, 20 August 1935, ASMAE, Affari Politici (1931–45), Etiopia fondo di guerra, b. 62, fasc. 3, 'Atteggimento del Giappone'.

invasion of Ethiopia, since we ourselves insist on the liberation of Asia from the hands of the white man.¹¹²

Even Sumioka conceded that Italy had an overpopulation problem just like Japan, foretelling the future alliance with Ethiopia's main enemy.¹¹³

It needed some time for the Japanese government and public opinion to realign and view Italy as a more palatable choice for an alliance. Disengaging from Ethiopia did not automatically mean entering into an alliance with Ethiopia's main threat in 1934—Italy—whose relationship with Japan was, in fact, tense. The two governments were at odds regarding Ethiopia and were economic competitors in many other contexts. In addition, the fascist bureaucrats had initially supported China against Japan. As we have seen, the broken engagement at first resulted in diplomatic incidents between the two nations: in Italy, the Japanese embassy needed 200 police officers to deal with the disorder, while in Japan, Ambassador Auriti received insulting letters and death threats.¹¹⁴

In sum, a Japanese alliance with Italy was neither a predestined nor an immediate choice for Japanese bureaucrats and politicians. In fact it was a cautiously pondered decision only finalized after 1936, when Ethiopia began to be more and more associated with Manchuria rather than Japan, as a consequence of both countries distancing themselves from the League of Nations.¹¹⁵ Moved by the very same urge against Anglo-American capitalism that had once joined Japan and Ethiopia, Fascist Italy became another viable ally in Japan's governmental agenda; indeed, a more palatable one. Italy, as a matter of fact, while claiming to be against the Anglo-American world order, did not try to uncouple itself from the basic order of civilization, as it was understood in Japanese ruling circles too: a white nation with the centre of Christianity in its capital, with a role among the 'civilized' countries and a male charismatic leader who sidestepped a female-brokered alliance.¹¹⁶

Conclusions

As Schuyler wrote in 1937, 'Ethiopia was the acid test of Japan's love for the darker peoples', a test that Japan 'failed' in the eyes of the same activists who only a few years

¹¹²See Hasegawa Satoru, *Ura kara mita Ōshū no gaikōsen* (Tokyo: Konnichino mondaisha, 1935), pp. 42–43.

¹¹³Sumioka Tomoyoshi, 'I-e kaisen to Nihonjin oyobi sekai yūshokujinshu no tachiba', in *Tōa no sen'un sekai wo ō: Itarii tachi Ethiopia ōzu*, (ed.) Ōyama Ujirō (Tokyo: Shōsashishi shorin, 1935), pp. 23–24.

¹¹⁴Hofmann, *The Fascist Effect*, pp. 92, 94.

¹¹⁵Similarly, in Italy, Mussolini and many propaganda newspapers initially denounced the Japanese economic dumping, hysterically calling it the 'yellow peril'. From 1936, instead, the image of Japan became associated with perceived virile notions such as *bushidō* and samurai, considered akin to gladiators.

¹¹⁶On the 'Mussolini boom', see Hofmann, *The Fascist Effect*, pp. 38–62. Ethiopia had a male leader too, but an alliance between Japan and Ethiopia could never be divorced from Kuroda's figure in Japanese minds in the immediate aftermath of the events of 1934. Even decades later, in news and programmes about Ethiopia her name would occasionally resurface. See, for instance, 'Lady Once Engaged to Prince of Ethiopia Now Seeking Votes', *Japan Times*, 22 May 1957, p. 3; 'Ai no monogatari', *Asahi shimbun*, 23 July 1967, p. 20; 'Television Program', *Japan Times*, 7 October 1969, p. 5.

earlier were enthusiastic about the archipelago.¹¹⁷ To be sure, popular Japanese fascination with Ethiopia, or as Fujita calls it, the ‘Ethiopia boom’, would have quickly faded out had it not been for Kuroda and Araya.¹¹⁸ Araya’s announcement had prompted the response of some 20 girls in just a month, a phenomenon that puzzled some newspapers. Even worse in the eyes of the Japanese government, the selected candidate belonged to the peerage. Albeit minor nobility, nonetheless Kuroda’s status, coupled with Araya’s inflated credentials, soon blew the matter out of proportion. Despite praising her courage, many did not see why an aristocrat would want to migrate and wondered why a member of a noble family would want to live in a ‘land of black people’ (*kokujin no kuni*).¹¹⁹ Unlike other Japanese women overseas, Kuroda was not forced to leave the country out of poverty. Nevertheless, she had assigned herself the role of pioneer in Ethiopia. Even if Kuroda believed that Ethiopia could welcome Japanese women like South America or Manchuria, it remained a black nation surrounded by white powers, and the Japanese political elite’s acquired notions of Western racial superiority played a part in not backing her project.

It did not help that Kuroda was a woman, as she, in her journey from being an imperial feminist to an unexpected counter-state actor, caused anxiety on account of her gender.¹²⁰ As Kuroda was acutely aware, empire-building, as elsewhere, had always been considered by Japanese policymakers a manly enterprise. A woman—even more so a vocal woman who acted without her family’s approval—could not be the most suitable subject to start a new colony in Ethiopia. The (mostly male) press always identified Kuroda as ‘manly’ to highlight that she deviated from 1930s gendered expectations about women, even after her marriage. When interviewed by the *Shufu no tomo* magazine, the reporter concluded that Kuroda was patient, sympathetic, strong-willed, and, most notably, masculine.¹²¹ Kuroda, while claiming her patriotic role, at the same time challenged patriarchal concepts of familiar authority and womanhood, eventually becoming a ‘problematic woman’¹²² arrested for her supposedly communist activities.¹²³

Despite Kuroda’s later treatment in the press, her engagement represented the pinnacle of Ethiopian-Japanese intimacy. In this article, I elucidated how the idea of an alliance between Ethiopia and Japan was soon enthusiastically welcomed both in Japan and in non-white communities, as an unprecedented relationship unmediated by Western powers. Ultimately, I suggested that this engagement, albeit unrealized, provided an arena for contesting Western-acquired racial assumptions; many Japanese

¹¹⁷Quoted in Taketani, *The Black Pacific Narrative*, p. 79.

¹¹⁸Fujita Midori, *Afurika hakken: Nihon ni okeru Afurikazō no hensen* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2005), p. 178.

¹¹⁹Yamada, *Masukaru no hanayome*, p. 148.

¹²⁰Interestingly, a 1934 account by Ethiopian enthusiast Aminaka Yasuhiro told a reverse story. After the ‘marriage problem’ of Araya and Kuroda, the interest of female Ethiopian noblewomen in Japanese gentlemen was reportedly ‘overflowing’ (*ōitsu*). As this was not mentioned in any other contemporary sources, it is most likely an exaggeration by a pro-Ethiopian activist, but in this new account, the Japanese would be the gentlemen taking African women as wives, testifying to how the colonial narrative was heavily gendered. Aminaka Yasuhiro, *Fugen Echiopiya teikoku no zenbō: senko no hikyō shin-Nichi no yūhō* (Osaka: Osaka tosho, 1934), p. 103.

¹²¹Sugiyama, ‘Mame senkan’, p. 9.

¹²²Suzuki, ‘Mondai ni natta josei no sono go’, p. 181.

¹²³Kanashiki gimei: Kuroda Masako-san no sainan’, *Asahi shimbun*, 25 July 1935, p. 11.

activists saw in Ethiopia (and vice versa) a spiritual brethren race presenting an alternative to the white and Western world order. In stark contrast with sympathy from the general public and intellectuals, the bureaucrats' interest in this union soon faded. On the Japanese side, Ethiopia was simply neither economically nor politically worth pursuing, unlike Fascist Italy later. Araya's announcement and Kuroda's choice thus accelerated the process of governmental detachment from Ethiopia, even as it ignited popular excitement.

The actors who championed this transnational dream of racial equality—Kuroda Masako and Araya Abebe—never met, nor did many Japanese pro-Ethiopian activists ever set foot in Ethiopia.¹²⁴ Nevertheless, the African empire represented in the imagination of many anti-Western groups a vivid fantasy of transnational coloured intimacy. In this article, I have explored a rather neglected alliance that started as a diplomatic possibility and became a non-governmental challenge that hoped to lay the foundations for a world order that would rethink existing racial hierarchies in the 1930s. Future studies could unveil further attempts to build alternative world orders beyond, and at times against, the nation-states and the Western civilization order, as was the case with the short-lived dream of an Ethiopian-Japanese union.

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¹²⁴Sumioka reportedly wished to, but his health was already poor in 1935 (he succumbed to a gastric ulcer in 1943). Kuroda (then Yonekura) Masako took part in donation campaigns to Ethiopia in the mid-1980s after enjoying a political career. She reportedly wrote to Araya when he was exiled in Bath in 1938, but the two never had the chance to meet in person. During the war, Araya lived between Bath and New York, returning to Addis Ababa in 1943. In 1975, due to the Marxist coup in Ethiopia, he and his second wife made a spectacular escape on foot to Kenya, fleeing thence to Washington, DC. See Gebrekidan, *Bond Without Blood*, p. 109; 'Lady Once Engaged to Prince of Ethiopia Now Seeking Votes'; Yamada, *Masukaru no hanayome*, p. 234.