A Japanese Scoundrel’s Skin Game: 
Japanese Economic Penetration of Ethiopia and Diplomatic Complications Before the Second Italo-Ethiopian War

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Between 1927 and 1935, many of Japan’s governmental representatives and private entrepreneurs visited Ethiopia to explore possibilities for expanding commercial and political ties. Among the latter were several con men, including Kitagawa Takashi. Arriving in Ethiopia in 1932, he negotiated for agricultural land concessions, permission for Japanese immigration, and rights to grow medicinal plants including opium. His scams led to diplomatic complications for Addis Ababa and Tokyo, which constrained Ethiopia’s ability in 1935 to rally international support against an Italy bent on war.

Kitagawa Takashi and the Nagasaki Association for Economic Investigation of Ethiopia (Nikkei-sha), 1932-34

As Italy girded for war against Ethiopia in the first half of the 1930s, Emperor Hayle Sellase desperately searched for allies to help defend his country. The Japanese seemed an attractive, potential source of aid. After all, many Ethiopians saw Japan as a non-Western, non-white model for modernization, and Ethiopia’s Japanizers had long encouraged closer relations with the Japanese Empire. Many Japanese, especially the ultranationalists who wished Japan would lead an alliance of the world’s “colored” peoples, favorably responded. Between 1927 and 1935, many governmental representatives and private entrepreneurs visited Ethiopia to explore possibilities for expanding commercial and political ties.

Among the latter visitors were several con men promoting get-rich-quick schemes, and among these hustlers was Kitagawa Takashi, the director of the Nagasaki Association for Economic Investigation of Ethiopia. Founded in 1932 in Nagasaki to conduct import and export trade, the association was more commonly known as Nikkei-sha. A businessman of an “adventurous and speculative type,” Kitagawa’s scams caused a notable international scandal for Addis Ababa and Tokyo, and these diplomatic complications constrained Ethiopia’s ability in 1935 to rally international support against an Italy bent on war.

With three companions, he arrived to a warm welcome in Ethiopia on September 24, 1932. After studying the economic conditions in Addis Ababa for Nikkei-sha, Kitagawa with perhaps four other Japanese ventured into the hinterland by mule caravan carrying samples, including cotton fabrics, patent medicines, sundry goods, and agricultural implements. Hoping to sell this cheap merchandise, Kitagawa also explored the market potential for a permanent business. Although this extra adventure...

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1 Jacksonville University, Jacksonville, Florida.
3 To Ethiopia, 1/18/34: NARA 784.94/3a.
into the interior had nothing to do with Nikkei-sha’s plans, Addis Ababa put an escort of twenty natives at Kitagawa’s disposal. Wherever the caravan visited, local chiefs warmly received it. The trip proved disappointing, however, because the provincial Ethiopians had little cash purchasing power. The group returned to Addis Ababa more-or-less destitute.4

A glib-talking and unscrupulous fixer, Kitagawa negotiated with Ethiopia’s foreign minister, Heruy Welde Sellase, for authorization for Nikkei-sha on the rights to lease more than 12,300,000 acres of land in Ethiopia. They also discussed a permit to grow cotton, tobacco, tea, green tea, rice, wheat, fruit trees, vegetables, and medicinal plants. Nikkei-sha wanted the exclusive right to cultivate some plants, including opium, to make medicines for sale in Ethiopia and for export. Kitagawa, on September 18, likely telegraphed the governor of Nagasaki Prefecture and the Nagasaki Chamber of Commerce reporting that Nikkei-sha had secured a concession of almost 1,500,000 acres with a monopoly for poppy cultivation. He pointed out that if Nagasaki set up an emigration company and provided each man with two and one-half acres, 650,000 Japanese could go to Ethiopia. If the company could open direct trade with Ethiopia and end the existing system of indirect trade mostly through Indian merchants, Japan could increase its business with Ethiopia.5

In September 1933, Tokyo asked Ethiopia to authorize Nikkei-sha to send a survey party in 1934 to search out 12,355,000 acres of wasteland for reclamation. Nikkei-sha proposed that for every thirty-seven acres, Ethiopia should allow one Japanese family to immigrate. Finally, Nikkei-sha asked for almost 2,500 acres near Addis Ababa as an experimental farm to discover what would grow well. Ethiopia agreed to approve lands to grow medicinal plants—apart from prohibited plants—and to discuss later contractual details with permission contingent on final signature of the contracts. Toward the end of September, Japan’s foreign ministry granted the application to rent land in name of Nikkei-sha to cultivate medicinal plants—contingent on a negotiated agreement with Ethiopia.6

Rumors and International Controversy

Kitagawa presented his simple negotiations to the public as though Nikkei-sha and Ethiopia had already signed the contract. Taking the bait, under a provocative title, as was usual for the third page of Japanese newspapers, the Osaka Asahi on September 21 first wrote about rumored concessions for the Japanese to grow opium. This short, fifteen-line story set off a huge, international contretemps.7

That same day, the London Daily Herald published a short article by its Tokyo correspondent, who repeated the Osaka Asahi story. The correspondent claimed that Japan had secured the “sensational capture of land for thousands of emigrants and new markets for her traders in Abyssinia. . . .” He added that Japanese newspapers were

4 Hirota, 9/4/33, 9/28/33; GSK E424 1-3-1; Greene, 1/17/34: NARA 784.94/6; To Ethiopia, 1/18/34: NARA 784.94/3a; Southard, 11/25/33: NARA 784.94/3; Faëber-Ishihara (1998: 14-15). My thanks to Mariko Clarke for translating the Japanese material in this paper.

5 Greene, 1/17/34: NARA 784.94/6; To Ethiopia, 1/18/34: NARA 784.94/3a. Because of the many rumors flying around, this is a difficult story to unravel. Greene, the American military attaché in Tokyo, thought that Kitagawa physically visited the governor in mid-September. Kitagawa did not return until November 4, but it is likely that this communication, which Greene described, was by telegram.


7 To Ethiopia, 1/18/34: NARA 784.94/3a.
celebrating Kitagawa’s triumph in getting Ethiopia to grant Japan concessions on immigration and commerce, 1,600,000 acres of lands suitable for cotton planting, and a monopoly for opium cultivation. The Japanese were forming an emigration organization to populate these lands, and soon there would be “a stream of Japanese moving west.” Exaggerating Kitagawa’s success, the correspondent lamented that Japanese salesmen were finding it easy to open new markets for their products in Ethiopia and that official escorts protected them as they moved around the country selling their goods. The stakes were high. Ethiopia served as a buffer between the vast colonial interests controlled by Britain, France, and Italy, and each held important interests within Ethiopia itself. Japan was challenging all three.8

The Daily Herald article snowballed around the world’s press, which denounced Japan’s economic and political invasion of Ethiopia. The French newspaper, Le Temps, as one example, from September through December published many articles, especially reprinting Italian stories and comments, chiefly those published in Azione Coloniale. Europeans worried about the possibility for Japanese economic and political hegemony in Ethiopia and Ethiopia’s attitude favoring the Japanese.9

Tokyo Investigates and Ethiopia Responds

Fearing diplomatic repercussions, Tokyo took action. The foreign minister sent a telegram on October 4, 1933, to the chargé d’affaires at Port Said, Harada Chuichiro, ordering him to look into Nikkei-sha. Harada spoke about it with Heruy who was passing through Port Said on his way to Greece. Ethiopia’s foreign minister explained that Ethiopia had not yet signed any contract with Nikkei-sha and, until then, the concession would not come into effect. The contract, he stressed, did not include opium growing, and Ethiopia was waiting for Nikkei-sha to clarify its conditions. Heruy added that his dearest wish was that commerce and friendship between Japan and Ethiopia would grow. And while he confessed he had underestimated the reaction of third countries, he was taking no notice of how they were choosing to interpret the affair.10

Meanwhile, Heruy spoke with the Cairo correspondent for the Naples newspaper, Mattino. The foreign minister admitted that a few months earlier several Japanese industrialists in a “private capacity and without any mandate from their Government” had arrived to study commercial possibilities in Ethiopia. Heruy said that Ethiopia was willing to grant 1000 acres for Japan to develop for growing cotton plus more land to cultivate other industrial and commercial plants. Ethiopia wanted, within reasonable limits, the Japanese to build industrial and commercial enterprises on its territory. While admitting that Japanese competition would displace India’s cotton trade with Ethiopia, Heruy wondered why conversations “with our Far Eastern Friends” disturbed Europe. Noting that “Abyssinia is not the enemy of any Power, but wishes to maintain cordial relations with everybody,” Heruy added that diverse discussions were developing that did “not exclude the probability of a new situation in favor of Japan.”11 This statement could not have eased worried Italian minds.

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8 London Daily Herald, Sept. 21, 1933; Military Intelligence, 10/5/33: NARA, 784.94/1; To Ethiopia, 1/18/34: NARA 784.94/3a; “Africa Beware!”: GSK E424 1-3-1; Taura (1995: 151-52); Celarié (1934: 126).
Tokyo continued to examine Kitagawa. A journalist active in Japan’s contacts with Ethiopia, Shoji Yunosuke, reported to the foreign ministry on several scandals surrounding Kitagawa. The ministry asked Suzuki Shintaro, governor of Nagasaki Prefecture, to look into Nikkei-sha. Harada also interviewed Kitagawa in Port Said while on his way back to Japan. According to Harada’s report, Kitagawa said he had gotten from Ethiopia the right to rent 12,355,000 acres. Further, Japanese immigrants would receive almost 370,650 acres, and Japan would receive a monopoly for cultivating cotton, coffee, and other crops and herbs. The potential deal did not include opium cultivation. Governor Suzuki, on the other hand, reported that the deal included a monopoly of opium cultivation as well as almost 1,600,000 acres for rent.12

Unsurprisingly, Harada’s report did not settle the issue. Kuroki Tokitaro, the acting consul in Colombo, Ceylon, also reported on several newspaper articles describing Japanese advances into Ethiopia. In Japan, based on information from Nagasaki, the *Tokyo Nichi Nichi* predicted that with Japanese aid Ethiopia would become a new Brazil. On October 25, 1933, the foreign ministry again ordered Harada to investigate. Harada’s reply came four days later. The day before, he wrote, Heruy had told him that the issues of cotton and medicinal herb cultivation and the land rent were as reported, but Ethiopia had not yet signed a contract. Heruy had assured Harada that he had told Kitagawa that he would study the possibility of granting a lease, if Kitagawa would add to his petition a statement detailing conditions and a draft of the proposed lease. Harada then told Heruy that Europeans were condemning Japan’s advance into world markets, and he feared that opinion would harden. Heruy took a slightly different tack. He said he placed friendship between Japan and Ethiopia on a high level: “How anyone else interprets these issues does not concern me, because I long to develop commerce between Japan and Ethiopia and I pray for improved friendship between the two countries.”13

On November 7, Japan’s representative to the 17th Session of the Opium Advisory Committee in Geneva denied rumors of an Ethiopian concession to Japan to cultivate poppies. These rumors, he admitted, must have alarmed the committee’s members, and he had asked Tokyo to investigate. The representative presented the results to the committee. The problem had begun with the “tendentious” article in the *Daily Herald*, which had repeated the story from the *Asahi*. He quoted from Harada’s report on Heruy’s negotiations with Kitagawa. Since then, the negotiations had made no progress. Ethiopia, a League member, could not allow poppy cultivation, and the manufacture of opium in the empire was illegal. Because of his unsuccessful ventures, Kitagawa found himself without capital, and upset by his complete failure, he wanted “to restore his personal credit.” Having broached the possibility of getting agricultural concessions, Kitagawa had received a “somewhat” favorable welcome. Based on this thin reed, he had sent his telegram of September 18 to pave “the way for a triumphant return to Japan” by securing financial support from the Nagasaki Chamber of Commerce. In other words, Kitagawa’s telegram “was only a fraudulent move by a member of the mission, a young man.” Japan’s representative regretted that “a mere intrigue by an adventurer” had led to unfriendly rumors about Japan, and he hoped he

13 Taura (1995: 153); To Ethiopia, 1/18/34: NARA 784.94/3a.
had reassured the committee and had removed any misunderstanding. He asked the Secretariat to make known this official Japanese denial to the international press.  

Putting together the results of its inquiries, Japan’s foreign ministry concluded that Ethiopia had not made any concessions, that Nikkei-sha lacked both funding and credit, and that Kitagawa had some personal problems. The ministry proved the actual contract differed from the content of the translation made by Nikkei-sha. Further, the lease and the right of cultivation would be effective only after signing the contract, and there was no contract. On November 27, the foreign ministry sent telegrams relaying these conclusions to Japanese ambassadors in England, France, Italy, Germany, and other states having diplomatic establishments in Ethiopia.

The Controversy Widens

In the middle of the brewing controversy, Kitagawa had returned to Japan on November 4, 1933. Arriving at Port Moji at night, Kitagawa proudly talked to newspaper reporters about the contract as if Ethiopia had already confirmed it. The next day Kitagawa received a warm welcome in Nagasaki. On November 8, the Nagasaki Chamber of Commerce and Industry and 130 people welcomed him.

Confirming Harada’s fears and justifying Italy’s concerns, on November 6 and 7, the Morning Post of London launched a campaign denouncing Japan’s commercial machinations in Africa. Specifically, the newspaper reported that Ethiopia had granted a cotton concession to a Japanese consortium. The paper feared that the effects of Ethiopia’s treating with the Japanese might “have far-reaching consequences” and warned that a “long contemplated and carefully planned project of industrial and commercial penetration is now in sight.” The newspaper worried that in moving into Ethiopia, Japan would apply the same energy and ability shown when invading other markets. Japanese advances threatened not just Italy, but Great Britain and France as well. The Azione Colomiale, “a vigorous Fascist newspaper devoted to Italy’s Africa problem,” was emphatically recommending anti-Japanese collaboration among the three. Ethiopia was modernizing, and Hayle Sellase was suspicious of Europeans. Therefore, he was turning to Japan. Italy was already upset that Ethiopia had refused invitations to take part in Italy’s annual International Tripoli Fair, and now Ethiopia was refusing to work with Italy as obligated by treaty. Ethiopia had sent a mission to Germany to buy airplanes, light artillery, and machine guns, “without staying to inquire about Italian aircraft prices.”

Toward the end of November, the United States’ representative in Addis Ababa, Addison Southard, responded to the State Department’s plea for information on the accuracy of the Daily Herald article of September 21. Southard recognized that similar reports, coming mainly from foreign newspapers, had been circulating in Ethiopia for several weeks. His legation had been unable to confirm from either Ethiopian or diplomatic sources that the Japanese had received any such land concessions. He

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14 To Ethiopia, 1/18/34: NARA 784.94/3a.
17 Morning Post, Nov. 7, 1933.
18 Ibid., Nov. 7, 1933.
19 Ibid. Also see To Ethiopia, 11/21/33: NARA 765.94/2; To Ethiopia, 11/21/33: NARA 784.94/1a; To Ethiopia, 11/27/33: NARA 784.94/1b; To Ethiopia, 11/21/33: NARA 884.602/41; Cox, 11/13/33: NARA 841.00/310; Atherton, 12/18/33: NARA 841.00/315; Atherton, 12/18/33: NARA 884.61321/5; Southard, 12/26/33: NARA 784.94/5; and London, 11/9/33: AP Ethiopia b14 f 9.
believed the Japanese had applied to Addis Ababa some months before for a concession of about 495 acres for experimentally growing medicinal plants for sale in Japan. When the Ethiopians discovered the Japanese had proposed to grow opium poppies, however, they deferred action on the application. Southard thought the Ethiopians might eventually grant this small plot of land, but informal inquiry at the foreign ministry had elicited only that the concession was pending. Without mentioning Kitagawa by name, he dismissed his efforts as a “good old ‘skin’ game.”

Then why were the British, French, and Italians competing so hard in Ethiopia against the Japanese? Southard thought national pride and jealousy motivated them more than any conviction of great profits in the offing. Southard added, “The crafty Ethiopian plays on the gullibility of one foreigner or another and thus gets an exaggerated amount of international advertising as to this country’s business potentialities.”

Southard noted that poor trade statistics made it difficult to appraise the true extent of Japanese inroads into Ethiopia, although recently they had won most of the local market for cotton piece goods especially of the coarser varieties. In past eighteen months, he added, a few minor Japanese had come to Ethiopia to explore opportunities, but they had found only disappointment. One had opened a little shop in Addis Ababa for selling samples “of the cheapest kinds of merchandise including mainly cottons, artificial silks, notions, and related knickknack. We hear that the business done to date has been unimportant.”

Southard thought it possible that other enterprises might be pending, but outside the few Ethiopian towns, there were few business opportunities. Undeveloped roads, ineffectual government and courts, an impoverished peasantry, and limited economic development restricted the potential for profit, “unless the Ethiopians offer inducements and liberty of operation which we think improbable.” He estimated the average per capita purchasing power for foreign goods was not more than $1.00 a year and was unlikely to increase soon. Any concessions of the rumored size were too large for the limited Ethiopian market to absorb. Further, the French, Germans, and Belgians had earlier wasted money on cotton-growing experiments. With a “paucity of water and amenable labor,” they had not been able to grow first-class fiber. All foreigners—and Southard confessed he had fallen prey too—for their first few years in country entertained delusions about Ethiopia’s economic potential. Finally, the “arrogance, obstinacy, and grasping of provincial officials” made running any foreign agricultural enterprise “unduly costly.” Not optimistic about Ethiopia’s economic development, Southard concluded that Japan inevitably would find disillusionment.

Southard elaborated on the difficulties the Japanese would face by adding three anecdotes. The enthusiasm developed by Heruy’s 1931 visit to Japan and his exaggerations of Ethiopia’s economic potential had resulted in a Japanese dentist going to Ethiopia. After only a few months, he went broke. He reportedly had said that it was hopeless to expect to make a living in Ethiopia as there were too few who could afford dental attention—and many of those who could, would not pay their bills. Southard editorialized, “Procrastination in paying just financial obligations appears to be a national characteristic of the Ethiopians.” Heruy loaned this dentist enough to

20 Southard, 11/25/33: NARA 784.94/3.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
24 For Heruy’s trip to Japan, see Clarke (2007: 17-28).
pay his steamer fare back to Singapore. Southard turned to salacious gossip for his second anecdote. The Emperor had a Japanese cook, Enomoto Seisaku, at the Imperial Palace. The cook’s wife worked as a masseuse and perhaps rendered as well “more intimate services, to certain Ethiopians.” Finally, Southard had heard that Ethiopia’s emperor was considering employing a Japanese jujitsu expert for his palace soldiers.

Southard had evidence that there were then fewer than eight or ten Japanese in Ethiopia, and none of these were important. Given Ethiopian suspiciousness of any foreign immigration, Southard doubted there was or would be any significant numbers of Japanese going to Ethiopia. Even more, reports in the international press of a “Japanese invasion” had upset the Ethiopians. He doubted they would either make important concessions or allow many to come. They, however, did want a Japanese Legation “to enhance the pride and prestige of their Emperor.” Hayle Selassie felt the public kowtowing of light-skinned foreign diplomats before him raised his position in eyes of his own people: “It is not difficult to imagine the Dejasmatches pridefully remarking, ‘See how even the great Emperor of Japan sends an important representative to bend the knee to our even greater Haile Selassie!’”

Despite Tokyo’s efforts and press protests, more sensational and exaggerated newspaper articles warning of Japan’s economic advance into Ethiopia came out from Germany and Italy. French and British colonial circles expressed concern. *Le Temps* on December 18 published a telegram from its Rome correspondent describing Italian anxieties. Ethiopia, the paper said, intended to favor Japanese enterprises while showing “deliberate hostility toward European economic penetration.” The French paper predicted that Italy would ask for cooperation with Paris and London.

Despite the denials, false rumors continued to fly. America’s embassy in Tokyo initially had reported that Nikkei-sha hoped to send 650,000 emigrants to Ethiopia. In mid-January 1934, America’s military attaché in Tokyo joined in the extravagant descriptions of Japanese inroads into Ethiopia. He also thought, however, that the *Daily Herald* had exaggerated the economic importance of any concessions, monopolies, and any rights and privileges the Japanese may have gotten in Ethiopia. If the concessions had any substance, their importance was political, he added. He described Kitagawa’s mission as one to exploit economic resources, to develop trade, and to open an outlet for Japan’s overflowing population. Mistakenly, the attaché declared that sometime in the summer of 1933, the Ethiopian government had leased to Kitagawa 1,600,000 acres of farmland, suitable for growing Arabian Mocha coffee and cotton. Even at this late date, he argued that the Ethiopian government had also agreed to grant Kitagawa monopoly rights to raise opium poppies.

**Substance to Italian Fears?**

Although exaggerated, Italian fears were not entirely fatuous. In January 1934, Count Luigi Vinci, Italian minister to Ethiopia, got hold of a letter in English from Dr. Yamauchi Masao to Hayle Sellase. Yamauchi had been in Ethiopia for a couple of years and had become a special correspondent of the *Osaka Mainichi*. In the letter, he proposed that the Japanese offer help and loans to Ethiopia to electrify industries and to

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26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
29 *Le Temps*, Dec. 18, 1933; Dawson, 12/20/33: NARA 784.94/2.
30 Grew, 10/3/33: NARA 894.00/70.
31 Grene, 1/17/34: NARA 784.94/6.
build iron works, which would also make weapons. Doubtless putting into focus many Italian fears, Yamauchi wrote: “If your Imperial Majesty may be willing to extend necessary permissions to afford me of an audience on matters of great importance for the ‘Lift up of Ethiopia’, I shall esteem it a great favour.” It continued that, by developing iron works, Ethiopia, “the cradle of civilisation,” would sow the seeds for future greatness. Yamauchi wanted to return to Japan as soon as possible to procure loans. He expected to get this loan “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.” Japan, Yamauchi explained, had refused Ethiopia a loan during Heruy’s visit, because the Japanese did not appreciate “the greatness and wealth of Ethiopia.” Now, he promised, things had changed. He closed by asking for a personal audience in which he could talk details.32

Vinci also forwarded to Rome a copy of an even more ominous letter from Wolde Giorgis, secretary-general of Ethiopia’s foreign ministry, to Toda Masaharu. Dated December 6, 1933, Wolde Giorgis wrote that, after agreeing on the price and quality, Ethiopia would offer its products in exchange for weapons, including heavy and light machine guns, and long and short rifles. Ethiopia would be grateful if, “on your arrival in Japan and after having discussed the matter with the appropriate authorities, you would communicate to us in detail the conditions necessary for properly concluding this matter.”33

Vinci also warned of the imminent arrival in Ethiopia of 170 Japanese, destined for a concession. Further, on January 14 a Japanese journalist, Nanjo Shinichi, arrived. He was to remain in Ethiopia for one month and then continue to London.34

Vinci was wrong on the arrival of Japanese settlers and on the implied threat Nanjo represented. In mid-March, the Osaka Mainichi & Tokyo Nichi Nichi published his story on a three-week hunt into Ethiopia’s hinterland, close to the border with Kenya. Most of the article described “skirmishes” with hippopotamuses. “Little Masao Yamauchi, the only Japanese residing in Ethiopia” accompanied Nanjo on the expedition. Their caravan, proudly displaying the Japanese flag, returned to Addis Ababa on March 6. Nanjo noted that Ethiopians along the route in the capital saluted the flag. Before leaving for his hunt, he had “invited royalties, cabinet ministers, and prominent citizens to a banquet.35

Meanwhile, Kitagawa was finding less success than the Italians feared. In mid-January 1934, the foreign ministry received a report from Governor Suzuki Shintaro that Kitagawa and others had been planning to set up an immigration company with capital investment of about one million yen. They, however, had temporarily suspended plans because of financial problems. On January 20, 1934, Kitagawa went to the International Trade section of the foreign ministry and tried to explain Nikkei-sha’s plan to send twenty technicians with capital of about ¥130,000 to manage an agricultural experimental station of almost 2,500-leased acres. The International Trade section

32 Rome, 1/17/34: AP Etiopia b24 f3. For more on Italian concerns in November 1933, see AP Etiopia b14 f9: Rome, 11/11/33; Istituto Nazionale per L’Esportazione, 11/13/33; Guaranenschelli, 11/15/33; To Istituto Nazionale per L’Esportazione, 11/17/33; Buti, 11/18/33; Vinci, 11/20/33; Vinci, 11/21/33; de Bono, 11/23/33; Vinci, 11/24/33; Guaranenschelli, 11/27/33; Astuto, 11/27/33; and “Documenti sulla penetrazione giapponese in Etiopia,” L’Azione Coloniale, Nov. 16, 1933.
33 Rome, 1/17/34: AP Etiopia b24 f3.
34 Ibid.
35 Osaka Manichi & Tokyo Nichi Nichi, Mar. 11, 1934.
opposed this plan because Ethiopia had not yet confirmed the land concession. Besides, the plan merely provided for an experiment on agricultural management. It was more realistic, said the International Trade section, to send a few people to conduct field tests.36

The International Trade section explained to Governor Suzuki the importance Japan placed on the Nikkei-sha issue. This was Japan’s first effort to advance agriculturally in Ethiopia, and its success or failure would influence Japanese development there. The foreign ministry feared “any negative impression in Ethiopia,” which would reflect on the plan itself as well as the total relationship between Japan and Ethiopia. Ultimately, financially strapped, Nikkei-sha went out of business after only six months.37

Italy’s ambassador on May 9, 1934 called on Japan’s foreign minister. During their fifty-minute conversation, the ambassador emphatically denied press reports that Rome strongly opposed the Nikkei-sha deal, and that Italy, cooperating with other countries, planned to expel Japanese goods from Ethiopia. He also objected to the anti-Italian implications in earlier reports in Japanese newspapers that a “certain power” opposed Japanese investments in Africa.38

Other Japanese Visitors, Business Failures, and an Ethiopian Proposal

Doubtless following up on the promise of Heruy’s visit to Japan, a few Japanese businessmen made their way to Ethiopia. A representative of the Kanegafuchi Spinning Company visited Ethiopia for about a week to look into the demand for cotton piece goods. He also wanted to discuss possibilities for growing cotton in Ethiopia and for building a local spinning mill, but probably entered no negotiations with Ethiopia’s government. On December 22, 1933, another Japanese arrived. A sub-managing partner and general inspector of the Chukyo Trading Company of Nagoya, he tried to run a retail shop in Addis Ababa for distributing Japanese goods. Discouraged, however, by the limited trade, he soon liquidated the business and left.39

Another visitor was Hanyu Chotaro, a businessman from Kamakura. In mid-April 1934 after five-months in Ethiopia, Hanyu publicly praised Ethiopia as a promising market for Japanese goods, but he was more circumspect in private. Having received an “enthusiastic welcome,” he spoke with the emperor, the foreign minister, and other high government officials. He also negotiated “with influential French and Indian businessmen” in Ethiopia. Hanyu granted that Italy, France, and Great Britain had extensive interests in Ethiopia and that despite an agreement between them providing for noninterference in Ethiopia’s domestic affairs, their influence was strong. He noted that Ethiopia’s principal exports were coffee and hides, and their main imports were cotton piece goods. The nation’s purchasing power, however, was low. The five-hundred-mile, French-controlled railway from Djibouti supplied Addis Ababa, where there were no electric lights. Hanyu noted that Ethiopia imported most of its cotton piece goods from Japan, and he suggested that it would be better to market Japanese cotton piece goods through foreign businessmen in Ethiopia than to market the goods themselves. This would “avoid unnecessary competition with the foreign firms.” He continued, “Ethiopia, I believe, promises to be a potential market for Japan, and I will

38  Japan Times, May 9, 1934.
39  Okakura and Kitagawa, (1993: 35-36); Southard, 2/14/34: NARA 784.94/7; Engert, 8/24/35: NARA 784.94/23; George, 3/22/35: NARA 784.94/17; Rome, 1/17/34: AP Ethiopia b24 f3.
advise the Foreign Office to establish either a legation or a consulate in Ethiopia.” He closed by insisting that Ethiopia had not granted 1,200,000 acres to a Japanese. This false report had perplexed both Addis Ababa and Tokyo, and the Ethiopians had asked him to report truthfully on things “as they are.”

Hanyu was correct. Contrary to what the European press was asserting, Japanese activities in Ethiopia were modest. In 1932, fifteen Japanese settled in Ethiopia, and in 1933, seven more arrived. In the summer of 1934, there were only five. By autumn, there were only three Japanese in Addis Ababa, one of whom was in the American Seventh-Day Adventist Hospital where doctors had removed his appendix. The emperor and Heruy had assured Southard that they had granted no concessions to Japanese interests, although they expected the Japanese to open a legation in 1935. Southard concluded that there was no Japanese penetration that his legation could “see, imagine, or hear about.” In 1935, there were only three Japanese in Ethiopia. The others had left Ethiopia after their enterprises had failed. In August 1935, no Japanese shipping company included Djibouti in its list of port calls.

Presumably inspired by Hanyu’s visit, in what appears to be a semi-official letter of early March 1934, Jacob Adol Mar, self-proclaimed friend of Ethiopia’s foreign minister, wrote to Hanyu. He asserted that all “logical thinking” Ethiopians wanted to see the Japanese come to Ethiopia for industrial and commercial purposes. Ethiopia, he wrote, felt squeezed between the colonies of Britain, France, and Italy. He added, “In this critical situation we all hope that the presence of many Japanese may encourage Your Government to give us a political help in difficult circumstances.” He lamented the “regrettable faults” by those in both Ethiopia and Japan, which allowed European powers to oppose mutually friendly relations. The Ethiopians feared that Japanese journalists, manufacturers, and traders knew so little about Ethiopia that new blunders might again trouble relations between Ethiopia and Japan.

Therefore, continued Mar, his friends had suggested that he go to Japan to deliver speeches to build sympathy for Ethiopia. He proposed that he would explain to the foreign ministry the best way to open political relations with Ethiopia and how Japan’s bankers, exporters, and manufacturers could set up successful enterprises. The necessary first step would be to set up an imperial legation in Addis Ababa. Japan could do this cheaply. Detailing a comprehensive economic and commercial plan, Mar wrote that Ethiopia’s government would let him act officially as an adviser for Japan’s legation.

In 1935, Heruy condemned rumors that Japan was settling 200,000 peasants to work on cotton plantations and to become soldiers in case of war. He said there was no Japanese legation and were only four Japanese in all the country. “[O]ur four Japanese guests are little merchants who have built a small shop where they sell Japanese goods to compete with the cheap Czech glassware that the Galli and Somali women like so much. As far as I can tell, this outpost of the Japanese invasion is not doing well, and its owners are thinking of leaving the country.”

Southard agreed. In October 1934, he argued the Ethiopians would let, in a restricted way, the Japanese set up commercial enterprises in Ethiopia—should they offer

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40 *Japan Times*, Apr. 22, 1934; Southard, 2/14/34: NARA 784.94/7.

41 Southard, 10/22/34: NARA 784.94/13.


44 Ibid.

substantial financial and other inducements. The legation, however, did not see much in Ethiopia the Japanese would find commercially or economically attractive. Southard added an important understanding. He insisted the Italians knew through their efficient, local legation that there was no real Japanese penetration and there was no chance there would be in the immediate future. He added that in pursuing its political and economic designs on Ethiopia, Italy needed a foil, an imaginary Japanese penetration based on the flirtations of the last several years between Addis Ababa and Tokyo.46

**Italian Manipulations of Fears of Japanese Incursions into Ethiopia**

As Southard pointed out, the Italians were making good use of the flirtations between Ethiopia and Japan. At the Rome Opera House on March 18, 1934, Mussolini proclaimed Italy’s destiny for expansion. “Italy’s historical objectives,” he said, “have two names: Asia and Africa . . . justified by geography and history.” Italy, after all, could not expand either to the north or to the west. The Duce added that of Europe’s powers, Italy lay the closest to Africa and Asia. He then set before himself and future Italians the completion of Italy’s centuries-old task, territorial expansion, not for its own sake, “but a natural expansion that should lead to collaboration between Italy and the Near East and the Middle East.” This would bring civilization to Asia and Africa. Mussolini declared, “We do not intend to claim either monopolies or privileges.” but, he warned, the satisfied colonial powers “should not try to block on every side the spiritual, political and economic expansion of Fascist Italy.” He then justified his military buildup in Eritrea and Somaliland by denouncing Japanese penetration into Ethiopia and the modernization of Ethiopia’s military with airplanes, howitzers, machine guns, tanks, field artillery. Italy, the Duce claimed, had to arm its colonies enough so they could defend themselves in case Italy should become preoccupied in Europe.47

Explaining why Italy recently had militarily reinforced its colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland, Alessandro Lessona, Under-Secretary of Colonies, in late 1934 clarified Italy’s position in a speech at Naples. Noting the worsening political situation in the Far East, Lessona saw Japan’s danger to Europe in its “birth rate, energy and spirit of sacrifice of the Japanese, the imperious necessity for always seeking new markets. . . . Her pretensions and her force are the axle around which turns all Oriental policy.” He went on, “The more one restrains the Japanese expansion in the East, the more she will try to expand in other sectors and in other continents, as is proved already by Japan’s activity in Ethiopia.” Lessona ominously added that Africa could represent the final objective of Japanese expansion. “To draw the Dark Continent into her own orbit would signify for Japan not so much in acquisition of power, as a means of depriving Europe of the possibility of using Africa for the defense of her civilization.”48

What were the chances for success of such an ambitious proposal? Foreign Minister Heruy had a more realistic sense of the possibilities. When a journalist asked him if Ethiopia had common interests with Japan, the foreign minister replied, “We shall never have an important exchange of trade with Japan, for we have hardly anything that they can buy from us.” Heruy explained that Ethiopia’s main export was coffee, “but the Japanese drink tea. . . .” Japan had no need for Ethiopia’s agricultural goods and skins.

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46 Southard, 10/22/34: NARA 784.94/13.
“We only buy from Japan because her goods are cheap and we have not enough money to pay for the perhaps superior but considerably dearer European and American products.”

The supposed agricultural concession to Kitagawa and other rumored deals between Ethiopia and Japan, despite many denials and obvious facts, continued to rankle the Italians throughout the summer of 1935. One book, published only months before the outbreak of the Italo-Ethiopian War, complained about Japan’s extensive penetration of Ethiopia. In four short years, the author asserted, Japan had gotten in the highlands extending between the valley of the Nile, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean, almost 750,000 acres of fertile land for cultivating cotton. The first contingent of Japanese cotton farmers had already set themselves up. Provocatively, the author asserted that they were young but had brought no women with them, because they were to marry Ethiopian women.

In his memoirs, Emperor Hayle Sellase declared that the Italians were spreading these rumors to rile up fears among the British and French who held neighboring colonies. The Italians knew, the emperor insisted, that Ethiopia had made no such secret treaty or concession. These rumors, nonetheless, seduced not just the London and Paris to violate their national and colonial interests, but even the Soviet Russians to forsake their communist, anti-imperialist ideology to support Italy against an Ethiopia helped by Japan. Without this presumed Japanese threat, it is unlikely that the world’s reaction to Italy’s preparations for war in 1934 and 1935 would have been so muted. Nor would the League of Nations’ response to war begun in October 1935 have been so ineffectual.

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51 Baravelli, (1935: 63-64). For the story of one proposed marriage that did provoke international complications for Ethiopia and Japan, see Clarke (1999: 105-16).
Secondary Literature


