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STUDIES



# ITALIAN COLONIALISM

*Edited by* RUTH BEN-GHIAT *and* MIA FULLER



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# Italian Colonialism

Edited by  
*Ruth Ben-Ghiat*  
and  
*Mia Fuller*

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ITALIAN COLONIALISM

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2005 978-0-312-23649-6

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First published in 2005 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS

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ISBN 978-0-230-60636-4

ISBN 978-1-4039-8158-5 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-4039-8158-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Italian colonialism / Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, editors.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Italy—Colonies—Africa—History. 2. Italy—Colonies—Africa—Administration—History. I. Ben-Ghiat, Ruth. II. Fuller, Mia, 1958—

JV2211.I83 2005

325'.345'096—dc22

2004061771

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: July 2005

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# Acknowledgments

First and foremost, we are thankful to the contributors to this volume, for their co-operation and forbearance. In addition, we are warmly grateful to our spouses, Elliot Jurist and Brien K. Garnand, for their support and advice. Brien K. Garnand also generously created the maps included in the volume. We are, furthermore, indebted to the University Seminars at Columbia University for assistance in preparing the manuscript for publication. Alan Gentile and Stephanie Hom Cary provided outstanding research assistance. Last but not least, we wish to pay homage to the pioneering work of Angelo Del Boca and Giorgio Rochat, who first succeeded in exposing the worst abuses of Italian colonial history, despite bureaucratic stonewalling and a disbelieving Italian public.

The editors jointly translated Italian texts from the original, and are solely responsible for any errors in translation. Essays that originally appeared elsewhere are as follows:

Ali Abdullatif Ahmida's "State and Class Formation and Collaboration in Colonial Libya" is excerpted from his *The Making of Modern Libya: State Formation, Colonization, and Resistance, 1830–1932* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), and has been updated by the author. It is reprinted with permission.

Giulia Barrera's "Patrilinearity, Race, and Identity: The Upbringing of Italo-Eritreans during Italian Colonialism" was excerpted and translated from her "Patrilinearità, razza e identità: l'educazione degli Italo-Eritrei durante il colonialismo italiano (1885–1934)," *Quaderni storici* 37, no. 109 (2002): 21–53, and is reprinted with permission.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat's "The Italian Colonial Cinema: Agendas and Audiences" is excerpted from its original version in *Modern Italy* 8, no. 1 (2003): 49–63, and is reprinted with permission.

Mia Fuller's "Preservation and Self-Absorption: Italian Colonization and the Walled City of Tripoli, Libya" is excerpted from its original version in

*The Journal of North African Studies* 5, no. 4 (2000): 121–154, and is reprinted with permission.

Ruth Iyob’s “Madamismo and Beyond: The Construction of Eritrean Women” is excerpted from its original version in *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 22 (2000): 217–238, and has been updated by the author. It is reprinted with permission.

Nicola Labanca’s “Italian Colonial Internment” was excerpted and translated from his “L’internamento coloniale italiano,” in *I campi di concentramento in Italia*, edited by Costantino Di Sante, 40–67 (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2001), and is reprinted with permission.

Haile Larebo’s “Empire Building and its Limitations: Ethiopia, 1935–1941” is excerpted from his *The Building of an Empire: Italian Land Policy and Practice in Ethiopia, 1935–1941* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), and is reprinted with permission.

Tekeste Negash’s “The Ideology of Colonialism: Educational Policy and Praxis in Eritrea” is excerpted from his *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882–1941: Policies, Praxis, and Impact* (Stockholm: Uppsala University, 1987), and is reprinted with permission.

Giorgio Rochat’s “The Italian Air Force in the Ethiopian War” was excerpted and translated from his “L’aeronautica italiana nella guerra d’Etiopia, 1935–1936,” *Studi piacentini* 7 (1990): 97–124, and is reprinted with permission.

Alberto Sbacchi’s “Poison Gas and Atrocities in the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1936” is excerpted from his *Legacy of Bitterness: Ethiopia and Fascist Italy, 1935–1941*, 55–85 (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1997), and has been updated by the author. It is reprinted with permission.

John L. Wright’s “Mussolini, Libya and the ‘Sword of Islam’ ” was updated by the author from his eponymous article in *The Maghreb Review* 12, nos. 1–2 (1987): 29–33. It is reprinted with permission.

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# Chronology

- 1837 Italian Catholic missionaries begin activity in Eritrea.
- 1861 Political unification of Italy.
- 1869 Rubattino, an Italian shipping company, purchases rights to the bay of Aseb (in the future Eritrea). Within 11 years Rubattino controls the entire bay, its beaches, and outlying islands.
- 1870 Territorial unification of Italy complete with takeover of Rome.
- 1884–1885 Berlin Conference at which 14 countries (including Italy) discussed how to partition Africa into colonial territories.
- 1885 Italian forces occupy Massawa, displacing Egyptian forces, with British assistance.  
Italian diplomatic mission reaches an accord with Abyssinia, stipulating free transport of Abyssinian goods to Massawa.  
Commercial treaty between an independent Italian mission and Sultan Said Bargash of Zanzibar, establishing Italian access to ports on the Somali coast.
- 1887 Italian forces are defeated at Dogali (in the future Eritrea), losing roughly 500 troops; these are subsequently commemorated as *i cinquecento*.  
Francesco Crispi becomes prime minister, with a platform of industrialization and overseas expansion.
- 1888 Italian troops occupy Asmara, and form the first Italian battalion composed of indigenous soldiers (*askari*).
- 1889 The Sultan of Obbia (Somalia) places his Sultanate under Italian protection—and occupation—in exchange for money and arms.  
The Sultan of Mijjertein (Somalia) places his Sultanate under Italian protection—and occupation—in order to continue his long-standing rivalry with the Sultan of Obbia.

Britain sublets the four principal ports of Benadir (southern Somalia) to Italy.

Menelik II is crowned *negus neghesti* (king of kings), with the support of the Italian government. Menelik II and the Italian government sign the treaty of Wichale. According to the Italian version—but not the Amharic version—the treaty allows for exclusive Italian “protection” over northern Ethiopian international trade. Italy then declares an infraction of the Wichale treaty on the part of Menelik II for his direct contacts with France and Germany, and pursues military aggression in the Ethiopian highlands.

- 1890 The Italian government declares Eritrea a colony, naming it “Eritrea” after the classical Greek term for the Red Sea.  
Menelik II protests the Italian interpretation of the Wichale treaty and Italian “pacification” policies (such as the slaughter of Massawa inhabitants).
- 1893 First settlement of Italian farmers in the central highlands of Eritrea.  
Continuing its pattern of indirect rule in Somalia, the Italian government places the Filonardi Company in charge of the Benadir concession. The Benadir ports are officially transferred from Britain to Italy.
- 1894 Chief Bahta Hagos leads a rebellion against the Italians in Eritrea; Italians quash the rebellion.
- 1895 General Oreste Baratieri, the military governor of the Eritrean colony, continues Italian aggression in the highlands. Italians occupy Adigrat, Mekele, and Adwa; they are defeated at Amba Alagi by the troops of *ras* Makonnen.
- 1896 Italians are calamitously defeated at Adwa by Ethiopian troops. The government and the military are held responsible for Italy’s loss of lives and face; Crispi is ousted from power. Treaty of Addis Ababa is signed between Italy and Ethiopia, and Italian prisoners of war are released.  
Filonardi & Co. is replaced by the *Società Anonima Commerciale Italiana per il Benadir* (Anonymous Italian Business Society for the Benadir).
- 1897 A new Italian-Ethiopian commercial treaty is signed.  
Fernando Martini becomes Eritrea’s first civilian governor.
- 1900 Italy obtains a commercial concession in Tianjin (China).

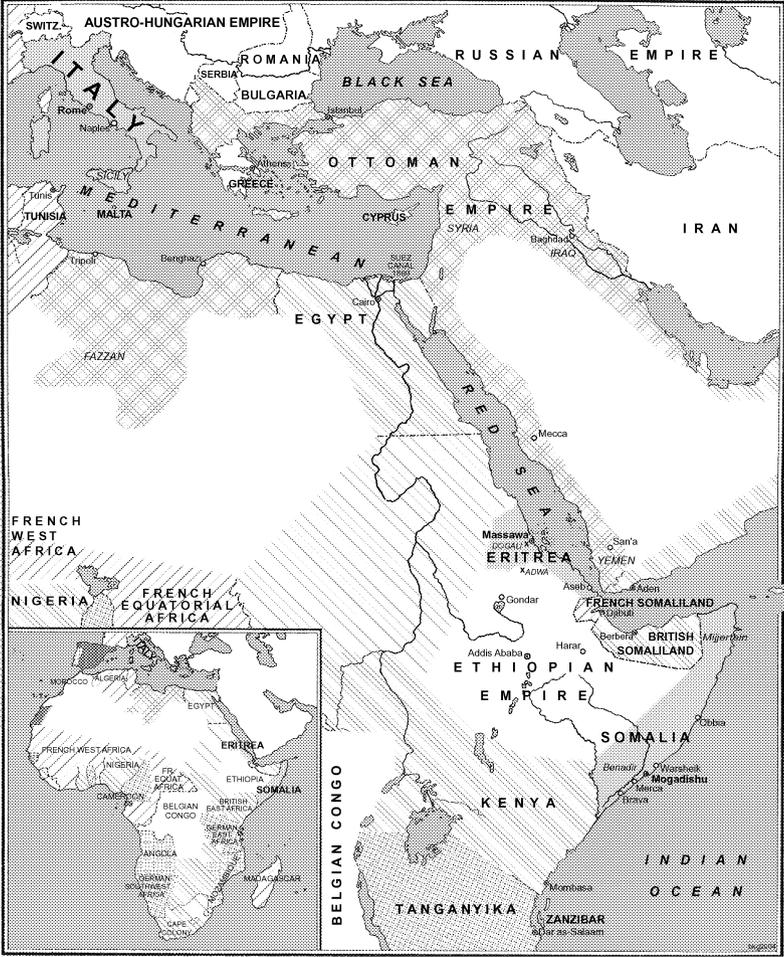
- 1905 Italy purchases the ports of Benadir in Somalia.
- 1906 The *Istituto Coloniale Italiano* (Italian Colonial Institute) is founded in Rome.  
Tripartite Treaty is signed between Britain, France, and Italy, dividing Ethiopia according to the spheres of their respective economic interests.
- 1907 The Bank of Rome opens a branch in Tripoli, under the auspices of the “peaceful penetration” tactics propagated by the Italian government.  
First contingent of Eritrean soldiers (*askari*) dispatched to Somalia.
- 1908 Italian government declares Somalia a colony (consisting of Benadir and its protectorates).  
Italy and Ethiopia sign an agreement delineating the Abyssinia–Somalia border.
- 1909 The *Istituto Agricolo Coloniale Italiano* (Italian Colonial Agriculture Institute) is founded in Florence.
- 1911 Italy declares war on the Ottoman Empire, attacking its province of Tripolitania. Combined Arab and Turkish forces attack Italian troops at Shara Shatt, an oasis near Tripoli.  
Benito Mussolini imprisoned for taking part in demonstrations opposing the invasion of Libya.
- 1912 Italy proclaims unilateral sovereignty over Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, and Italian forces occupy Rhodes and other Dodecanese islands, also Ottoman holdings. An Italo-Turkish peace treaty is signed in Lausanne surrendering the two North African provinces and deeming the Dodecanese Islands a temporary “Possession.”  
Establishment of a new Ministry of the Colonies.  
First *askari* battalion (1,112 Eritrean soldiers) dispatched to Libya.
- 1915 Italy enters World War I.
- 1922–1943 Fascist rule.
- 1923 Giuseppe Volpi, Governor of Tripolitania, begins military campaign to “reconquer” the territory together with General Rodolfo Graziani.  
Italians occupy Corfu, and leave after one month.  
Ethiopia gains membership into the League of Nations.

- 1924 Britain cedes Kismayu (Somalia) to Italy.
- 1925 Italians bombard northern Somalia.
- 1927 Ministry of Colonies declares sovereignty over northern Somalia.
- 1930 *Negus* Tafari is crowned Emperor Haile Selassie I.
- 1931 Italians hang resistance leader ‘Umar al-Mukhtar, defeating the Cyrenaican resistance.
- 1932 Minister of the Colonies Emilio De Bono submits the first plan for the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.
- 1934 Tripolitania and Cyrenaica are unified under the name *Colonia di Libia* (Colony of Libya).
- 1935 Italian troops invade Ethiopia. The League of Nations condemns Italy for assaulting an independent, sovereign nation (and a member of the League of Nations), and imposes economic sanctions against Italy.
- 1936 Haile Selassie I and his family flee Ethiopia. Haile Selassie speaks at the League of Nations to denounce Italian aggression.  
Mussolini proclaims the Italian Empire. Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia are united as one colony, *Africa Orientale Italiana*, or A.O.I. (Italian East Africa).
- 1937 Assassination attempt on viceroy Graziani in Addis Ababa, followed by a massacre of Ethiopians that lasts several days.  
The *Ministero delle Colonie* (Ministry of the Colonies) becomes the *Ministero dell’Africa Italiana* (Ministry of Italian Africa).  
*Unioni miste* (“mixed unions”) between Italians and the colonized are prohibited.  
Italy withdraws from the League of Nations.
- 1938 Fascist proclamation of anti-Semitic Racial Laws.
- 1939 Northern Libya becomes the nineteenth regional district of Italy’s national territory.  
Italy declares colonial rule over Albania.  
Germany and Italy sign the Pact of Steel.
- 1940 Italy enters World War II as a German ally.  
Mussolini begins Italian military campaigns against Greece.
- 1941 Britain gains control of Italian East Africa; Haile Selassie I reenters Ethiopian territory.  
Italy declares war on the Soviet Union and on the United States.

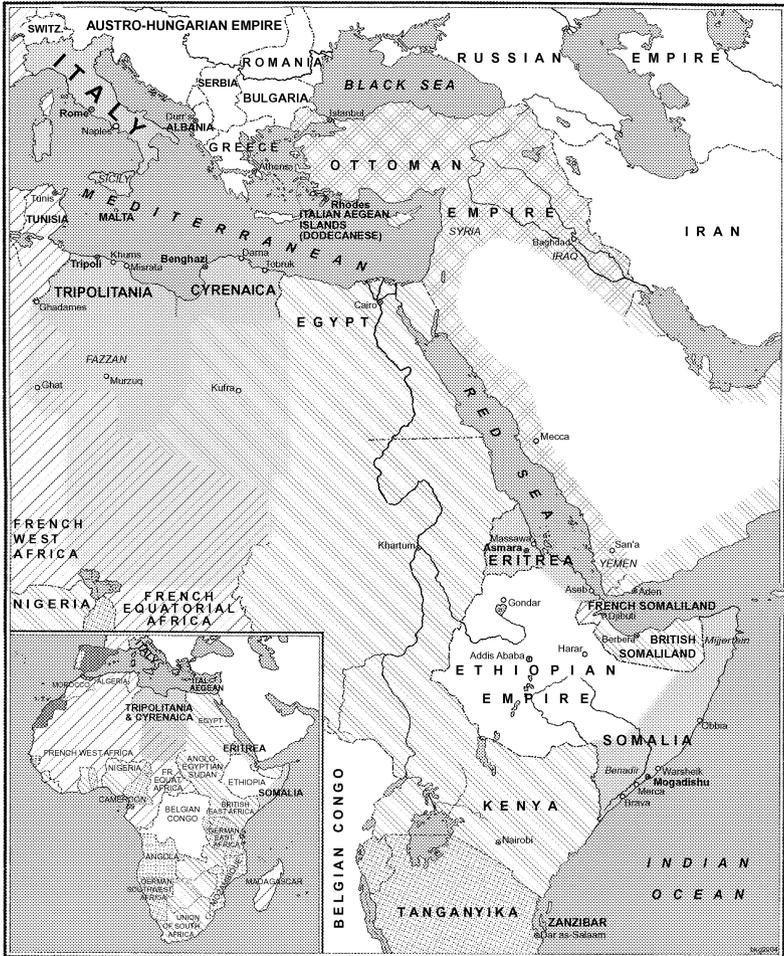
- 1943 Italian forces are defeated in Libya by the British and French. The Fascist Grand Council votes the destitution of Mussolini; the Fascist Party is dissolved; Mussolini is arrested. He is rescued by German parachute troops, and founds a puppet regime (*la Repubblica Sociale Italiana*, or Italian Social Republic) at Salò.  
Allied troops land in Sicily, then on the peninsula.
- 1944 Allied forces liberate Rome and Florence.
- 1945 Mussolini is captured and executed; World War II ends.
- 1947 With the Paris Peace Treaty, Italy abandons claims to all of its former colonies.
- 1948 Somalia is entrusted to Italy in fiduciary administration on behalf of the United Nations.
- 1951–1969 Monarchical rule in independent Libya.
- 1952 Federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia.
- 1960 Somalia becomes independent.
- 1962 Ethiopia declares Eritrea an integral part of the Ethiopian Empire.
- 1969 Colonel Qadhafi leads a coup in Libya, deposing the king.
- 1970 Qadhafi confiscates Italian properties and expels remaining Italians from Libya.
- 1991 Eritrean freedom fighters gain independence from Ethiopia.
- 1997 Italian President Scalfaro visits Addis Ababa.
- 1999 Italian Prime Minister d'Alema visits Tripoli.

## **Editors' Note on Transliterations**

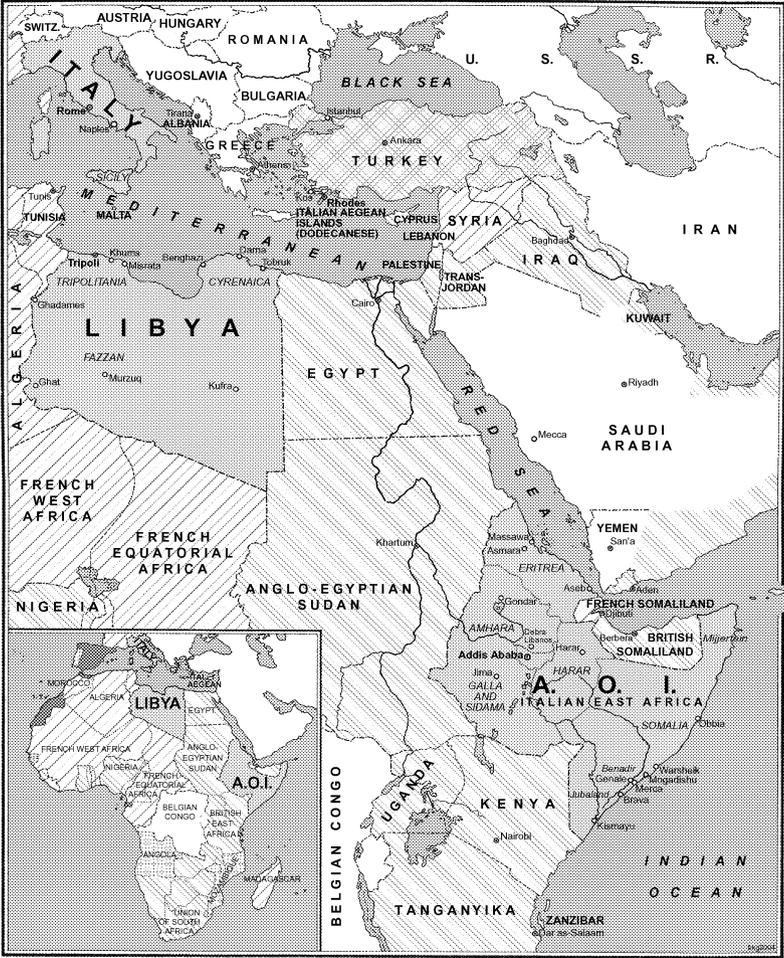
**I**n the case of Arabic place names, we have imposed a certain consistency across all the essays included here. In a few instances, however, we have retained the Italian spelling for Arabic names, in order to distinguish between Italian-made sites (such as hotels in Libya) and postcolonial orthographies. In the case of transliterations from Amharic and Tigrinya, which are notably inconsistent, we have left them as preferred by individual authors.



Italian colonial possessions, 1897 (map by Brien K. Garnand).



Map of Italian colonial possessions, 1913 (map by Brien K. Garnand).



Map of Italian Empire, 1939 (map by Brien K. Garnand).

# Introduction

*Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller*

We designed this book with two goals in mind: to make the subject of Italian colonialism better known among Anglophone students and scholars of international history and European imperialisms, and to facilitate the integration of the history of Italian colonialism into larger narratives of Italian national experience. Once the province of specialists of Italian diplomatic and military history, the study of Italian colonialism now engages social and economic historians, art and architectural historians, literary and film critics, and anthropologists and sociologists.<sup>1</sup> With this expanded disciplinary scope has also come a greater internationalization of the field, as scholars from several continents build on earlier research by historians such as Angelo Del Boca, Giorgio Rochat, and Romain Rainero.<sup>2</sup>

This recent body of work counteracts a “double marginalization”<sup>3</sup> that has long characterized historical studies of Italian colonialism. Mirroring Italy’s generally faint presence in most accounts of modern Europe, Italy’s imperial enterprises have received far too little attention in comparative colonial studies and in histories of the continent. Indeed, until recently Italian colonialism even occupied a marginal place within Italian national histories. With respect to the historiography of Europe, this is not entirely unusual, as the study of the borrowings, reciprocal influences, and parallel developments between metropolises and colonies is a relatively new scholarly development.<sup>4</sup> Yet in the Italian case, the conceptualization of the national and the colonial as separate spheres, and the privileging of the former at the expense of the latter in Italian historical writing, also reflected the particularly vexed history and memory of an imperialism that cost over one hundred thousand lives before it collapsed in the course of fascist Italy’s World War II defeat.

Although Italian colonialism was more restricted in geographical scope and duration than the French and British empires, it had no less an impact on the development of metropolitan conceptions of race, national identity, and geopolitical imaginaries. Indeed, since Italy began acquiring

protectorates (Aseb and Massawa) just a few years after unification in 1870, and since Italy's first national war was a colonial one (the Italo-Turkish War over Libya in 1911–1912), it could be argued that in Italy colonialism was even more central to the construction of nationhood, especially if we consider the crises of government and national confidence provoked by Italy's 1896 defeat by Ethiopian troops at Adwa. During the fascist dictatorship (1922–1943), when Italy consolidated its control of Libya and added Ethiopia and Albania to its Eritrean, Somali, and Dodecanese Islands holdings, colonialism emerged as a key component of the regime's project of unifying Italians. Italian imperialist rhetoric exploited Italy's imperial past even as it asserted Italy's modernity in the face of international (and Italian) perceptions of the Italians as degraded, disorganized, and decidedly unmartial. Mediterranean conquests would also bring about a geopolitical shift: Italy would no longer be on the periphery of a northern-oriented Europe, but at the center of a new supra-continental economic and political order that would hinge on the exploitation of Africa and a network of Italian-controlled ports from the Adriatic Sea to the Red Sea.

Italian colonialism's heavy symbolic burden made the circumstances of its demise all the more crushing for Italians, even though Italy's empire ended not in a groundswell of nationalist revolts by colonized peoples (as was the case of Britain and France) but by military defeat and diplomatic fiat. The Allied powers had taken over Eritrea, Somalia, and Libya as they routed Italian forces in Africa during World War II. Although liberals, leftists, and neo-fascists united after 1945 in a campaign to retain Italy's colonies—a fact that demonstrates empire's national importance for Italians—the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty made these losses official.

The collapse of Italian colonialism in a context of wider military and political defeat, and the fact that the Italian colonies did not undergo any real process of decolonization, had long-term repercussions for how Italian colonial history has been written and remembered. Presumably as a result of such an anticlimactic ending to Italy's half-century of colonial rule, the end of Italian imperialism occasioned little public reflection. Instead, political elites and colonial circles generated a culture of “myths, suppressions [and] denials”<sup>5</sup> that managed the image of the still-desired lost object—Italy's empire—by suppressing knowledge of Italian atrocities and fostering strains of popular memory that perpetrated images of Italian colonizers as benign. Control of the colonial archives was central to this state-sanctioned historical “revisionism,” and only a handful of individuals—most of them ex-colonial functionaries—were allowed to consult state-held archival materials on Italian colonialism for much of the postwar period.<sup>6</sup> Scholars of other colonialisms have in recent years problematized

the notion of the archive as a complete source of knowledge about the past, highlighting the inequities of power encoded in its silences and omissions.<sup>7</sup> In the Italian case, gaining access to documents was so problematic as to postpone such discussions of the politics of interpretation. This “archiving” of colonialism by the Italian state enacts the construction of collective memory as famously defined by Ernest Renan: a willed remembering to forget.<sup>8</sup> In the Italian case, it is not only colonialism’s many violences that were *rimosse*—to use the Italian word that means both removal and repression—but also the shame of its defeat.

Although the chapters in this volume are not explicitly comparative, one purpose of this collection is to identify the similarities and differences between Italian and other colonialisms. What can the Italian case tell us about imperialism in general? What, on the other hand, defines Italian colonialism as unique? Italy’s colonial enterprises never approached the scope of profits realized by either France or Britain. A closer comparison might be sought with Germany and Japan: the three countries, all monarchies, had in common—late national unification and industrialization, a heavy reliance on outmigration, and the formation of fascist antiliberal and anticommunist movements after the disappointments of World War I.<sup>9</sup>

Poverty certainly was a hallmark of Italian colonialism. Paltry state resources hampered the realization of ambitious land settlement schemes and limited private investment in the colonies. The Italian state was almost bankrupt when the Italian Empire was officially proclaimed in 1936. This same poverty fueled anxieties of well-to-do Italians about their country’s backwardness with respect to other European powers, making the maintenance of authority and prestige central concerns. For Italian believers in colonialism, empire promised an escape route from a subordinate international position and a means of advertising Italian power and modernity. Yet Italian elites and colonial functionaries also worried constantly that Italian colonists were themselves too unschooled and subaltern to command effectively. In these obsessive concerns about prestige and image lies the particularity of the Italian “civilizing mission,” which was directed as much toward Italian colonizers as toward the colonized.<sup>10</sup>

Poverty, finally, had also made Italy a nation of emigrants since the country’s unification, sending millions not only to North and South America, but also to French colonial territories, especially nearby Tunisia. Until the early 1930s, in fact, more Italians lived under French than Italian imperial rule.<sup>11</sup> During both the liberal and the fascist periods, ideas of “demographic colonization” (using colonies to resettle large numbers of Italians who could not find work at home, thereby stemming the flow of Italians abroad) found fortune as a distinctively Italian solution to imperial practice and ideology. The colonial endeavors of this diasporic state thus

invite analyses that go beyond the linear interchanges of colony–metropole and the paradigms of national history to encompass exchanges among European colonial territories and within regional and inter-regional economies.

Popular and official memory alike has tended to present Italians as “different” among European colonizers in another important manner: with respect to their attitude toward, and aptitude for, violence. The persistence of stereotypes of Italians as more humane and less martial than other European peoples, together with the difficulties in accessing both Italian and African archival collections, have contributed to a grave general underestimation of Italian colonial repression.<sup>12</sup> Yet during the colonial era, the Italian state attained a notable primacy in military aggressions: the world’s first military use of airpower and aerial bombardments (during the 1911–1912 Italo-Turkish war); the first country to widely use gases in violation of the 1925 Gas Protocol (in Libya and Eritrea in the 1920s, in Ethiopia in the late 1930s); the first European country to wage a large-scale war after World War I (the Ethiopian invasion); and the first Western European country in the twentieth century to employ genocidal tactics outside of the context of world war (in the late 1920s and early 1930s, in the Cyrenaica region of Libya, through a combination of mass population transfers, forced marches, and mass detention in concentration camps). From the Dodecanese Islands to Libya, to Eritrea, the Italian state’s colonial holdings were testing grounds for strategies of governance and repression that would characterize Italian domestic and occupied territories during World War II.<sup>13</sup> In sum, Italy’s heavy uses of chemical and aerial warfare, and the deeply destabilizing effects of the Ethiopian invasion, beg a reevaluation of the country’s role in the history of twentieth-century European warfare and international relations.

Finally, Italian history reads differently with Italian colonialism as part of its narrative. Spanning both liberal and fascist periods, Italian colonialism illuminates issues of continuity and rupture between democracy and dictatorship. Studying the conquest and governance of Italy’s colonies also provides a fuller understanding of the fascist regime. Certainly, Italian colonial violence and repression, which ranged from old-fashioned savageries (decapitations, castrations, and the burning and razing of civilian quarters) to industrial killing methods (aerial gas bombings, open-grave executions, concentration camps), evinces the totalitarian nature of Mussolini’s state. At the same time, the colonial sphere makes clear the limitations of fascist interventions. The huge expansion of bureaucratic offices and procedures during the dictatorship made for crossed communications and redundancy. The Italian colonial corps’ ignorance of local cultures and languages obstructed the implementation of policy on the

ground, as did long-standing patterns among Italians of ignoring or distrusting the edicts of a state that many perceived as lacking in legitimacy. Finally, even during the dictatorship, Italian colonialism engaged most Italians only at the level of imagination. In the early 1930s, out of a population of thirty million, fewer than forty-five thousand Italians lived in the colonies. While the colonies attracted adventurers, idealists, and the very impoverished, real knowledge of colonial conditions among Italians was restricted by fascist censorship and propaganda. Indeed, some settlers returned to the metropole, disillusioned by the low return on their labor and the difficulties of colonial existence.<sup>14</sup>

These divergences between the intentions and the outcomes of colonial governance, and between projects of dominance and the realities of colonial life, should not be taken to mean that Italian colonialism was ineffectual. Italian colonial society resembled all European colonial orders in being unsystematic, ambivalent, and at times even self-defeating in its practices of governance. It was also shaped by daily engagements between rulers and the ruled. Several of the essays in this book emphasize that Italian colonial policies evolved in dialogue with the actions and aspirations of colonial subjects, especially with regard to measures that incited collaboration and reacted to contestation. As recent research presented here and elsewhere suggests, exploring the mechanisms of reciprocity and exploitation that defined the relationships of colonial intermediaries such as notables *askari* (natives who served in the Italian colonial army), and *madamas* (East African women who cohabited with Italian men) with Italian colonizers clarifies both the specificities of Italian colonialism and its affinities with other systems of imperial rule.<sup>15</sup>

Our aim to present as many aspects of, and approaches to, Italian colonialism as possible dictated our decision to make this book less a conventional volume of collected essays than an anthology that represents work from a variety of disciplines, generations, and geographical areas. While we make no claims to have rendered Italian imperialism completely—Italy's relatively small-scale settlements and agricultural developments in Somalia, its 1900 acquisition of a commercial outpost in Tianjin, China, and its 1939 occupation of Albania are not discussed here<sup>16</sup>—we have included essays on the colonial territories that most occupied Italians' attention and attracted the highest numbers of Italian settlers, from Italy's earliest colony—Eritrea—to Libya, the Dodecanese Islands, and the target of its most ambitious colonial undertaking, Ethiopia. *Italian Colonialism* also exposes readers to scholarship that has never before been published in English: six of the twenty contributions have been translated from the original Italian.

The book is divided into five thematic sections. Part I, Conquest, examines the range of strategies and technologies Italian governments

used in their quest for colonial possession. David Atkinson's chapter on the role of geography and geopolitics in the construction of "Italian Africa" shows how exploration, cartography, and scientific survey facilitated conquest both on the ground and at the level of national imaginaries. Nicola Labanca discusses the phenomenon of colonial internment, which was until very recently little known and less studied. He argues that the grim concentration camps of Cyrenaica, to which almost half of the population of Eastern Libya was deported at the end of the 1920s, can only be understood in their proper context, the history of colonial deportation and confinement dating from the liberal period. Both Labanca's and Atkinson's chapters span the liberal and fascist periods, offering considerations on continuities and changes from democracy to dictatorship. The next two chapters in this section, instead, focus on the conquest tactics used in the Ethiopian War of 1935–1936. Giorgio Rochat reveals the central role the Italian Air Force played in the invasion and occupation. His chapter corrects a longtime neglect of the subject that derived in part from a reluctance to delve into the Air Force's involvement in gas and other bombings that continued for years after the proclamation of victory and Empire in May 1936. Alberto Sbacchi focuses on the devastation caused by Italy's use of chemical weapons in the Ethiopian War and its destabilizing effects on international relations. Both Rochat and Sbacchi note that after World War II the Italian government denied that gas had ever been used in Africa. A formal admission of the deployment of chemical weapons in colonial wars came only in 1995.<sup>17</sup>

Part II of the book—Colonization—begins with a chapter by Ali Abdullatif Ahmida that examines state and class formation in colonial Libya from Ottoman through Italian rule. Ahmida questions postcolonial Libyan historiography's reticence to explore the range of Libyan engagements with Italians during the thirty years of Italian occupation, arguing that Libyan collaboration and resistance can only be comprehended with reference to issues of state formation and political economy. Federico Cresti examines agricultural settlement initiatives in Libya's Cyrenaica region in the early 1930s. Based on documents from the recently discovered archives of the Agency for the Colonization of Cyrenaica (*Ente per la Colonizzazione della Cirenaica*), Cresti's contribution sheds light on the material conditions of life in these early settlements and on the financial and other constraints that impeded their expansion. In the final chapter of Part II, Haile Larebo looks at the vagaries of Italian empire building in Ethiopia, namely the factors (from Ethiopian resistance to misguided Italian trade policies to an inefficient colonial bureaucracy) that complicated the implementation of colonial policy, especially in the domains of demographic colonization, racial segregation, and economic exploitation.

Part III, *Practices and Ideologies*, begins with a chapter by Giulia Barrera on how Italian attitudes toward Italo-Eritreans (children of mixed unions) evolved from the liberal through the fascist periods. Many of these children's Italian fathers, as well as their Eritrean mothers, considered their offspring to be Italian on the basis of a strictly patrilineal view of descent. Barrera's analysis underscores how beliefs about paternity determined perceptions of "race," and illuminates the complexities of Italo-Eritreans' conflicted membership in postcolonial Eritrean society. Tekeste Negash addresses education policies in Eritrea. Using sources that range from Italian textbooks published in Eritrea to documents from Italian colonial archives, he describes how limiting the education of Eritreans furthered Italian agendas of racial separation and prevented the formation of an Eritrean intellectual elite. The next two pieces in this section concentrate on Libya. John L. Wright writes about Mussolini's 1937 visit to Libya and the politics of religion and spectacle that surrounded his acceptance of the "Sword of Islam." The elaborately staged ceremony sent a message to colonial and international audiences: proclaiming Mussolini to be a patron and protector of Muslims communicated fascism's bid to compete with the British and French for influence in the Middle East and Mediterranean regions. Mia Fuller approaches the colonial engagement with local culture in the context of urban planning. In comparison to French interventions elsewhere in North Africa, Fuller shows that Italian policies concerning Tripoli's old walled city were relatively noninterventionist. Assuming that Tripoli was a familiar environment due to its partly Roman past and its morphological resemblance to many cities in Italy itself, administrators remained largely indifferent to Tripoli's more obviously "foreign" traits, leaving them untouched—and preserving much of the old city, almost by accident.

The chapters in Part IV—*Representations*—all focus on the fascist period, when the colonies became important templates for the elaboration of an Italian national image that evoked both Italy's modernity and its weighty historic and cultural patrimony. Cristina Lombardi-Diop's essay considers the autobiographical and fictional writings of Italian women who traveled to colonial Africa. She sees these texts as sites for the definition of a vision of female modernity that corresponded neither to fascist metropolitan models of femininity nor to male-authored "Orientalist" visions. Krystyna von Henneberg's contribution on the Tripoli Trade Fair argues that it constituted an example of a "hybrid" civic space that encouraged the interaction of different racial and ethnic groups, but on terms established by and for the colonial regime. The architecture and layout of the Fair present a compendium of ideal resolutions to the problems of reconciling the national and the indigenous, the modern and the

traditional, and agendas of separation and control with the appearance of benevolent rule. Brian L. McLaren examines the architecture of tourism in Libya and the creation of a “Mediterranean” identity for public consumption by means of designs for hotels that interpreted indigenous sources through a contemporary lens. He highlights how, in modernizing Libya while preserving its culture, Italians were also advertising their own historically grounded contemporary ethos. In the last chapter in this section, Ruth Ben-Ghiat analyzes Italian colonial cinema and photography. She contends that reconstructing the circumstances of the production and consumption of colonial images can yield insights into the daily interactions of Italians and Africans and the psychological climates and social fabrics of Italian colonial society.

Part V, *Legacies*, begins with two studies on Libya. Angelo Del Boca explores the reasons for the selective amnesia that has marked public and official memory about Italian colonialism, and examines the Italian government’s failure to recognize its moral and material obligations toward Libya in particular. Muhammad Jerary, director of the Libyan Studies Center in Tripoli, takes up Del Boca’s discussion of Libyan requests for reparations in greater detail. The Center’s unique large-scale projects of oral history and scientific research have been crucial in documenting Libyan memories from that thirty-year period, and in assessing the extent of social, psychological, environmental, economic, and political damages from the Italian occupation. Irma Taddia’s contribution further engages methodologies of oral history as a means of reconstructing memories of Italian colonialism. Her interviews with both Italians and East Africans about their experiences during the colonial era highlight how responses to colonialism have depended on local contexts, individual conceptions, and political contingencies that proved troubling for colonizers and the formerly colonized to evoke even decades later. Nicholas Doumanis’s chapter on how Dodecanesians recall the Italian occupation of the Dodecanese Islands highlights the ambivalence and reticence that mark remembrances about Italian colonialism. For many Dodecanesians, reconstructing what Doumanis calls “the subaltern experience” has proved particularly difficult; many have preferred to remember the benevolent aspects of Italian colonization. The final chapter of the volume, by Ruth Iyob, examines the images of *madamas* during colonialism and the social constructions of Eritrean women in the current postindependence era. Like Giulia Barrera, Iyob addresses what Ann Laura Stoler has termed “the affective grid of colonial politics”<sup>18</sup> in relationships between Italian men and Eritrean women. Yet Iyob writes from the perspective of contemporary Eritrean society, and her examination of *madamismo* argues that strong patriarchal traditions in Eritrea have favored the continuing circulation

of images of the Eritrean woman as docile and obliging, overwriting depictions of the Eritrean female guerrilla warriors who contributed so heavily to the country's long battle for independence from Ethiopia.

Iyob's account of how continuities in attitudes toward women have transcended political changes in Eritrea from the colonial to the postcolonial era is just one example of how the study of imperialism and its legacies requires us to question prevailing periodizations and analytical frameworks. Italian colonialism is no exception. Spanning parliamentary rule and dictatorship, the study of Italian colonialism illuminates elements of both continuity and rupture in Italian history—as does its afterlife, tinged as it is with repressed memory and nostalgia. Italy's colonial history also exposes Italy's particular structural and attitudinal characteristics, from its diasporic patterns to its anxieties about subalternity. It is our hope that this volume will provide Anglophone readers with a resource for the study of Italian colonialism, while stimulating further research and offering more accessible international foundations for future comparative work.

### Notes

1. Examples of this work can be found in special journal issues devoted to Italian colonialism: *Quaderni storici* 109, no. 1 (2002); *Modern Italy* 8, no. 1 (2003); and the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 8, no. 3 (2003); and in edited volumes such as Patrizia Palumbo, ed., *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Gianluca Gabrielli, ed., *L'Africa in giardino. Appunti sulla costruzione dell'immaginario coloniale* (Anzola dell'Emilia: Zanini, 1998); Enrico Castelli and David Laurenzi, eds., *Permanenze e metamorfosi dell'immaginario coloniale in Italia* (Perugia: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2000); and Enrico Castelli, ed., *Immagini e colonie* (Rome: Museo Nazionale delle Arti e Tradizioni Popolari, 2000).
2. See Roberto Battaglia, *La prima guerra d'Africa* (Turin: Einaudi, 1958); Romain Rainero, *I primi tentativi di colonizzazione agricola e di popolamento dell'Eritrea (1890–1895)* (Milan: Marzorati, 1960), and *L'anticolonialismo italiano da Assab ad Adua* (Milan: Edizioni di Comunità, 1971); Angelo Del Boca, *La guerra d'Abissinia, 1935–1941* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1966), *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*, 4 vols. (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1976–1984), *Gli Italiani in Libia*, 2 vols. (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1986–1988), and *L'Africa nella coscienza degli Italiani* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1992); Angelo Del Boca, ed., *Le guerre coloniali del fascismo* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1991), *I gas di Mussolini: Il fascismo e la guerra d'Etiopia* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1996), and *Adua: Le ragioni di una sconfitta* (Rome: Laterza, 1997); Robert L. Hess, *Italian Colonialism in Somalia* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1966); Jean-Louis Miège, *L'impérialisme colonial italien de 1870 à nos jours* (Paris: Enseignement Supérieur, 1968); Luigi Preti, *Impero fascista, africani ed ebrei* (Milan: Mursia, 1968); Giorgio Rochat, *Militari e politici nella preparazione della campagna d'Etiopia. Studio e documenti*,

1932–1936 (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1971), *Il colonialismo italiano* (Turin: Loescher, 1973), and *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia. Studi militari 1921–1939* (Paese, Treviso: Pagus, 1991); Claudio G. Segrè, *Fourth Shore. The Italian Colonization of Libya* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974); Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (New York: Viking Press, 1976); Richard J. B. Bosworth, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers: Italian Foreign Policy Before the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Luigi Goglia and Fabio Grassi, eds., *Il colonialismo italiano da Adua all'Impero* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1981); Cesare Marongiu Buonaiuti, *Politica e religione nel colonialismo italiano, 1882–1941* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1982); Francesco Surdich, ed., *L'esplorazione italiana dell'Africa* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1982); Marta Petricioli, *L'Italia in Asia Minore. Equilibrio mediterraneo e ambizioni imperialiste alla vigilia della prima guerra mondiale* (Florence: Sansoni, 1983); Alberto Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini. Fascism and the Colonial Experience* (London: Zed Books, 1985), and *Legacy of Bitterness: Ethiopia and Fascist Italy, 1935–1941* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1997); Irma Taddia, *L'Eritrea—colonia, 1890–1952: Paesaggi, strutture, uomini del colonialismo* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1986); Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882–1941: Policies, Praxis, and Impact* (Stockholm: Uppsala University, 1987); Yemane Mesghenna, *Italian Colonialism: A Case Study of Eritrea, 1869–1934. Motive, Praxis and Result* (Lund, Sweden: University of Lund, 1988); Alberto Aquarone and Ludovica De Courten, *Dopo Adua: Politica e amministrazione coloniale* (Rome: Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali, 1989); Alessandro Triulzi, ed., *L'Africa dall'immaginario alle immagini. Scritti e immagini dell'Africa nei fondi della Biblioteca Reale* (Turin: Il Salone del Libro, 1989); Timothy W. Childs, *Italo-Turkish Diplomacy and the War over Libya, 1911–1912* (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1990); Giampaolo Calchi Novati, *Fra Mediterraneo e Mar Rosso: Momenti di politica italiana in Africa attraverso il colonialismo* (Rome: Istituto Italo-Africano, 1992); Nicola Labanca, ed., *L'Africa in vetrina. Storie di musei e di esposizioni coloniali in Italia* (Paese, Treviso: Pagus, 1992), and *Un nodo. Immagini e documenti sulla repressione coloniale italiana in Libia* (Manduria: Lacaita, 2002); Nicola Labanca, *In marcia verso Adua* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), and *Oltremare. Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002); Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya. State Formation, Colonization, and Resistance, 1830–1932* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994); Haile Larebo, *The Building of an Empire: Italian Land Policy and Practice in Ethiopia, 1935–1941* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Fabienne Le Houérou, *L'épopée des soldats de Mussolini en Abyssinie, 1936–1938: Les "ensablés"* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994); Federico Cresti, *Oasi di italianità. La Libia della colonizzazione agraria tra fascismo, guerra e indipendenza* (Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1996); Carla Ghezzi, ed., *Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana. Atti del convegno (Taormina-Messina, 23–29 October 1989)*, 2 vols. (Rome: Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali, Ufficio centrale per i beni archivistici, 1996); Anna Baldinetti, *Orientalismo e colonialismo: La ricerca di consenso in Egitto per l'impresa della Libia* (Rome: Istituto per l'Oriente, 1997), and Anna Baldinetti, ed.,

- Modern and Contemporary Libya: Sources and Historiographies* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 2003); Gustavo Ottolenghi, *Gli italiani e il colonialismo. I campi di detenzione italiani in Africa* (Milan: SugarCo, 1997); Barbara Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi. Antropologia, discorso giuridico e politiche sessuali interrazziali nella colonia Eritrea 1890–1941* (Naples: Liguori, 1998), and *Etnografia e colonialismo. L'Eritrea e l'Etiopia di Alberto Pollera, 1873–1939* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001); Federica Guazzini, *Le ragioni di un confine coloniale: Eritrea 1898–1908* (Turin: L'Harmattan Italia, 1999); Nicola Labanca and Pierluigi Venuta, eds., *Un colonialismo, due sponde del Mediterraneo. Atti del seminario di studi storici italo-libici (Siena-Pistoia, 13–14 gennaio 2000)* (Pistoia: Edizioni C.R.T., 2000); and Francesco Sulpizi and Salaheddin Hasan Sury, eds., *Gli esiliati libici nel periodo coloniale* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 2002).
3. See on this point Jacqueline Andall, Derek Duncan, and Charles Burdett, "Introduction," *Modern Italy* 8, no. 1 (2003): 5–7.
  4. For instance, Paul Rabinow, *French Modern. Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire. Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Patricia Morton, *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).
  5. The phrase is Angelo Del Boca's, from his "The Myths, Suppressions, Denials, and Defaults of Italian Colonialism," in Palumbo, *A Place in the Sun*, 17–36. On how Italians remember Italian colonialism, see Irma Taddia, *La memoria dell'Impero. Autobiografie d'Africa Orientale* (Lacaita: Manduria, 1998); Angelo Del Boca, "Il mancato dibattito sul colonialismo," in *L'Africa nella coscienza degli Italiani. Miti, memorie, errori, sconfitte*, 111–127 (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1992); Alessandro Triulzi, "L'Africa come icona," in *Adua. Le ragioni di una sconfitta*, ed. Angelo Del Boca, 285–281 (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1997); and Krystyna von Henneberg, "Monuments, Public Space and the Memory of Empire in Modern Italy," *History and Memory* 16, no. 1 (2004): 37–85.
  6. The Comitato per la Documentazione dell'Opera dell'Italia in Africa published a series of volumes titled *L'Italia in Africa*, selectively lauding Italian "achievements" in the colonies.
  7. See Tony Ballantyne, "Rereading the Archive and Opening up the Nation-State: Colonial Knowledge in South Asia (and Beyond)," in *After the Imperial Turn. Thinking with and through the Nation*, ed. Antoinette Burton, 102–124 (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2003); also see Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents. Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 271.
  8. Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?" (1882), in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha, 8–22 (New York: Routledge, 1990).
  9. Marina Tesoro, ed., *Monarchia, tradizione, identità nazionale. Germania, Giappone, e Italia tra Ottocento e Novecento* (Milan: Mondadori, 2004).
  10. For this argument see Jane Schneider, ed., *Italy's Southern Question: Orientalism in One Country* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998); John Dickie,

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Part I

# Conquest

# Constructing Italian Africa: Geography and Geopolitics

*David Atkinson*

## Geographies and Imperialisms

In recent years the discipline of geography has undergone a thorough engagement with some of the murkier aspects of its histories. In particular, impelled by broader interdisciplinary poststructural and postcolonial initiatives, geographers have interrogated and exposed ever more of the entwined and entangled complicities between geographical knowledges and European imperialisms.<sup>1</sup> Elements of this work found inspiration in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which not only reworked western understandings of the colonial encounter and its construction of colonial Others, but also recognized the profound roles of geographical knowledges within these complex and shifting matrices of power, culture, and knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, when Said revisited these themes in *Culture and Imperialism*, he was still more explicit:

Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.<sup>3</sup>

Said's critics highlight his problematic meta-narratives of Orient and Occident, his persistent attachment to Enlightenment humanism, and his overstated textualism that risks eliding the materiality of imperialism as it impacted upon lived experiences in different colonies. But despite these problems his work—and the postcolonial debates that ensued—gestured toward the connections between abstract geographical imaginations about

difference, Otherness, and hierarchies of civilization, and how these categories were materialized in the strictures and regulations of actual colonial spaces.

While exposing its shifting, heterogeneous forms, subsequent debate also revealed geography's central roles in constituting, legitimating, and sustaining colonialism in numerous contexts. "Scientific" geographical practices allowed the *practical* construction of colonial territory as lands previously "unknown" to western imaginations were transformed into legible, knowable places with their dimensions, topographies, and characteristics enshrined in cartography and scientific survey. Thereafter, these spaces could be bounded and ordered along European lines, with established strategies of surveillance and control enabling easier governance. Maps thus became imperial artifacts *par excellence*: demonstrably "scientific" documents that embraced the complexities and nuances of entire regions in a single image. They simultaneously enabled the practical appropriation of territory, while also remaking space imaginatively as a colonial domain—represented and named within European epistemologies.<sup>4</sup> In addition, imperialism was frequently legitimated by formal geographical scholarship that attributed racial difference to climate and environment, or that justified spatial expansionism with geopolitical theories.

Yet European imperialism also relied upon collective geographical imaginations to naturalize the colonial order. To these ends, *popular* geographical knowledges also communicated the racial and civilizational Otherness of overseas territories to domestic audiences. Nineteenth-century "heroic explorers," for example, often returned sensational accounts of exotic lands, strange peoples and plentiful resources to eager audiences. Mass media like newspapers, novels, exhibitions, and cinema reinforced these geographical imaginations in everyday contexts, while parallel messages suffused educational curricula too. Admittedly, these protean forms of geography often coexisted uneasily; their imperial service also attracted sustained critique from some. Nevertheless, increasingly weighty evidence supports the thorough imbrication of geography and imperialism in Western colonialisms throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Despite a wider reluctance to address colonialism within Italian academia and society, some useful discussion of these connections has emerged recently.<sup>5</sup> This chapter continues this project by outlining three episodes that illustrate some of the ways that Italian geographers mobilized their science to serve imperialism.

### Geographical Societies and Exploration

Although Italian colonialism was relatively belated compared with other European powers, it was nevertheless subject to the broader trends that

characterized the late nineteenth century. The aggressive “new” imperialism of the 1860s–1880s, for instance, prompted a “geographical mania” that saw over eighty geographical societies being founded in Europe’s leading cities. These were curious organizations composed of differing constituencies with divergent priorities. Home to amateur, dilettante scientific interests, they also accommodated Europe’s emergent professional scientists. Of greater significance were the social, political, and economic elites who dominated these bodies. In major provincial and port cities these were usually financiers and merchants who coveted commercial information about trade routes, resource bases, and new markets. In capital cities, they were populated by diplomats, politicians, military officers, and the aristocracy: privileged groups with financial or political overseas interests who fashioned the societies as powerful lobbies and a locus of “expertise” on foreign lands. Finally, the societies also supplied prestige, advice, and funds for the field-scientists and explorers who actually undertook the overseas travel, bringing back accounts of previously “unknown” places. Arguably these societies were “centers of calculation”: nodes for the ordering and dissemination of the swaths of information returned to imperial centers by the business of travel, trade, and empire.<sup>6</sup> And given all this, “Geography” was a contested, shifting terrain: a category constantly renegotiated between its interwoven factions. Equally, it was seldom divorced from the political and economic agendas of its dominant constituencies. All these trends were replicated in Italy.

Italy’s foremost society, the *Società Geografica Italiana* (SGI) was founded in Florence in 1867 and followed the government to Rome when it became the new capital in 1871. The membership was dominated by diplomatic, military, and political interests and just 11 percent of this “scientific” organization were university geographers.<sup>7</sup> Although some academics advocated studies of Italy’s unequal development ahead of overseas expeditions, the heady nationalism of the period and its membership ensured that the society was soon central to the colonial lobby and it articulated expansionist sentiments from the start. The society’s first expedition was dispatched to the Sciotel valley of Abyssinia in 1870. Nominally a scientific study of botanical and geological phenomena, the party also monitored Italian settlers in the region and marked broader Italian interests in East Africa.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, when politician Cesare Correnti became President in 1873, the society reflected his ardent expansionism by sponsoring further expeditions to Tunisia (1875), Morocco (1876), and Abyssinia (1876–1891). When colonial aspirations shifted more firmly toward East Africa in the 1880s, the society organized exploration in Somaliland (1891 and 1892–1893), and more missions to Abyssinia (1895–1897). These expeditions compiled maps and surveys, undertook scientific research, and reported their

findings extensively in the society's *Bollettino*. By so doing, they transformed unknown spaces into more legible territories, with resources, topographies, and populations recorded and archived in Rome. They also mirrored Italy's developing colonial ambitions and were fuelled by a society embedded firmly within the colonial lobby.

At the same time provincial interest groups also established geographical societies to promote their concerns. In the 1880s, the Neapolitan elite supported the *Società Africana d'Italia*, which agitated for colonies in North and East Africa to serve as markets for Italian commerce and destinations for the South's endemic emigration. Milanese industrialists, merchants, and financiers, in tune with the period's aggressive expansionism and the commercial priorities of the northern middle classes, founded the *Società d'esplorazione commerciale* in 1879. This concentrated upon exploration for economic ends: establishing a trading post at Benghazi in 1880, and sending further expeditions into Cyrenaica to assess commercial and agricultural opportunities. Societies also appeared in Turin, Genoa, and Bari and were similarly responsive to the agendas of local elites. Critically though, it was through the organization of expeditions to potential colonies and the dissemination of knowledge about these places that the societies helped create the practical and imaginative possibilities for subsequent colonialism.

This relationship was not uncontested and not every "geographer" rushed to the colonial cause. Isolated voices critiqued these imperial ties and both the *Società di studi geografici*, established in Florence in 1895, and the Genoa-based journal *La cultura geografica* (from 1899), articulated anticolonial sentiments and urged attention for Italy's chronic domestic problems before colonial adventurism.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the SGI's intimate connections with colonialism became more problematic after the disastrous 1895–1896 African campaign and its ignominious *dénouement* at Adwa. The backlash worsened when the society's "scientific" expedition to the Sciotel was massacred in 1897 and its political and expansionist agenda was exposed. With the colonial lobby muted, academic geographers were permitted to assert more scholarly, "scientific" criteria within the society.

However, the colonial lobby's latent strength resurfaced in the early twentieth century and again enlisted geography. The small yet highly influential *Istituto Coloniale Italiano* was founded in 1906 by leading colonial advocates and geographers, with inaugural president Antonio di San Giuliano serving simultaneously as Foreign Minister and President of the SGI. In his 1906 presidential address, he reorientated the SGI toward colonialism too. Moreover, when growing expansionist fervor found expression in the 1911 invasions of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, many academic geographers discarded any residual pretence to impartiality.

They justified the invasions intellectually and introduced Italy's new territories to the public through lectures and accessible writings. The SGI also recommenced its expeditions program, but now in more open partnership with the colonial authorities: in 1913, its geographical survey of Italian Somalia helped facilitate subsequent colonialism as, once again, exploration became entwined with Italy's imperial project.<sup>10</sup> Unsurprisingly, such practices found further favor under fascism.

### Fascism and Geographical Survey

In retrospect, fascism's cults of nation, war, and ancient Roman imperialism inevitably signaled the expansionist sentiments of the regime. Amidst this context, fascism demonstrated an appreciation of geography from the start. In May 1924, when fascist rule remained far from secure, Mussolini made time to visit the SGI and award the organization an increased government subsidy. These connections were drawn still closer with the appointment of Luigi Federzoni, leader of the Nationalist Association and president of the SGI, as Colonial Minister. In turn Federzoni's ministerial successor, Pietro Lanza di Scalea, likewise inherited the SGI presidency, and by 1932 the Society's officers were nominated directly by the Education Minister. Similarly, the traditionally marginal discipline of geography became established within the national curriculum and the first university degrees were introduced.<sup>11</sup> This persistent coalition of bellicose regime, colonial lobby, and geography played a significant but often overlooked role in fascist expansionism. By illustration, the next section focuses upon geography's roles in the construction of Italian *Libia*: describing how the *ricognquista* of the Fezzan was followed by the swift application of geographical survey to domesticate the "unknown" Saharan interior and transform it into a comprehensible, governable colonial domain.

Other European imperial powers had long used cartography and survey to transform *terrae incognitae* into measured and knowable territory: rendering space governable in practical terms as well as capturing it symbolically. The nineteenth-century surveys of French North Africa, for example, were vast interdisciplinary endeavors that scrutinized lands through all appropriate sciences—ignoring and eliding indigenous knowledges in favor of reconstructing colonies intellectually in languages intelligible to "modern" Europeans. In a similar vein, under liberal colonialism Eritrea and Italian Somalia were mapped extensively as soon as conditions allowed, and this process accelerated under fascism. By the mid-1930s, newly conquered terrain in Libya and Ethiopia prompted dedicated training courses to supply the demand for colonial cartographers. And such was their rate of production that by 1942, for example, the

*Istituto Geografico Militare* (IGM), Italy's state cartographic organization, had mapped almost the entire 1.8 million square kilometers of Libya at a scale of 1:400,000.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the politics of these practices were acknowledged explicitly. The IGM's roles in the 1935–1936 Abyssinian campaign were celebrated in a publication that outlined the organization's contributions to preparatory planning and espionage, to the military campaign, and finally, to the imposition of Italian authority.<sup>13</sup> The account also emphasized cartography's standing as a modern, "western" scientific practice—the application of which distinguished the colonizers from the "uncivilized" colonized.

The early-1930s Italian interdisciplinary surveys of the Fezzan employed similar strategies.<sup>14</sup> Geographical traditions of exploration and field-science and the SGI's close links to the state ensured that the society was enrolled to organize them practically. In addition, geography's coordinating intellectual role was theorized explicitly. In 1928 Nicola Vachelli—director of the IGM, president-elect of the SGI, and crucial conduit to the regime—explained that "colonial science" entailed the collection, organization, and dissemination of all relevant knowledge about overseas territories to develop Italy's colonial consciousness, reinforce the colonial domain, and enable effective governance. Moreover, this "science" required

an accurate and profound knowledge of geographical environments and the societies inhabiting them. Our goal must be to form our own colonial and foreign [policies] supported from a scientific basis by geography, which understood in its true sense encompasses the physical, the political, and the economic all at once, and is a sure and realistic basis for coping with physical and human problems.<sup>15</sup>

Between 1932 and 1936 Vachelli's "colonial science" found full reign as the SGI dispatched seven expeditions to the Fezzan and the Southwest of the colony. Both regions had been recently "pacified" by Italian forces, so the opportunity to emphasize Italy's "civilizing" presence through the practice of science was not wasted. As the SGI president boasted in his introduction to the 700-page survey report in 1937:

In the spring of 1931, immediately after our victorious troops had occupied the furthest edges of Libyan soil, the Royal Geographical Society . . . laid the indispensable foundation of every civilising mission [when it] immediately proceeded with the scientific exploration of the most remote and least known regions of this vast North African dominion.<sup>16</sup>

The first expedition of 1932 collected physical anthropological and ethnographic data; the second, in 1933, dealt with botany and prehistory.

The third and fifth, in 1933 and 1934, addressed biology, clinical medicine, parasitology, and zoology. The fourth, in 1933, dealt with archaeology and ancient history, while the sixth and seventh, in 1935 and 1936, studied human and physical geography. The final report also included detailed studies of geology, morphology, climate, and water-resources, vegetation and fauna, communications, economic resources, languages, demography, and settlement patterns. Such was the scope of this survey and its synoptic gaze, and this sprawling alliance was held together under the interdisciplinary umbrella of geography, with the SGI also responsible for the publication and dissemination of the results. For Del Boca, this close collaboration between geographers and colonial authorities made Libya “an authentic laboratory” of geographical science.<sup>17</sup>

Human geographers also contributed their specific expertise to this program while also reflecting its broader political ends. Their analyses of social structures, demographic conditions, and settlement patterns, for example, were inflected through the frameworks of European racial science and their recurrent concern was to identify, isolate, and rank the region’s races. The so-called “pure races” like the nomadic Tuareg or Tebu were distinguished from the more hybrid, intermixed—and by implication, degenerate—*Fezzanesi* using criteria like familial structures and housing types or, following the physiological laws of racial sciences, cranial capacities and cephalic indices. Yet unsurprisingly, even “racially pure” groups such as the Tuareg were categorized as “degenerate” and “inferior” to Europeans—one geographer reporting that:

although now free, the *Fezzanesi*, who were living like slaves until relatively recently, still effectively remain in a state of servitude. In fact, given the particular composition of the Arab family, it is impossible for the *Fezzanesi* to live independently because of their indolent nature [and] their poverty.<sup>18</sup>

The implication that racial difference is natural, enduring, and identifiable, and that indigenous peoples cannot govern themselves is a familiar trope of colonial discourse. But for most of the survey report, these sentiments were masked by neutral, “scientific” prose. For Del Boca, this is because the surveys were indeed motivated largely by “scientific questions,” whereas Gambi thinks they served as nothing more than smokescreens for the region’s violent conquest.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, I suggest that it was this self-conscious *practice* and application of “science” that both rendered the region more governable, and also legitimated the Italian presence symbolically. Certainly, the roles of geographers and their technologies in the construction of colonial *Libia* are clear, as once more the geographers proved dependable servants of empire.

### Popular Geographies and Geopolitics

Through the later 1930s fascism's support for geography grew steadily stronger. Although overseas exploration and surveys continued, my final example considers the ways the regime and its geographers focused increasingly on a domestic agenda of developing more sophisticated colonial and geographical imaginations that would make Italians better *imperial* citizens. Central to this project was Giuseppe Bottai, Education Minister from 1936 to 1943 and initiator of several cultural initiatives to mold a future fascist society. A consistent element of his program involved promoting geography and the "geographical imagination" to an "imperial level" appropriate to Italy's reborn imperial status.<sup>20</sup> To this end, geography was embedded deeper within the national curriculum and Bottai addressed academic geographers in 1937 and 1941 to outline their patriotic roles: "Geographical understanding is now so much more necessary in that, to understand is to control, and scientific control is the optimum, indispensable introduction to all other forms of control," he announced. Moreover: "the geographical imagination of the population has to be disseminated through schools" for geography had to be "at the center of the study of a modern nation: where it can perform its duty to co-ordinate and unify every aspect of human knowledge in the understanding of the earth."<sup>21</sup>

Persuading Italians whose traditional affiliations were local and regional to identify with Italy and its imperial agenda meant mobilizing the increasing range of geographical media that circulated through everyday lives. School textbooks—censored and controlled by the state from the mid-1930s—were enlisted to this end. All elementary schoolchildren, for example, encountered Luigi Filippo De Magistris's 1938 *L'impero d'Italia*—presented as a factual geography of the colonies, but also an heroic account of Italian expansion and the moral and material advantages it brought.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile the Italian Colonial Institute—now enmeshed within the regime as the *Istituto Coloniale Fascista*—focused upon diffusing a wider "colonial imagination" among adults. Local branches provided lectures, films, and classes to "afterwork" programs, organized public exhibitions, and published newspapers, pamphlets, and magazines. Similarly, the *Touring Club Italiano*, the patriotic organization that celebrated Italian landscapes through maps and guidebooks, was also drawn closer to the regime and renamed the *Consociazione Turistica Italiana* in 1937. It augmented its popular magazine *Vie d'Italia* with the *Vie del Mondo* to extend its 490,000 members' horizons to foreign lands. In 1938 each member also received a 640-page *Guidebook to East Africa* that claimed to develop among Italians an understanding of the empire. Inside the front

cover, a map highlighted the extent of Italian territory—straddling the Mediterranean and extending into East Africa.<sup>23</sup> Inevitably, the SGI was also involved. It was granted further state subsidies to produce booklets about regions coveted by Italy or recently incorporated into the empire, and its learned journal was reoriented to a wider audience as *The Countries of the World (I paesi del mondo)*. In its first issue, Bottai outlined once more geography's significance to the expansionist state. Here was a science offering a unified understanding of the modern world, he explained, but also one that disseminated these understandings to the masses, because "an empire demands a vivid and widespread geographical consciousness in the population."<sup>24</sup>

For their part, many academic geographers augmented the popular media with studies and theories that legitimated Italian expansionism intellectually. The most explicit example developed in 1930s Trieste, where political geographers Giorgio Roletto and Ernesto Massi observed the wider politicization of European geography and particularly the emergence of German *Geopolitik*—a combination of geographical and political perspectives that claimed to explain the instabilities of the modern world and to justify renewed German expansionism.<sup>25</sup> As ardent nationalists and convinced Fascists, these *triestini* developed an *Italian* version of geopolitics to serve Mussolini's imperialism. This geographical approach also claimed a synthesizing perspective—encompassing economic, political, social, and colonial aspects of the contemporary world simultaneously. Moreover, they argued, this radical and privileged insight offered the state valuable counsel due to its unique analytical and explanatory potential. It also promised "scientific" arguments for Italian expansionism. Their project resonated with Bottai's agenda; with his support, the geographers launched the monthly journal *Geopolitica* (1939–1942). Bottai penned the opening pages, demanding that *Geopolitica* develop the "political conscience" of geography.<sup>26</sup> In turn, Roletto and Massi outlined their Italian geopolitics: with its interdisciplinary breadth and a unique comprehension of international relations, it was, they wrote: "the geographical doctrine of empire [that would] express in the most complete manner the geographical, political, and imperial imaginations of the Italian people."<sup>27</sup>

*Geopolitica's* articles were global in their coverage and mainly concerned with the dynamic interaction of space, territory, geography, and politics. Colonial matters were a recurrent theme—particularly the unequal distribution of colonial land and resources among the European powers. To Massi, geopolitics demanded that Italy was awarded a fairer share of colonial wealth because, in contrast to the British and French empires, Italy was population-rich but resource-poor. Additionally, Italian hegemony over the Mediterranean was supported by "geopolitical

realities” like the concentration of Italians around its shores and Italy’s geographical position linking Europe to Africa, as well as historical Italian colonialism in the region and “spiritual” criteria such as the “will to empire.”<sup>28</sup> Ironically it was through such *anti*-geographical arguments—homogenizing entire regions and eliding differences beneath the reductionist understandings of geopolitics—that *Geopolitica* presumed to inform Italian colonial imaginations. With a print run of a thousand copies, *Geopolitica* could never influence collective imaginations as much as Touring Club guides or school textbooks. However in combination, this range of formal and more popular geographies ensured that accounts of the empire and international matters were seldom far from ordinary Italians; together they made the construction of collective colonial and geographical imaginations—at the “imperial level” Bottai demanded—far more feasible.

### Conclusion

While *Geopolitica* can be understood as perhaps the most politicized expression of the enduring relationship between geography and the Italian state, the three case studies discussed here demonstrate the range of services geographers offered expansionism. Whether through exploration, cartography, or scientific survey, geographical practices and knowledges helped make colonial expansionism more feasible practically, and enabled the construction of colonial spaces that could be ruled more effectively. Equally, geography saw imperial service at home: naturalizing and legitimating the racial difference that underpinned colonialism, providing spatial theories to support expansionism, or persuading Italians to conceptualize themselves as an “imperial people.” There was clear overlap between these different forms of geography and some geographers moved among them with ease. Equally, there was some contestation and debate about geography’s roles and remit. But generally, as in other European nations, geographical knowledges were at the forefront of the phalanx of sciences, technologies, and practices engaged by the expansionist state: the “Queen of all imperial sciences” to one commentator.<sup>29</sup> Given all this, a greater recognition of geography’s multiple roles contributes a further angle to our rethinking of Italian colonialism.

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# Italian Colonial Internment

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The sixteen concentration camps that operated in the Cyrenaica region of Libya between 1930 and 1933 constitute one of the grimmest aspects of Italian colonial history.<sup>1</sup> About four-fifths of the nomadic and seminomadic populations of the Marmarica and of the Jabal-Akhdar plateau (almost half the population of eastern Libya) were forced to settle in the camps. Only inhabitants of the coast and the foothills of the Jabal plateau were spared this fate, as they were less involved with anticolonial resistance struggles. The camps were mandated by Mussolini, who advocated brutal treatment of the native populations; theorized and ordered by colonial governor Pietro Badoglio; cruelly organized by troop commander Rodolfo Graziani; implemented by nameless Italian soldiers and civilians (and other colonial subjects); seen by the few Italians who were settling in “green and pacified” Cyrenaica; denounced by the antifascist press and democratic public opinion; and criticized by the rising nationalist and pan-Islamist anticolonial movements. While Italian colonialism should not be reduced to its practices of confinement,<sup>2</sup> we cannot dismiss these camps in a few sentences, or even ignore them, as certain colonial histories have done.<sup>3</sup>

Even in comparison with the means of repression adopted by other European powers during an imperial age that, as Andrzej Kaminski has argued, produced the first modern concentration camps,<sup>4</sup> the Italian camps emerge as unusually brutal.<sup>5</sup> They beg for historical explanation and an understanding of their policies and norms, the institutions that produced them, and the individuals who created them. The history of the ordinary management of power, including judicial policies and practices, prison systems and native policies, should be reconstructed starting from the concrete management of relationships with traditional leaders and local populations.<sup>6</sup> Depicting the camps as the result of an isolated episode of “excess,” or as manifestations of a lawless colonial society in which

unregulated and sadistic violence was the norm,<sup>7</sup> obscures the regulations, behaviors, and practices that actually structured colonial power, and the extent to which colonial society developed in direct relationship with the political, penal, institutional, and legal history of the metropole. This essay considers the history of internment in Italian colonies starting from the liberal period, and argues that Libyan camps during fascism were both an exacerbation of prior tendencies, and a qualitative departure from what Italian colonial governments had imposed to date.

Colonial internment aimed first and foremost at segregating colonized populations within the Italian colonies. Before examining this policy, let us consider contemporary debates about deporting metropolitan subjects to the colonies, for this ostensibly separate history of exclusion is interwoven with the progression of colonial internment. Authoritarian proposals to deport and confine political dissenters and common criminals overseas had circulated in liberal Italy since the country's 1860 unification.<sup>8</sup> Juridical debate in subsequent decades had focused on colonial deportation, which developed coterminously with house arrest, introduced in an attempt to stem internal brigandage.<sup>9</sup> That the issue of colonial deportation was raised when Italy did not yet possess any overseas territories is a measure of its appeal as a solution to perceived threats to "public order," such as the oppositional politics of anarchists and socialists and the increased visibility of the "dangerous classes." If the principal reasons spurring liberal Italy's first colonial enterprises were diplomatic prestige and commercial advantage, the possibilities of creating penal colonies must also be factored in as incentives for colonial expansion. Indeed, the topic of colonial deportation arises throughout the liberal era. It appears in the penal code reforms proposed in 1874–1875 by the ruling Historic Right bloc within the liberal political class; in Prime Minister Crispi's projects of 1894, when the government declared a state of emergency in response to peasant uprisings, and was also undertaking the state's first penetration into East Africa; and in conservative attempts to enact a "strong government" at the expense of Parliament in 1898.<sup>10</sup> Its continuing appeal is confirmed by its inclusion in the fascist public security laws of 1926 and 1931.

Various objections to deportation were raised, as when legal historian Luigi Lucchini defined it in 1891 as a "juridical monster," a "solution worse than the problem," and one that would yield "scarce results" at best.<sup>11</sup> There was also a potential political cost in the realm of public opinion. But ultimately, such objections carried little weight with the liberal governments: they may have reduced their recourse to this form of detention, yet they did not eliminate it from the arsenal of repressive measures available to those in power. All of this demonstrates that the liberal ruling class was not

adverse to a colonialism that utilized detention. It also points out the limits of political and juridical liberalism in liberal Italy, and the persistence of a double standard between liberal law codes and public security laws.<sup>12</sup> Finally, it highlights a certain intertwining of the apparently distinct issues of colonies and deportation. Once colonies were seen as places to which to deport Italians, it was not hard to imagine a similar use of such territories for colonized populations. In fact, for the first two decades of its colonial occupation, Eritrea was treated as both an internment destination for Italians sentenced to political confinement, and as a territory whose dissident inhabitants were subject to deportation themselves.

The propensity of Italians to use a heavy hand in matters of colonial order, and the links between expansionist politics and discussions about colonial deportation must be taken into account when debating whether Italian colonialism manifested authoritarian inclinations from its inception. It is sufficient to point out the autonomy Rome conceded to the colonies; the strong role the armed forces played there; the undisputed recourse to military tribunals and summary executions; the denial of individual rights and of defense in legal proceedings; and the segregation and confinement, from early on, of individuals suspected of resisting Italian occupation. The abuse of these practices is attested to by the creation of a Commission of Inquiry in 1891, whose role was to examine relations between military and civilian authorities in Massawa. Its findings led to an important criminal proceeding.<sup>13</sup>

The speed with which protagonists of Italy's early colonial enterprises resorted to internment as a means of governance is telling. Repressive institutions had been deployed in Eritrea despite the absence of any armed anticolonial resistance: The anti-Italian actions of Eritreans—to the extent that there were any—were isolated events. Nonetheless, Eritrean leaders who did not support the Italian presence were sometimes deported to Italy; at other times, their kin were taken hostage and enclosed in squalid prisons such as Nokra, on an island off the Eritrean coast. Even before sentencing, the accused could be transferred from one Italian colony to another (as when Somalis accused of murdering Antonio Cecchi were taken to Eritrea in 1897).<sup>14</sup> These practices were often hidden from the Italian public, but were well known within colonial circles.

The immediate uprising of an anticolonial resistance among Libyans (organized in a first phase by Ottoman Turkish officials) after the Italian invasion of November 1911 created a very different situation than the one in Eritrea. Italians had hoped that the Arab population of Libya would accept Italian occupiers as “liberators” from the Turkish yoke. But Libyan resistance proved challenging, as when Italian troops sustained a demoralizing surprise attack at Shara Shatt. Colonial government soon became

associated with the deportation of Libyans: beyond taking individual hostages as they had in Eritrea, in Libya, Italians carried out deportations on a grander scale.<sup>15</sup>

This aspect of Italian policy in Libya has been studied insufficiently, in large part because archival sources have long been unavailable to scholars. But we can affirm on the basis of existing studies that the major waves of deportation coincided with periods of intensified resistance: 1911–1912, and 1914–1915—when Italians, distracted by their military engagement in the World War, were forced back to the coast by an Arab revolt.<sup>16</sup> We also know that by January 1912, at least 3,425 Libyans had already been deported to Italy, 349 to Favignana, 654 to Gaeta, more than 834 to Ustica, and 1,080 to the Tremiti Islands. Those figures must be considered incomplete, however, because they do not include the total number of deportees, nor those who died on the way—and given the general conditions deportees endured, it is likely that more than a few met that fate. A mandate to punish Libyan “traitors” opposed to Italians “liberating” their country explains the pitiful conditions of these deportations and imprisonments: nonexistent or inadequate medical attention, overcrowded prisons, and racial prejudices among detention authorities and the general populations with whom deportees came into contact.<sup>17</sup> One can wonder whether such practices reflected the power of Italian colonial dominance in Libya or, to the contrary, they revealed the limitations of the colonial authority of Italians.

Only this preceding history can explain the camps for Cyrenaican nomads at the institutional, political, and doctrinal levels. Yet in their scale and cruelty the Libyan internments stand apart from the Eritrean deportations: the Cyrenaican camps differed qualitatively from their liberal precedents, in their forms and their dimensions. The break with liberal-era internment is discernible in the transformation of internment into mass confinement, and in the totalitarian character of this confinement, with all the risks for its victims it comported, including extermination. In addition, while the first experiences of colonial internment in Libya and Eritrea had taken place in the context of white imperialists’ scramble for colonies and the reactions of local populations to these occupations, the escalation of Italian colonial internment during fascism took place during the growth of nationalist anticolonial movements and the first efforts elsewhere toward decolonization.<sup>18</sup>

The turn to colonial internment and other means of repression as a quotidian practice of colonial governance characterized practically all of the Italian overseas territories during the dictatorship. In Cyrenaica, but also in Somalia and later in Ethiopia, the regime interned dissidents and others who were suspected of obstructing regime policies. In each of these

cases the heaviest uses of colonial internment accompanied military events: conquests, “reconquests,” or even “pacifications” *manu militari*. And yet, as we have seen, these internments cannot be considered as wartime improvisations, since their origins lay in the peacetime confinements and banishments of liberal Italy.

While deporting notables did not constitute an innovation for Italian colonialism in either its liberal or fascist articulations, deporting an entire population in order to stop anticolonial resistance—as Italians did with the Cyrenaican Jabal inhabitants in the late 1920s and early 1930s—was without precedent. In Tripolitania, the fascist struggle against the resistance had been resolved by the late 1920s through military means and by fostering division among tribal leaders. Such tactics did not have the same effect in Cyrenaica, due to the rootedness of anti-Italian sentiment among seminomadic populations and the influence and organization of the Sanusi confraternity. In 1928–1929, when Italians ruled over most of western Libya, they still had not been able to go beyond the coastal areas of the Surt desert or into the eastern part of the country. General Pietro Badoglio, the new governor, had met with a sharp defeat in the second half of 1929 after an attempted truce with the resistance had left Italians open to attack; and the military operations undertaken by General Rodolfo Graziani the following year were not particularly effective. Facing Mussolini’s anger, a shrinking budget, and the risk of compromising his authority with subordinate commanders such as Graziani, Badoglio adopted a draconian approach to the pacification of the country. Pushed by Mussolini, he acted to suppress the support that local populations gave to the resistance by forcing them into “a restricted space so that they can be surveilled adequately, and isolated from the rebels. Once this is done, direct actions against the rebels can be undertaken.”<sup>19</sup>

The political directive to pacify Libya through the exceptional forced settlement and deportation of an entire population was implemented in conjunction with military tactics defined by Badoglio and made operational by Graziani.<sup>20</sup> The population of the Jabal was transferred to the Syrta, interned in concentration camps, deprived of all means of traditional subsistence (such as livestock breeding), and subjugated entirely. Mass internment can be seen in the context of measures which for years had tried to isolate areas “infected” by the squads of resistance leader ‘Umar al-Mukhtar, confiscate assets of real and suspected rebels, purge tribal leaders and notables, and fire *askaris*, further depriving the population of arms and resources.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, in February 1931, a gigantic barbed wire fence, 270 kilometers in length, was erected on the border between Egypt and Libya to stop aid from coming to the resisters from the East, and halt the flow of Cyrenaican refugees to Egypt. These measures

were not realized in a hermetic void, but after years and years of military and political pressures on the population, the notables, and the resistance.

Numerous camps of various dimensions were created: Marsa al-Brega, Soluch, Sidi Ahmad al-Magrun, al-Agaila, Ajdabiya, al-Abiar, and the minor camps of Derna, Apollonia, “Barce” (al-Marj), Driana, Sidi Khalifah, Suani al-Terria, an-Nawfaliya, Coefia and al-Guarsha. Almost one hundred thousand people were imprisoned there; many had already fallen victim to the terrible conditions imposed during forced marches to the camps. Camp life was harsh both in relative terms—in that it forced nomadic and seminomadic populations to be sedentary—and in the absolute. It has been estimated that 90–95 percent of the internees’ sheep, goats, and horses, and 80 percent of their cows and camels perished. Forced inactivity alternated with forced labor. A few internees were able to have small gardens, but discipline was rigid for all. Although the Al-Agaila camp soon became especially infamous for its punishments, discipline was harsh everywhere, and the power wielded by Italians (aided by Eritrean and Abyssinian *askaris*) was nearly absolute. Punishments, executions, and deaths by starvation were daily occurrences. Forced acculturation accompanied the physical repression: in the camps a dozen training centers were formed to indoctrinate and train young internees for service in Libyan *askari* battalions. This situation ended only in September 1933, two years after the hanging of ‘Umar al-Mukhtar in the Soluch camp. Of the hundred thousand Cyrenaicans who entered the camps, only sixty thousand came out alive.<sup>22</sup> Exact numbers are difficult to calculate, but it is clear that the cost in human lives of Eastern Libyan pacification was very high. Furthermore, mass internments and deportations led to equally high numbers of exiles and refugees, mostly to Egypt, and to Tunisia, Algeria, Chad, and Sudan as well. Overall, of the few hundred thousand inhabitants of Cyrenaica (a third of whom were not affected by the deportations), between forty and seventy thousand disappeared.<sup>23</sup>

The particular gravity of the Cyrenaican case must not lead us to omit other territories that can be mentioned only briefly here, such as Somalia and Ethiopia. Somalia, the colonial territory farthest from Italy, has been the one least studied.<sup>24</sup> The near-absence of relevant scholarly works has limited our evaluation and knowledge of local social controls and therefore, of practices of internment. A few remarks can be made nevertheless. For a long period, colonial control was limited to the principal inhabited centers on the coast. Yet with the spread of land expropriations and concessions, the fear of local manual labor shortages led colonial institutions and white concessionaires to institute or facilitate forced labor. Somalis who attempted to flee saw their liberties curtailed, and even paid with their lives. Here too, we see the blend of force and weakness that characterized

Italian colonialism. In 1935, the regime opened the Somali camp of Danane, which housed Ethiopian and Somali political dissidents and criminals.<sup>25</sup> All in all, more than six thousand men and women passed through the camp, many of them interned during the political crackdown that followed the 1937 assassination attempt on Graziani and during colonial police operations against the Ethiopian resistance. Danane remained active until 1941, when it was “liberated” by the occupying British.

Many more studies exist on Italian East Africa as a whole, although most monographic works and memoirs concentrate on the seven-month war of Ethiopian conquest rather than on the five subsequent years of Italian occupation. Aside from the work of Angelo Del Boca, general studies on these years of “peace” are almost entirely lacking.<sup>26</sup> Too many of the specialized studies available fail to address the specifics of how colonial order was maintained, and neglect the related issue of internment.<sup>27</sup> The function and scope of internments and other repressive measures cannot be fully understood without investigations of the operations of the colonial police and the colonial institutions in Italian East Africa, as well as local studies that would highlight the relations among Italian power, traditional leaders, and autochthonous society during the occupation. It is possible, therefore, that our views on Italian colonial internment will have to be revised once additional work on the subject has been completed.

For now, our impression is that fascist authorities in Italian East Africa relied more on repression to combat anticolonial resistance than they did on internment.<sup>28</sup> Internment and deportation were used against tribal leaders, whether they were active resistance militants or merely followers—even passive ones—of the anticolonial struggle. In the summer of 1937, a few leaders were sent from Ethiopia to Eritrea and then to Italy, where they were imprisoned for an entire year. Yet available studies suggest that the kind of repressions Graziani and Mussolini supported, especially during the crackdown in Addis Ababa and its provinces that led up to the massacre of Debra Libanos, favored execution over internment. As Graziani wrote to Italian commands in the Shewa region on May 13, 1937:

I am following your work with great attention and passion; [it] must conclude with the total submission of the Shewa and the elimination of all who refuse to disarm, even if every last house must be razed to the soil. I trust in your capability, fascist spirit, and decisiveness. Remember that every false piety is a crime when dealing with people decidedly hostile to our dominion (. . .) Essential goals: an absolute totalitarian disarmament; elimination of all leaders, impostors, sorcerers, witches, false prophets, etc. Conquest is conquest (. . .) and its only law is that of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Which is, after all, in the spirit of these people, and constitutes true Roman imperial justice as well.<sup>29</sup>

Beyond its relatively exceptional policies of deportations and massacres, fascism promoted a broad politics of discrimination that can be understood as a type of virtual internment. Whereas internment as realized by the regime in Cyrenaica had involved only part of the population for a limited period of time (albeit with disastrous outcomes), the color ban in Italian East Africa involved all of the native populations—potentially forever.<sup>30</sup> In these developments the histories of internment and the maintenance of colonial order intersect with the more complex history of fascist racism, within which colonial racism played a fundamental component.<sup>31</sup> In this light, colonial internment represented but one modality of colonial repression, one on which historical knowledge of the various forms is quite sketchy.<sup>32</sup> But we can affirm on the basis of studies already completed that the fascist regime went well beyond the traditional authoritarian practices of liberal Italy in its recourse to internment, not only with respect to past national history, but also on the international plane. Certainly, the massacre at Amritsar in India and the cruel war waged on the Rif at ‘Abd al-Karim earned both Great Britain and France much criticism from anticolonialists and from independence movements on the rise. But on the point of internment practices, neither French nor British colonial policy compared to fascist colonialism. The importance of this subject within the history of Italian colonialism, and the history of fascist colonialism in particular, indicates clearly that we need to pursue this topic instead of continuing to minimize it.

### Notes

1. The earliest works to bring attention to this subject were Giorgio Rochat, *Il colonialismo italiano* (Turin: Loescher, 1973); Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1976–1984); and Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1986–1988).
2. As does Gustavo Ottolenghi, *Gli italiani e il colonialismo. I campi di detenzione italiani in Africa* (Milan: SugarCo, 1997).
3. I have discussed this in my books *In marcia verso Adua* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993) and *Oltremare. Storia dell’espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002).
4. Andrzej J. Kaminski, *I campi di concentramento dal 1896 a oggi. Storia, funzioni, tipologia*, trans. Antonella De Bernardis and Brunello Mantelli (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1997).
5. Angelo Del Boca, “La repressione in Libia,” *Studi piacentini* 2 (1987): 31–44.
6. An important study is Luciano Martone, *Giustizia coloniale. Modelli e prassi penale per i sudditi d’Africa dall’età giolittiana al fascismo* (Naples: Jovene, 2002). For a collection of essays on Italian colonial repression, also see Nicola Labanca, ed., *Un nodo. Immagini e documenti sulla repressione coloniale italiana in Libia* (Manduria: Lacaita, 2002).

7. Luigi Túccari, *I governi militari della Libia (1911–1920)* (Rome: Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, Ufficio storico, 1994).
8. See Gennaro Mondaini, *La legislazione coloniale italiana nel suo sviluppo storico e nel suo stato attuale (1881–1940)* (Milan: ISPI, 1941).
9. See Franco Molfese, *Storia del brigantaggio dopo l'Unità* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1966).
10. See Umberto Levra, *Il colpo di stato della borghesia. La crisi politica di fine secolo in Italia 1896–1900* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975).
11. Francesco Carfora, "Domicilio coatto," in *Il digesto italiano* vol. 9, part III (Rome: UTET, 1899–1902), 721.
12. See, for instance, Guido Neppi Modona, *Sciopero, potere politico e magistratura (1870–1922)* (Bari: Laterza, 1969); or Luciano Violante, "La repressione del dissenso politico nell'Italia liberale: Stati d'assedio e giustizia militare," *Rivista di storia contemporanea* 5, no. 4 (1976): 481–524.
13. See *Relazione generale della Reale Commissione d'inchiesta sulla Colonia Eritrea* (Rome: Tipografia Nazionale, 1891).
14. Explorer Antonio Cecchi was killed while trying to take possession of Somali lands in the interior. See Gian Carlo Corada, *Lafolè. Un dramma dell'Italia coloniale* (Rome: Ediesse, 1996).
15. There is a large bibliography on these events, including Gaetano Salvemini, *Come siamo andati in Libia e altri scritti dal 1900 al 1915*, ed. Augusto Torre (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1963); Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia*; Mario Missori, "Una ricerca sui deportati libici nelle carte dell'Archivio Centrale dello Stato," in *Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana. Atti del convegno (Taormina-Messina, 23–29 October 1989)*, ed. Carla Ghezzi, 253–258 (Rome: Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali, Ufficio centrale per i beni archivistici, 1996).
16. Claudio Moffa, "I deportati libici alle Tremiti dopo la rivolta di Sciara Sciat," in Ghezzi, *Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana*, 259–286.
17. Lino Del Fra, *Sciara Sciat. Genocidio nell'oasi. L'esercito italiano a Tripoli* (Rome: Danawews, 1995).
18. For a substantial bibliography, see Nicola Labanca, "Solo politica? Considerazioni su contenzioso post-coloniale e decolonizzazione, a partire da alcuni studi recenti," *Studi piacentini* 22 (1997): 163–178.
19. Piero Pieri and Giorgio Rochat, *Pietro Badoglio* (Turin: UTET, 1974), 614.
20. Angelo Del Boca, "Graziani," in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 58, 829–834 (Rome: Treccani, 2002).
21. See Giorgio Rochat, "La repressione della resistenza araba in Cirenaica nel 1930–1931," in Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia. Studi militari 1921–1939*, 22–98 (Paese: Pagus, 1991).
22. Eric Salerno, *Genocidio in Libia. Le atrocità nascoste dell'avventura coloniale 1911/1931* (Milan: SugarCo, 1979); Ottolenghi, *Gli Italiani e il colonialismo*.
23. Rodolfo Graziani, *Cirenaica pacificata*, 109 (Milan: Mondadori, 1932); Rochat, "La repressione della resistenza araba in Cirenaica," and his "Il genocidio cirenaico," *Belfagor* 35, no. 4 (1980): 449–454; Enrice De Leone, "Il genocidio delle genti cirenaiche secondo Giorgio Rochat," *Intervento* 38–39 (1979): 31–34.
24. See Robert L. Hess, *Italian Colonialism in Somalia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

25. See Angelo Del Boca, "Un lager del fascismo: Danane," *Studi piacentini* 1 (1987): 59–70.
26. The exception is Alberto Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini. Fascism and the Colonial Experience* (London: Zed Books, 1985).
27. For example, Vincenzo Mellana, *L'amministrazione della giustizia nei territori oltremare*, vol. I *L'amministrazione della giustizia in Eritrea e in Somalia (1896–1936)*, and vol. II *L'amministrazione della giustizia nell'Africa Orientale Italiana (1936–1941)* (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1969).
28. See Richard Pankhurst, "La resistenza dei patrioti etiopici," *Materiali di lavoro* 9/10, no. 2–3/1 (1992/1993): 143–164; and Giuliano Procacci, *Dalla parte dell'Etiopia. L'aggressione italiana vista dai movimenti anticolonialisti d'Asia, d'Africa, d'America* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1984).
29. Cited in Rochat, "L'attentato a Graziani e la repressione italiana in Etiopia 1936–1937," in Rochat, *Guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia*, 177–214.
30. Among various aspects of racial segregation in Italian East Africa, one that has been studied is urban planning, in which barbed wire was not used to separate the colonized from the colonizers, but in its place stood inconspicuous barriers of greenery—leafy, perhaps, but present nonetheless. Internment was thus sublimated in the urban landscapes of Italian colonialism. See Mia Fuller, "Wherever You Go, There You Are: Fascist Plans for the Colonial City of Addis Ababa and the Colonizing Suburb of EUR '42," *Journal of Contemporary History* 31 (1996): 397–418; and Marida Talamona, "Addis Abeba capitale dell'Impero," *Storia contemporanea* 16, no. 5–6 (December 1985): 1093–1132.
31. Nicola Labanca, "Il razzismo coloniale italiano," in *Nel nome della razza: Il razzismo nella storia d'Italia*, ed. Alberto Burgio, 145–164 (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999); and, more generally, *La menzogna della razza* (Bologna: Grafis, 1994). A different view of Italians' responses is formulated in Angelo Del Boca, "Le leggi razziali nell'impero di Mussolini," in *Il regime fascista. Storia e storiografia*, ed. Angelo Del Boca, Massimo Legnani, and Mario G. Rossi, 329–351 (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1995). On the institutional framework of racism see Luigi Goglia, "Note sul razzismo coloniale fascista," *Storia contemporanea* 29, no. 6 (December 1988): 1223–1266; and Luigi Preti, *I miti dell'impero e della razza nell'Italia degli anni Trenta* (Rome: Opere Nuove, 1965).
32. Luigi Goglia, "Politica coloniale," in *Bibliografia orientativa del fascismo*, ed. Renzo De Felice, 369–394 (Roma: Bonacci, 1991), and his "Storia militare coloniale," in *Guida alla storia militare*, ed. Piero Del Negro (Naples: Esi, 1997).

# The Italian Air Force in the Ethiopian War (1935–1936)

*Giorgio Rochat*

The Italian–Ethiopian war of 1935–1936 was the first war after 1918 (and the first colonial war) in which the Italian Air Force was employed on a large scale (450 airplanes) and had a significant role in military operations. But studies on the subject have been inadequate. The many works that appeared after the conflict were largely propagandistic, and these were not followed up with systematic research after World War II. This gap is due both to a decline of Italian interest in Italy's lost Empire and to the long scholarly monopoly exercised by ex-colonial institutions, which have been little inclined to undertake a critical examination of this recent past.<sup>1</sup> Historians connected with the military archives are just beginning to study the colonial experience in general and the war against Ethiopia in particular, as military and colonial archives were not opened to outside scholars until the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Above all, studies of the Air Force's role were delayed by Italy's unwillingness to admit to its large-scale use of gas in the war.<sup>3</sup> The use of chemical weapons was loudly denounced at the time by world public opinion, but it was denied so stubbornly by fascist propaganda and postwar Italian censorship that the subject became intractably taboo.<sup>4</sup>

Italy was the first nation to use airplanes in war, during its conquest of Libya in 1911–1912. What is less well known is that Italy also used the Air Force extensively during its 1921–1931 campaigns in the Libyan interior. Using airplanes gave Italians a decisive advantage against Libyan tribal warriors, who had traditionally depended on the protection of the desert's grand expanses. These successes made the Air Force a central factor in Italy's subsequent plans for the conquest of Ethiopia. As early as 1932,

Emilio De Bono, Italy's Minister of Colonies, argued that any future invasion of that country would depend on having a

powerful Air Force, one that can bring terror to the [Ethiopian] Empire's capital and major cities [and] disarm and delay enemy forces, who could be bombed and machine-gunned en masse as they march . . . it would disseminate panic in their army and . . . inflict heavy losses that would break their fighting spirit.<sup>5</sup>

A letter Mussolini wrote to *capo di stato maggiore generale* Pietro Badoglio in December 1934 confirmed that the Air Force's contribution in the coming conflict would be even more central than that of the Army:

A rapid and definitive war is always a tough war, thus one must prepare on a grand scale. Along with sixty thousand native soldiers, an equal number of national ones must serve as well. At least 250 airplanes must be concentrated in Eritrea and another fifty in Somalia. Tanks: 150 in Eritrea and fifty in Somalia. Absolute superiority of artillery and of gas. Abundant munitions. The sixty thousand Italian soldiers—better still if these were one hundred thousand—must be ready in Eritrea by October 1935.<sup>6</sup>

Badoglio responded with a proposed breakdown of the 250 planned airplanes (two hundred bombers and reconnaissance, another ten prevalently for reconnaissance, and forty fighters), and reflected that

We have a weapon that we did not have [at Adwa] in 1896: the Air Force[. . .]It will allow us to make life almost impossible for the Abyssinians, who total more than three hundred thousand men. This is where our absolute superiority lies: in being able to attack without being attacked. The advance on Adwa must be prepared by a violent bombing action on all the principal Abyssinian cities, including Addis Ababa. Everything must be destroyed with incendiary exploding bombs. Terror must be disseminated throughout the Empire. I expect great results from such a strategy, which is also the only one that the enemy cannot oppose to any appreciable extent, even if he manages to acquire a few planes in the coming months. I repeat: it is through the Air Force that we must crush the Abyssinian resistance.<sup>7</sup>

Mussolini's response was to approve an even heavier military presence in East Africa, so that aircraft would now number three to five hundred. As he would do repeatedly in the following months, he affirmed that the Air Force would play a "preponderant part" in the war, carrying out "all the normal tasks of bombing troops, populations, materials, sources of life."<sup>8</sup> Thus there is evidence that military and political officials in charge of the invasion expected much from the Air Force, even though they had no

studies of, or experience with, the deployment of such a large aerial force within the difficult Ethiopian theatre; nor did they know anything about the results such a force would obtain against an adversary so different from those encountered in Europe. Moreover, Italian military aviation had only about one thousand operative aircraft at the time. The deployment of a few hundred of these planes in East Africa, even if quickly replaced, could not help but cause hardships throughout the system, effectively closing down the possibility of sustaining a European conflict in the near future.<sup>9</sup> The nature of the fascist state did not permit the expression of opposition or doubts, however, least of all in the case of the aggression against Ethiopia, which enjoyed Mussolini's support, practically unlimited state funding, and an extraordinarily successful national mobilization (the war against Ethiopia was the only truly popular war in the history of united Italy). The Air Force therefore accepted the plans of Mussolini, De Bono, and Badoglio without hesitation, and tried only to safeguard its own autonomy and conduct its war without depending on the Army command.

The principal theatre of operations was the Ethiopian highlands, which offered difficult conditions for aviation, due both to its high altitude (2,000–2,500 meters, 3,000–3,500 meters in the mountains) and frequent variations in pressure (in the east the plateau dropped abruptly 2,500 meters to the lowlands), so that airplanes often could not take off with a full load. In the other theatre of operations, Somalia, difficulties stemmed less from altitude than from high temperature; but there the flat terrain offered neither obstacles to troop advance nor refuge to the enemy. Since in January 1935, Air Force strength in those two colonies totaled only thirty reconnaissance aircraft, it took an extraordinary logistical effort (made possible by an equally extraordinary credit outlay) to build air bases, airports (eighteen of them), and airstrips, all at record speed. Meteorological and radio services were also created, along with photo and cinema laboratories for surveillance and cartography. Finally, hundreds of tons of bombs, gas, and other weapons, and supplies for aircraft and other vehicles were shipped.<sup>10</sup> As for the cost of this enormous outlay, suffice it to say that early in 1936 the Air Force had two hundred million Lire a month at its disposal just for the African War, while in preceding years its total annual budget had been less than eight hundred million.<sup>11</sup>

This budget increase also provided for more airplanes. Taking the example of Eritrea, for which we have the most reliable data, aircraft of all types increased from a total of twenty-seven in February 1935 to 318 in June 1936, although losses and constant repairs brought the number of craft in effective service during the spring of 1936 to about 225–230.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Italians possessed only one truly modern type of aircraft: the S.81 bomber and transport plane, whose velocity and load capacity would determine its

heavy use in the upcoming Spanish Civil War. For the most part, operations were conducted with outdated airplanes (such as the Ro.1, or Fokker). Such aircraft would have been inadequate for a European war, but they had the robustness and versatility necessary for a colonial conflict in which the true obstacles came not from the enemy but from ambient conditions and the range of interventions requested of the Air Force. As it was, Italians lost one hundred of the 450 aircraft they employed during the war.<sup>13</sup>

Air operations in the Ethiopian War took a different turn than colonial and Air Force officials had originally envisioned. Mussolini's worries about the international political situation led him to veto the bombing of several of the most strategic targets, namely Addis Ababa and the railroad between that city and Djibuti, which provided the Ethiopian Empire's only link to the outside world.<sup>14</sup> Bombings of other Abyssinian cities were suspended for their scant military value,<sup>15</sup> and because of the international outcry after the December 1935 destruction of the Red Cross office in Dessie. In reality, the Italian strategy of large-scale bombing for terrorist effect was unsuited for Ethiopia, which had neither industrial nerve centers nor multiple vital avenues of communication to destroy.

Air Force actions in the interior also had mixed results. The Air Force was able to obstruct the northward march of the largest Abyssinian army, destroying the few trucks it possessed, but it did not prevent the massing of eighty thousand men by *ras* Mulugeta at Mekele. Nor was it able to stop the progress of the forty thousand men that *ras* Kasa and *ras* Seyum were guiding toward Tembien, or the forty thousand men brought to Shere by *ras* Emeru.<sup>16</sup> The Abyssinians, in fact, were able to surprise the Italians at those sites in December 1935 and January 1936, thereby threatening the entire Italian front. To compensate for the slow pace of Italian troops, who had to contend with rough terrain, Badoglio ordered the Air Force to slow the advances of enemy columns by all possible means.<sup>17</sup> For about three months, until the Italian victories of February–March 1936 brought about the fall of the Northern Abyssinian front, aircraft were strictly used in support of the Army.

Aerial interventions in the Ethiopian War took several forms: on the battlefield, the bombing and machine-gunning of enemy forces (this was the Air Force's most effective intervention); in the Ethiopian hinterland, so-called offensive exploration, or low-flying surveillance of territory by bomber planes (alone or in squads) which attacked any sign of life; and at points of obligatory enemy passage (fords, passes, and so on), where barrages were effected with mustard gas (yperite).<sup>18</sup> A precise appraisal of the results is impossible in the absence of systematic studies. Certainly, the Air Force was not shy about publicizing its contribution to the war, and it received enthusiastic encouragement from fascist propaganda and the

press. On the other hand, we should not overestimate the Air Force's role in some of Italy's victories (especially those in which the army also participated). But Italian bombers were crucial in exploiting the vulnerabilities of retreating Abyssinian columns, which were forced to take certain routes and then hammered with every means available, causing huge losses that led to their definitive collapse.<sup>19</sup>

The destruction of the Abyssinian army opened the way to Italian advances in the interior; due to poor roads, these advances were possible only thanks to the provisions brought in by the Air Force.<sup>20</sup> The contribution of aerial resuppliers proved especially important in the most spectacular move of the war: Badoglio's advance on Addis Ababa. Airplanes dropped or parachuted in essential supplies and protected the advancing columns. The novelty of such complex operations posed not a few problems. Early supply launches resulted in the loss of a third or even half of the foodstuffs because of faulty packing and poor maneuvering of the airplanes. Yet these problems lessened with experience, and altogether the airplanes transported 1,212 tons of materiel and 2,430 people (versus 1,205 tons of bombs launched).<sup>21</sup> These numbers may seem small with respect to those of successive wars, but they illustrate the decisive support given by the Air Force to a war that was at once the last traditional colonial war, if one looks at the armaments and organization used by the Abyssinians, and the first modern war in the Afro-Asiatic countries, if one thinks about the quality and scale of Italy's involvement.

We will say just a few words about the chemical war, which we have already discussed elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> That war was prepared with the same extraordinary concentration of resources that characterized the Ethiopian War in general, but it was conducted almost exclusively by the Air Force (its use among artillery forces was limited to one bombing raid of dubious effectiveness against Amba Aradam). Nine hundred and ninety-one "C 500-T" mustard gas bombs were launched on the northern front (about 300 tons of mustard gas bombs out of a total 1,205), and gas was used heavily in Somalia as well (ninety-five were C 500-T mustard gas bombs, 186 were twenty-one kilogram mustard gas bombs, and 325 were phosgene gas bombs of forty-one kilograms—about forty-four tons of chemical bombs out of a total of 380).

On the effects of mustard gas bombings (which rained down corrosive drops that penetrated through clothing and produced potentially fatal internal lesions), we have dramatic testimonies from the Abyssinian side; but the lack of documentation and historical studies has meant that we cannot yet evaluate their military efficacy (we cannot, for example, give even an approximate number of fatalities, although we know these were mostly civilian). The effectiveness of these gas bombings has probably

been overestimated (the Abyssinians attributed their defeat to them), because the vastly superior Italian forces would have had a sure victory even without them.

The lack of systematic studies on the Air Force's activities during the war means that all the data we have must be taken as approximate. Published and unpublished statistics do not always agree; moreover, the Air Force archives reveal that figures presented as definitive in many of these sources are actually missing information for certain months or divisions. Finally, there are also issues of periodization: the official date for the end of the conflict, May 5, 1936 (when Badoglio entered Addis Ababa), means little, because military operations continued for months and years to come. This was especially true for the Air Force, which sustained its greatest losses in this second phase of the war. For the period through June 30, 1936, the most authoritative figures we have for Air Force activity are furnished by General Mario Ajmone-Cat, head of Air Force command in East Africa: fifty thousand flight hours; 1,890 tons of explosives launched; 1,360 tons of materiel transported or launched; 4,430 people transported.<sup>23</sup> The numbers we have for losses are also incomplete. Abyssinians shot down eight Italian planes and hit 251, but these figures tell us less about the efficiency of Ethiopian anti-aircraft defense than they do about Italian pilots' practice of flying so low that they easily became targets of enemy fire.<sup>24</sup> We have more detailed figures for the northern front: a total of seventy-two planes were lost (five planes were shot down, six were damaged beyond repair and sixty-one were felled in flying accidents). Another forty-nine planes were damaged but repaired.<sup>25</sup> We have no comparable data for the South, except an approximate estimate of twenty-five to thirty planes lost. But we have detailed numbers of casualties: a total of 160 deaths among officials and troops (forty in combat, forty-four in aerial accidents, fifteen of disease, forty-seven in ground attacks, and fourteen in unspecified incidents).<sup>26</sup>

With these losses came a flood of military decorations: twenty-three gold medals and hundreds of silver and bronze ones. In a departure from Italian military tradition, all the war dead were honored with gold or silver medals. Even more controversial were the many promotions and decorations given to the living, for example, to political figures who had volunteered for the Air Force, and to officials who had merely done their duty without engaging in acts of particular heroism. This inflation of decorations, which involved the Army as well, was derived from official exaltations of the war as an event demonstrating fascist Italy's capacities for efficiency and sacrifice. Certainly, the Air Force was the branch of the military best equipped to take advantage of this enthusiasm: its war was the most modern, and it left space for individual initiative and courageous

exploits that were more glorious to recount than the obscure routines of infantrymen. Put simply, the Air Force fit the mass media needs of the regime. It is not surprising that many of Mussolini's younger family members served in this branch (two sons, one nephew and one son-in-law), nor that the press followed their war service closely.<sup>27</sup> All of these things contributed to the Air Force's grandiose image during the war, and to the popular postwar idea that Italy's victory was largely to its credit.

As we have seen, the Italian Air Force's effectiveness and flexibility were certainly determining factors in Italy's rapid victory, and the Air Force did pioneer new practices, such as the aerial reinforcements of advancing army columns. But these results were obtained in quite exceptional circumstances (the enemy had no Air Force and no organized anti-aerial defense). Despite the use of large-scale forces by the Italians, the East African war remained a colonial war, and the Air Force's experiences in it could not be applied in a European war without careful and critical study.

Badoglio's entry into Addis Ababa, and the proclamation of the Italian East African Empire by Mussolini four days later, appeared to mark the end of the conflict. Emperor Haile Selassie's attempts to obtain the United Nations' support failed in the face of French and British desires to maintain a European equilibrium already upset by Hitler. In the following months, international condemnation of the Italian aggression grew weaker, the economic sanctions were withdrawn, and Europe accepted the Italian Empire as a *fait accompli*. But in Ethiopia, the war continued. Even after the destruction of the Abyssinian forces, powerful *ras* continued to fight, so that Italian control of the country was in effect limited to the northern and southern regions. In 1936–1937 the troops of Viceroy Graziani (primarily Abyssinian *askari*, but also Libyans and Somalis) extended Italian domination to Ethiopia's major cities, and destroyed the resistance cells of the traditional leaders. Nonetheless, in autumn 1937, popular resistance spread throughout the central regions with irrepressible violence: as it was crushed in one area, it surfaced again in another. It was a ferocious war of ill-armed peasants guided by seasoned leaders who took advantage of the mobility of their bands, their knowledge of the terrain, and the support they received from the local populations. Despite all their efforts, the Italians never managed to dominate this popular resistance, especially after 1939, when the French and English supported it with arms and money. By 1940 most of the Italian forces in East Africa (two hundred thousand *askari* and ninety-one thousand nationals) were employed in a futile attempt to contain the guerrilla warfare that threatened the future of the Italian Empire.

In this long and forgotten war after the official victory, the Air Force played a central role that remains to be studied. Under difficult conditions made worse by bad weather, the Air Force kept a besieged Addis Ababa

supplied by flights launched from Eritrean bases, dropped foodstuffs to columns blocked by the great rains, and carried out bombings of the Abyssinian forces who sought to block the Djibuti railroad. From May to September 1936, 1,385 tons of materiel and 6,403 people were transported or dropped, more than during all the months of the official war.<sup>28</sup> Between summer and fall 1936 most Italian troops were repatriated, but not the Air Force, which between August and September sent another thirty-four planes making up for a total force of three hundred aircraft.<sup>29</sup>

In autumn 1936, once the emergency had passed, the Air Force was reorganized under one command at Addis Ababa, with four sectors based in Asmara, Dire Dawa, Addis Ababa, and Mogadishu. Air Force tasks in this period included transporting people between the Empire's cities, dropping reinforcements and munitions to marching columns and isolated garrisons, supporting exploration operations, and carrying out bombings of enemy positions and peoples.<sup>30</sup> Between October 1936 and the end of June 1937, the Air Force transported 1,085 tons of materiel and 7,621 people.<sup>31</sup> A comparison between the seven months of official war and the fourteen months following (May 1936–July 1937) is instructive. Explosives launched: 1,853 versus 1,107 tons; materiel transported or launched: 1,074 versus 2,458 tons; persons transported: 1,563 versus 13,832; pilots and specialists dead: forty-eight versus fifty-five.<sup>32</sup> We do not have analogous numbers for the three years from July 1937 to World War II, but because both Abyssinian resistance and Italian repression continued, we estimate that in order to obtain a realistic assessment of the Air Force's engagement in East Africa, the data on its expenditures and losses in the 1935–1936 war should be multiplied by four or five. In summary, one can say that the Air Force fought a misguided war with much efficiency and much sacrifice. Italy's entry into World War II in 1940 opened another page of Italian history—one that is far better known and one in which the Italian Air Force would be less successful.

### Notes

1. For a full bibliography, see Giorgio Rochat, "Il colonialismo," in *Storia d'Italia*, ed. Fabio Levi, Umberto Levra, and Nicola Tranfaglia, 107–120 (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1978); Giorgio Rochat, "Le guerre coloniali," in *La storiografia militare italiana negli ultimi venti anni*, ed. Piero Del Negro, 85–94 (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1985); and Jean-Louis Miège, Romain Rainero, and Giorgio Rochat, "Studi sul colonialismo italiano," in *Atti del convegno sugli studi africanisti in Italia dagli anni '60 ad oggi*, ed. Istituto Italo-Africano, 93–117 (Rome: Armellini, 1986).
2. Among the few sources to date are those by the former head of the Air Force Historical Office: see Vincenzo Lioy, *L'opera dell'Aeronautica*, 2 vols.

- (Rome: Istituto poligrafico dello stato, 1964–1965), which gives interesting details but is hagiographic in tone. There has only been a single instance of internal criticism: see the two lectures by General Mario Ajmone-Cat, who headed the Air Force command in East Africa: “L’Aeronautica nella guerra in Africa orientale” and “Notizie sulla preparazione e partecipazione dell’Aeronautica nell’AOI alla campagna per la conquista dell’Etiopia” (1937). These are held by the Archivio dell’ Ufficio Storico dell’Aeronautica (Air Force Historical Office), *fondo AOI* (cited hereafter as AUS, Aeronautica, AOI), *carteggio* 174. For a general history of the Italian aggression that stands out for its scope, frankness, and range of documentation, see Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa orientale: La conquista dell’impero* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1979) and *Gli Italiani in Africa orientale: La caduta dell’impero* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1982).
3. [Editors’ note: the Italian government only admitted to using chemical weapons in 1995–1996. For more recent work on the use of gas and its place in Italian memory, see Angelo Del Boca, ed., *I gas di Mussolini: Il fascismo e la guerra d’Etiopia* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1996).]
  4. Lioy, for example, makes no mention of the use of gas (*L’opera dell’Aeronautica*). See Giorgio Rochat, “L’impiego dei gas nella guerra d’Etiopia, 1935–1936,” *Rivista di storia contemporanea*, 1 (1988): 74–109.
  5. Emilio De Bono to Air Force Minister Italo Balbo, November 29, 1932, quoted in Giorgio Rochat, *Militari e politici nella preparazione della campagna d’Etiopia. Studio e documenti, 1932–1936* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1971), 291–293.
  6. *Ibid.*, 376–379.
  7. Badoglio to Mussolini, March 6, 1935, quoted in *ibid.*, 392–404.
  8. Mussolini to Badoglio, March 8, 1935, quoted in *ibid.*, 405–406.
  9. *Ibid.*, 227.
  10. See Lioy, *L’opera dell’Aeronautica*, vol. 2, 24, for details on all but the use of chemical bombs (which he omits casually), and Rochat, “L’impiego dei gas,” for full statistics on chemical weapons use. Air Force supplies of chemical weapons included 270 tons sent to East Africa for the infantry (which never used them), and 624 tons of artillery grenades loaded with arsine. Overall, gas was prepared for large-scale use by all branches of the military, but in practice, it was used only by the Air Force.
  11. For the first figure, see the memo from the state controller to the Finance Minister P. Thaon di Revel, February 17, 1936, in the di Revel archive (Fondazione Einaudi, Turin; *fascicolo* 24/47). I thank Andrea Curami for this document. The total cost of the war for the Air Force is hard to calculate, but it can be estimated at one billion Lire for 1934–1935, twelve billion for 1935–1936, and eighteen billion for 1936–1937 (including costs of the Spanish Civil War). The state’s normal annual budget was of about twenty-four billion.
  12. For these figures, see “Dati statistici 1 febbraio 1935–30 giugno 1936,” an undated anonymous typescript in the AUS, Aeronautica. It refers only to air forces in the northern theater but offers a breakdown of the type of aircraft used. Also see Ajmone-Cat, “L’Aeronautica,” 14, and Lioy, *L’opera*

- dell'Aeronautica*, vol. 2, 90. For Somalia, the numbers are thirty-eight aircraft in September 1935; eighty in December 1935; and ninety-nine in May 1936. These are not conclusive figures, but a tabulation of the aircraft that were war-ready in these given months. See AUS, *Aeronautica*, AOI, *carteggio* 51, *fascicolo* 4. The May 1936 statistic is taken from the "Diario storico" of the Comando Brigata Aerea Mista of Somalia, in *ibid.*, *carteggio* 25.
13. Ajmone-Cat, "Notizie," 16.
  14. Lioy, *L'opera dell'Aeronautica*, vol. 2, 74, 87, 117; "Dati statistici 1 febbraio 1935–30 giugno 1936."
  15. For Badoglio's synthesis of the limitations on the Air Force's strategic operations at the end of 1936, see Piero Pieri and Giorgio Rochat, *Pietro Badoglio* (Turin: Utet, 1974), 697.
  16. Ajmone-Cat, "L'Aeronautica," 8.
  17. Lioy, *L'opera dell'Aeronautica*, vol. 2, 54.
  18. Five hundred and three offensive reconnaissance and 132 barrage actions were carried out (all between December 23, 1935 and March 29, 1936); nine hundred and seventy-two C 500-T mustard gas bombs of 280 kilograms were dropped, for a total of 272 tons. See "Dati statistici 1 febbraio 1935–1 giugno 1936"; and Clemente Prepositi, *L'opera dell'aviazione in Africa Orientale* (Rome: Unione editoriale, 1937), 139.
  19. The maximum tonnage of bombs dropped in one day (seventy-two tons) was on February 16, 1935, the first day of the Abyssinian retreat from Enderta.
  20. Lioy, *L'opera dell'Aeronautica*, vol. 2, 72.
  21. Ajmone-Cat, "Notizie"; "Dati statistici, 1 febbraio 1935–30 giugno 1936."
  22. See Rochat, "L'impiego dei gas."
  23. Ajmone-Cat, "L'Aeronautica."
  24. Lioy, *L'opera dell'Aeronautica*, vol. 2, 221.
  25. "Dati statistici, 1 febbraio 1935–30 giugno 1936."
  26. Lioy, *L'opera dell'Aeronautica*, vol. 2, 90–91, 162–163; "Elenco caduti in AOI," AUS, *Aeronautica*, AOI, *carteggio* 135 bis, *fascicolo* 6.
  27. Vittorio Mussolini published a book about his experiences, *Voli sulle ambe* (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1937).
  28. Lioy, *L'opera dell'Aeronautica*, vol. 2, 168.
  29. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 142.
  30. See Lioy, *L'opera dell'Aeronautica*, vol. 2, 133, for a detailed chronicle which, however, stops at June 1937, just before the Abyssinian resistance exploded, thereby giving the false impression that the Air Force did little in successive years.
  31. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 168.
  32. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 221. The figures on losses refer to in-flight personnel and do not take into account ground personnel (thirty-five dead and six civilian drivers on May 11, 1936, alone) or deaths caused by disease and noncombat accidents.

# Poison Gas and Atrocities in the Italo-Ethiopian War (1935–1936)

*Alberto Sbacchi*

Although Italy had ratified the 1925 Geneva Protocol against the use of asphyxiating chemicals in war on April 3, 1928, Mussolini was willing to incur international condemnation by allowing the use of gas to expedite the conquest of Ethiopia. The Italian army's deployment of chemical weapons facilitated its final victory by wearing down the Ethiopians and breaking their will to fight. In addition to the 1925 gas protocol, Italian troops violated other international pacts by freely bombing Red Cross ambulances, hospitals, and civilian targets.

It is difficult to say how many poison gas bombs were dropped in Ethiopia, and to determine which were loaded with yperite or arsine (both of which are vesicant or blistering agents). For the Ethiopian campaign the Air Force used C 500-T bombs<sup>1</sup> loaded with yperite (a "mustard" gas), the most deadly poison available. Yperite is corrosive; its vapors, produced by an explosion, are lethal. The drops penetrate under the skin, producing blistering, internal lesions and death.<sup>2</sup> The other type of bomb used was the C 100-P filled with arsine, an irritating chemical which is not always lethal. Exploding shells scatter the vapor in the air, affecting the mucous membranes of the respiratory tract, and producing suffocation if inhaled in great quantities. The efficiency of poison gases varied according to the amount used and the specific natural setting, terrain, and weather conditions.

The Italian production of poison gas was directed by the Ministry of War's Office of Chemical Warfare and the National Association for the Commerce of Asphyxiating Gases (*Società ACNA, Associazione Commercio Nazionale Asfissianti*). By 1935, the military chemical industry was well

stocked and the Italian government had made the decision to use gas in war.<sup>3</sup> The ACNA had already produced five hundred tons of yperite, valued at more than five million Lire;<sup>4</sup> this was but a token of Italy's planned production of seventy-thousand tons per year of war chemicals.<sup>5</sup>

The war chemicals budget for Italian East Africa (*Africa Orientale Italiana*, or AOI) amounted to one hundred million Lire,<sup>6</sup> including flame throwers and gas masks for the army. By February 2, 1936, some 72,743,352 Lire had been spent for the war chemical service, including payment of 5,850,000 Lire to the Pirelli Company for seventy-five thousand gas masks.<sup>7</sup> In 1934 it had been calculated that twenty air raids with gas bombs would require the use of forty thousand gas bombs.<sup>8</sup> The yperite bombs, known as C 500-T, would cost 4,502 Lire apiece.<sup>9</sup> The price of the poison alone was 2,940 Lire per bomb—that is, more than half the total amount for each weapon. Between 1930 and 1932, about one thousand yperite bombs were sent to Mogadishu and stored in the arsenal at Afgoi to be used in the event of an Ethiopian attack against Somalia. In the summer of 1935, Emilio De Bono, High Commissioner for East Africa, ordered the shipment of fifty-five thousand artillery shells loaded with arsine gas to Eritrea, and twenty thousand to Somalia.

With the conquest of Addis Ababa in May 1936, Italy conquered about one-third of Ethiopia. The Ethiopian chiefs and various rebel groups, however, did not submit to Italy. Mussolini insisted that Graziani impose a reign of terror and extermination against the rebels and supporting population.<sup>10</sup> In late 1936, Graziani decreed total destruction, using aerially delivered chemical weapons against *ras* Abebe Aregai, patriot chief of Shewa, and against the patriots in Amhara.<sup>11</sup> Poison gas bombs were dropped quite regularly in all regions of Ethiopia until Duke Amedeo of Aosta replaced Marshall Graziani as Viceroy in December 1937. During the Duke's administration, poison gas bombs were employed mostly in Amhara and Shewa. The size of the stockpiles of the Italian Air Force gives an idea of their employment for the next three years of Italian rule in Ethiopia. Up to September 1936 there were 2,108 C 500-T yperite bombs in AOI, but at the end of the year another thousand were shipped to Ethiopia, for a total stockpile of 3,108 bombs. In addition, there were 524 arsine bombs for a grand total of 3,542 gas-loaded weapons.

On the basis of the available evidence, it seems that between May 1936 and June 10, 1940 (when Italy entered World War II), 459 poison gas bombs were used against the patriots.<sup>12</sup> The estimated use of poison gas for the war of occupation by the Air Force in the northern front is 1,972 C 500-T bombs, equivalent to about three hundred tons of yperite. Badoglio also fired 1,367 artillery shells loaded with arsine against the Ethiopians at Amba Aradam. On the southern front the Air Force dropped a total of

forty-four tons of chemical weapons: 281 yperite C 500-T bombs, and 325 bombs loaded with phosgene (an asphyxiating agent). In all, between 1935 and 1936, the Italian Air Force alone dropped about 1,600 C 500-T bombs on the Ethiopians, corresponding to 317 tons of yperite. Throughout the whole of the Italian occupation, the Ethiopians thus endured roughly 2,100 poison gas bombs, conservatively equivalent to five hundred tons of poison gas.<sup>13</sup>

Although the exact date when Italians first used gas bombs is not certain, the earliest documented date is October 10, 1935, when Graziani dropped poison gas bombs on troops at K'orahe.<sup>14</sup> After the incident, Graziani requested authorization to use poison gas against the K'orahe entrenched camp. The permission that De Bono granted on October 16, 1935<sup>15</sup> was revoked the next day by Mussolini, who decreed that henceforth he would be the only one to give permission to use gas. He allowed Graziani to bombard Ethiopians at the southern front with chemicals to overcome enemy resistance as early as October 29, 1935.<sup>16</sup> From then on the use of gas became routine. The Ethiopian Emperor protested before the League of Nations, as did the British and Swedish governments after receiving the confirmation of reports from their doctors, missionaries, and diplomats in Ethiopia.<sup>17</sup>

After De Bono's departure in November 1935, Badoglio became the High Commander of all Italian troops in East Africa. During the months of military reorganization, Badoglio used the Air Force for airborne missions and easy victories. Gas was not only deployed against Ethiopian troops opposing Italy, but also in distant villages.<sup>18</sup> Badoglio ordered the Air Force to bombard cities, roads, hospitals, and Red Cross encampments. To terrorize the civil population, Badoglio sprayed villages, herds, pastures, rivers, and lakes with yperite.<sup>19</sup> When asked by Mussolini if he wished to use bacteriological warfare, he answered that at the battle of Enderta, yperite had proven satisfactory.<sup>20</sup>

Italians claimed that poison gas bombing was a reaction to the barbarities committed by Ethiopians against Italian prisoners of war. To remove the spotlight from Italian aggression, Italy influenced world public opinion by reporting Ethiopian war atrocities. Italians had no difficulty in producing evidence of Ethiopian atrocities by setting up a special office attached to the International Red Cross.<sup>21</sup> In reality, though, the acts that appeared "barbaric" were desperate actions of defenseless people who tried to protect themselves as best they could. Furthermore, Italy considered chemical weapons as a means of legitimate warfare. Fascist propaganda, the lack of a free press in Italy, and censorship made it possible for Mussolini to promote his assertion that gas was employed to punish Ethiopia for cruelty against Italian soldiers. Nonetheless, Italian pictures of Ethiopian atrocities

created, to the embarrassment of the Ethiopians, a reason for the League of Nations to protest less strongly against the Italian invasion.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the Ethiopian minister in Paris advised his government to respect conventions regarding prisoners in order to preserve world sympathy for Ethiopia.<sup>23</sup>

The eyewitness reports on Ethiopian barbarities obtained by the Italians were questionable, such as the written deposition of Makaronas, Registrar of the Greek Consulate at Dire Dawa, which confirmed that Italian airmen and tank drivers had been torn to pieces as early as November 1935. Three members of the Egyptian Red Cross reported torture inflicted on Italian prisoners on December 1, 1935.<sup>24</sup> Information was circulated about Italian soldiers being crucified.<sup>25</sup> According to a Belgian Lieutenant, Armand Frère, military advisor to *ras* Desta, the *ras* gave ten Maria Theresa thalers (the Ethiopian currency before the Lira was imposed) to anyone who gave proof of having emasculated Italian soldiers. At the *ras*'s camp, he saw the decapitated corpses of three Italians.<sup>26</sup> In other reports sent to the League of Nations, Italy protested the emasculation of pilots Totò Minniti and Livio Zannoni;<sup>27</sup> Graziani ordered retaliatory bombing with gas.<sup>28</sup> One event that especially aroused Italian sentiment was the massacre of employees of Gondrand (a transport company), ordered by *ras* Imru on February 13, 1936. After seeing photographs of the sixty-eight emasculated Italians, Mussolini immediately ordered Badoglio to act with "inexorable energy."<sup>29</sup>

It was not only emasculation that the Italians intended to punish with gas, but also the Ethiopians' use of dum-dum (or explosive) bullets. The first Italian victim was an Air Force sergeant, Dalmazio Birago; he was hit in the leg early in November 1935.<sup>30</sup> General Nasi, who commanded the Libyan division on the southern front, reported that Ethiopians had used explosive cartridges; they had hit eleven of his men.<sup>31</sup> Mussolini then ordered his generals in Ethiopia to retaliate with poison gas bombs. On April 28, 1936, Mussolini wrote to Graziani reconfirming his authorization to use gas without any reservation.<sup>32</sup> On the same day, the Air Force showered Sassabaneh with thirty-six phosgene bombs and Bulale with fifty-four, thus putting an end to Ethiopian resistance and opening the way to Härär.

Besides using chemical weapons, Italians deliberately bombed Red Cross camps set up by the Ethiopian government and other nations friendly to Ethiopia. (The creation of non-Ethiopian Red Cross camps was intended to forestall Italian aggression: in theory, the presence of foreign nationals would make Italians hesitate to attack citizens of neutral nations.) In some cases the bombings were caused by pilot error. In others, they were in retaliation for the Ethiopians' treatment of captured Italian soldiers. In all, twelve Red Cross camps were bombed; of these, five were Ethiopian.

The only airplane Italians encountered in these raids was piloted by the Swedish Count Van Rosen; they bombed it at K'orahe, even though it had the Red Cross emblem on its wings.<sup>33</sup>

International recognition of the occupation of Ethiopia had begun by now, only to be stalled by the embarrassing testimony by two members of the Ethiopian Red Cross, on being mistreated by the Italians. When Italians defeated the army of *ras* Mulugeta at Amba Aradam, they found two Poles, Maximilian Belau and T. Medynsky, employed by the Ethiopian Red Cross, and took them prisoner on February 16, 1936.<sup>34</sup> Both declared (under duress) that they had been oppressed by the Ethiopian chiefs.<sup>35</sup> Belau gave information about the bombing of the Red Cross at Dessie in December 1935, explaining that the Seventh-Day Adventist hospital had been hit by bombshells.<sup>36</sup> According to Adventist records, the Dessie hospital, transformed into a Red Cross camp, had a big red cross on the roof. About forty bombs fell on the mission compound, mostly incendiary, and one on the roof of the Red Cross.<sup>37</sup> On March 25, 1936, Belau, once free, gave another deposition at the Clinique Générale in Geneva, accusing the Italians of systematically bombing everything that resembled the Red Cross.<sup>38</sup>

Ethiopians, meanwhile, reportedly misused the emblem of the Red Cross. This was the case at Amba Aradam, where (according to Italian sources) the sign was displayed "after" the air raid.<sup>39</sup> At K'orahe, Italian pilots had seen thirty trucks being loaded with ammunition boxes in a place covered with a red cross. Some Italian airplanes had been hit by Ethiopian fire coming from red-cross-marked territory; it was then decided to bomb the area.<sup>40</sup> Ethiopian chiefs and people, afraid of the air attacks, took cover in the Red Cross camps in hopes of saving themselves.<sup>41</sup> Ethiopians also installed crosses near urban centers, where military and civilians took refuge.<sup>42</sup> Even Haile Selassie, at the bombing of Dessie, had his quarters three hundred meters from the Red Cross.<sup>43</sup> *Ras* Desta, reported Doctor Ulland, proposed placing empty Red Cross tents at a distance from the real Red Cross where the doctor actually worked,<sup>44</sup> in the zone of Dolo. Martin Workeneh, Ethiopian minister in London, wrote to the Emperor, advising him to keep the military out of the town and away from the Red Cross tents, as they would be bombed.<sup>45</sup> In the meantime, on the advice of European military advisers, the population stretched white drapes on roofs and displayed signs that seemed like red crosses from the sky above. These signs were also used on army barracks. When the Italians recognized this practice, they bombed without any distinction.<sup>46</sup>

The Ethiopians had no air force with which to retaliate, or any means to protect themselves against the "rain of death," except for a few thousand old gas masks, useless against yperite and arsine, while the Italians were

well stocked, with eighty-four thousand gas masks. *Ras Imru* recounted:

[O]n 23 December 1935 [the Italians] dropped barrels that broke up upon hitting the ground . . . projecting a colorless liquid . . . a few hundred of my men were hit by the mysterious liquid . . . their feet, their hands, their faces were covered with blisters . . . I did not know how to fight this rain that burned and killed!<sup>47</sup>

At first, aerial yperite bombardment was of limited effectiveness because Ethiopian soldiers had learned to scatter and wait for the winds to dissolve the toxic gas. But during the Ethiopian encirclement of Mekele, the Italians, fearing defeat, installed devices that enabled them to spray large areas. By the end of January 1936, soldiers, women, children, cattle, rivers, lakes, and pastures were systematically sprayed with gas.<sup>48</sup> The cases of suffocation, however, were fewer than those of blisters and ulcers.<sup>49</sup> The poison was lethal because it produced ulcers and blisters all over the body and it blinded its victims. Those who escaped the deadly rain would fall victim to intestinal poisoning because they drank water contaminated by yperite. Yperite also paralyzed communications in Ethiopia because it killed mules and horses, which were used for transportation and for carrying messages. People could not walk without being affected by the poison, which produced ulcers on their bare feet. Gas was even more dangerous for animals than for people, because animals were left to wander.<sup>50</sup> Foreign observers estimated that the use of poison gas played an important role in the termination of the hostilities. The negative effects of the gas on morale were superior to those of firearms,<sup>51</sup> and Haile Selassie believed that yperite brought far more damage to his army than conventional weapons.<sup>52</sup> When international opposition grew stronger, Mussolini advised his generals to suspend the use of gas, at least for a time, but Graziani continued and had to be told again to stop.<sup>53</sup>

When, after World War II, documentary evidence emerged that Italy had used poison gas in Ethiopia, the reaction of Italian public opinion was one of astonishment, indignation, disbelief, and doubt.<sup>54</sup> No one knows exactly how many gas bombs were dropped in Ethiopia. Even Graziani claimed that he was not well informed. He stated that the only person who knew was Captain Franco Freda, officer in charge of the Military Chemical Service in Italian East Africa.<sup>55</sup> General Emilio Faldella, assistant to the chief of the Italian Intelligence Service in East Africa, made the improbable claim that neither he nor his superior, General Roatta, knew about the use of poison gas against the Ethiopians.<sup>56</sup> Alessandro Lessona, former Minister of Colonies, admitted to the use of gas to punish the massacre of two Italian aviators fallen behind Ethiopian lines.<sup>57</sup> But he only recently admitted that

he knew about its use; however, he added that he felt absolved because he told Mussolini it was a mistake. He also explained, but few believe it, that when the use of gas was authorized he was not in his office. However, there is evidence that Lessona signed telegrams authorizing the gas bombing.<sup>58</sup>

In the end, public opinion was not so interested in Ethiopia. It shifted its attention to Europe as a result of the German reoccupation of the Rhineland. Historians, political personalities, and military leaders have ignored the problem. In this connection, it is important to remember that the Italians were not alone in using poison gas. The French employed it in their colonial campaigns in Morocco, and Japan used it against China in 1937. In spite of international agreement against its employment, all major powers used gas for defensive and offensive reasons between the two world wars as well as in chemical warfare research and poison gas production. What international public opinion opposed was aerial bombardment with poison gas on civilian targets. This preoccupation explains the international protest against the Italian use of yperite in Ethiopia. Information about the use of yperite was noticed in early 1936 after Haile Selassie denounced its use. His charge was corroborated by the eyewitness accounts of journalists and medical personnel. By that time Italy had barraged northern Ethiopia with three hundred tons of yperite. It took three months for the League of Nations to assess the reliability of the charges, but by the time Geneva had decided to launch an inquest it was too late, as Italy had won the war.<sup>59</sup> The League of Nations was thus also partly responsible for Italy's continuing use of poison gas because its policy was to moderate rather than oppose the Italian occupation of Ethiopia.

### Notes

1. Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Ministero dell'Aeronautica Militare (MAM), 8/1937/2/IV/9, General A. Monti (General Staff at the MAM) to MAM, October 8, 1937.
2. Ibid., General A. Monti to MAM, October 8, 1937, and *ibid.*, General A. Fiore (Director of the MAM, Office of Constructions and Supplies) to MAM, Cabinet, September 28, 1937. Fiore reports that he had orders to load 5,335 bomb shells with yperite and arsine and not, as Monti suggests, 4,600. See Giorgio Rochat, "L'impiego dei gas nella guerra d'Etiopia, 1935-1936," *Rivista di storia contemporanea* 1 (1988): 88.
3. ACS, MAM, 31, 1957, *fascicolo* 8/II/14, General A. Ricchetti to General Valle (Undersecretary of the Ministry of Aeronautics), September 19, 1936. Also see Mario Roatta et al., *Il processo Roatta* (Rome: De Luigi, 1945), 30.
4. Fondazione Luigi Einaudi (Turin), Carte Conte Paolo Di Revel (hereafter abbreviated as Einaudi/Di Revel), *fascicolo* 24/7, E. Cambi: Scheme of the monthly expenditure for East Africa, February 17, 1936.

5. Ministero dell'Africa Italiana (MAI), Direzione Affari Economici e Finanziari, C/2-93, Inter-ministerial commission for the production of raw materials, Cloro, November 1937.
6. Einaudi-Di Revel, 1/88, State Bookkeeping Office: Military expenses for East Africa, March 1936.
7. *Ibid.*, 24/7, Cambi, Monthly Expenditures for East Africa, February 17, 1936.
8. Ministero degli Affari Esteri (MAE), Comitato per la documentazione delle attività italiane in Africa, Aldo Vitale Papers 111, Valle to Ministero delle Colonie (hereafter abbreviated as MC), May 1, 1934.
9. ACS, MAM, 31/1937/8/I/14, MA: Cost of a C 500-T bomb (yperite), November 27, 1936. The total cost of the bomb was of 4,502 Lire—shell, four hundred Lire; fuse, 410 Lire; casing, 187 Lire, trinitrotoluene (TNT), fifteen Lire; empennage, 550 Lire; yperite, 2,940 Lire.
10. Mussolini to Graziani, July 7, 1937. Angelo Del Boca published Mussolini's 120 telegrams authorizing the use of poison gas in *Il Giorno*, November 11–21, 1968.
11. Graziani to MC, September 11, 1936; Graziani to Pirzio Biroli, September 11, 1936; Graziani to MC, September 12, 1936; Graziani to MC, October 27, 1936; all published in: Ethiopia (Press and Information Office), *La civilisation de l'italie fasciste en Éthiopie* (Addis Ababa, n. p., 1938), 23–26, 30, 36, 39.
12. Rochat, "L'impiego dei gas," 100, 102–103; ACS, MAM 11/1938/2/IV/1, G. Macerantini (Director of the Office for Supplies of Airports) to MAM, Cabinet, November 14, 1939; *ibid.*, 8/1937/2/IV/1, MAM: Situation of Ammunition in AOI by month, n.d. (1937–1938).
13. ACS, MAM, 11/1938/2/IV/1, G. Macerantini to MAM Cabinet, November 14, 1939; *ibid.*, 8/1937/2/IV/1, Situation of Ammunition in AOI, n.d. (1937–1938); Angelo Del Boca, "I crimini del colonialismo fascista," in *Le guerre coloniali del fascismo*, ed. Angelo Del Boca, 232–255 (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1991), 239–240.
14. ACS, Carte Rodolfo Graziani (RG), 63-H, SIM (Italian Intelligence Service) of Mogadishu, Bulletin AO, October 27, 1935.
15. MAI, Archivio Segreto di Gabinetto (Gab), 263/97, De Bono to Graziani, October 16, 1935, telegram no. 14323/6748; also, MC to Graziani, October 17, 1935, telegram no. 11889.
16. Mussolini to Graziani in Mogadishu, October 27, 1935 (published by Angelo Del Boca in *Il Giorno*, November 12, 1968); also see Rochat, "L'impiego dei gas," 96.
17. ACS, RG, 10/19, Graziani to all military commanders of the southern front, April 20, 1936.
18. George Lawther Steer, *Caesar in Abyssinia* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936).
19. Pietro Badoglio, *La guerra d'Etiopia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1936), 101; Antonio Perria, *Impero mod. '91* (Milan: Il Momento, 1967), 180, n. 3; Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa orientale: La conquista dell'impero* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1979), 440, 486, 488.
20. ACS, RG, 12, Badoglio to Mussolini, Enda Jesus, February 19, 1936.

21. MAI, Gab, 28, list of reports on Ethiopian war crimes collected and prepared by Doctor Gerardo Mennonna, K'orahe, March 28, 1936; ACS, Ministero della Cultura Popolare (MCP), 167/115, Marco Marchini to Ciano, Geneva, January 8, 1936.
22. *Ibid.*, Marchini to Ciano, Geneva, February 1, 1936.
23. MAI, Gab, 11/II-2, message intercepted by the Italian Intelligence Service and forwarded by Mussolini to Badoglio in Mekele on January 16, 1936.
24. ACS, Ministero della Marina Militare, 168, Captain Stefano Miccichè to the Ministero, October 7, 1936; ACS, Cultura, 95/14, Project of news communication for foreign press release, April 10, 1936.
25. ACS, Cultura, 95/14, Marchini to Ciano, Geneva, January 8, 1936.
26. F. Suvich (Undersecretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) to the League of Nations: Document No. 216692/26, Rome, May 16, 1936. Frère's letter was dated Djibuti, April 22, 1936.
27. Suvich to the League of Nations, "Ethiopian Atrocities and Misuse of the Red Cross Emblem," Geneva, March 10, 1936, Document No. C. 104. M. 45/1936; G. L. Steer reports that the head of pilot Minniti was brought to *ras* Nasibu by Somalis, as proof of their loyalty to Ethiopia (*Caesar in Abyssinia*, 243).
28. Rodolfo Graziani, *Il fronte sud* (Milan: Mondadori, 1938), 220; author's personal interview with Alessandro Lessona, former Minister of Colonies, October 27, 1972.
29. ACS, RG, 12, Mussolini to Badoglio, February 29, 1936.
30. Perria, *Impero Mod.* '91, 167.
31. ACS, RG, 10/19, Nasi to Italian Armed Forces, High Command of the southern front, April 23, 1936.
32. *Ibid.*, Mussolini to Graziani, April 27 and 28, 1936; MAI, Gab, 12/III, Mussolini to Graziani and Badoglio, April 27, 1936; Rochat, "L'impiego dei gas," 99–100.
33. MAI, Ufficio Affari Politici (Pol), 15/124, Henry to "Mon cher ami," Addis Ababa, March 21, 1936 (letter intercepted by SIM).
34. Archivio Storico MAI (ASMAI), 181/35–166, Lessona to Governatore Generale, AOI, June 1, 1936.
35. *Ibid.*, Badoglio to MC, Asmara, February 29, 1936; ACS, RG, 12, Badoglio to MC, Makale, February 22, 1936.
36. *Ibid.*, Gabba (Chief of Staff of the Italian Army in AOI) to MC, Mekele, February 20, 1936.
37. Herbert M. Hanson and Della Hanson, *For God and Emperor*, 35 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958).
38. ASMAI 181/35–166, MAE to MC, August 12, 1936; Belau's deposition, Geneva, March 23, 1936.
39. ACS, RG, 12, Badoglio to MC, Enda Selassie, February 4, 1936.
40. *Ibid.*, Badoglio to Lessona, March 4, 1936.
41. ACS, MCP, 95/8, Text of news to distribute to foreign press agencies, January 1, 1936.
42. ACS, Carte Manlio Morgagni, 4/9, Information for the Press, January 2, 1936.

43. ASMAI, 181/35–166, Cremonesi, Italian Red Cross to MAE, Rome, July 8, 1936. This information was given by Mr. Junod to Count Vinci.
44. ACS, MAM, 64/1937/12/X/11, Gunnar Ulland, *Under genferkorset i Etiopia med den norske ambulanse* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1936), 69.
45. MAI, Pol, 15/124, Workeneh Martin to Haile Selassie, London, January 25, 1936 (letter intercepted by SIM).
46. Perria, *Impero Mod.* '91, 168.
47. Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa orientale. La conquista dell'impero*, 490.
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Bulletin belge des sciences militaires* (March 1937): 127–128.
50. Count Gustav Van Rosen, interview with the author, Stockholm, November 2, 1970.
51. *Bulletin belge des sciences militaires* (March 1937): 128.
52. MAI, Gab, 281, Sivrisarian to Associated Press, London, Addis Ababa, May 1, 1936 (telegram intercepted by SIM); *Times of India* (Bombay), February 26, 1937.
53. ACS, RG, 10/19, Mussolini to Graziani, April 10, 1936; *Ibid.*, Meregazzi to Graziani, April 21, 1936.
54. *Oggi*, December 28, 1947, and January 11, 1948.
55. ACS, RG, 64/215, Graziani: biographical sketch of Captain Franco Freda, January 4, 1949.
56. Interview by Del Boca with General Faldella: Angelo Del Boca, *La guerra d'Abissinia, 1935–1941* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1978), 76.
57. Alessandro Lessona, *Memorie* (Florence: Sansoni, 1958), 292.
58. Pitamitz, A. "Tavola rotonda: Gli Italiani in AOI," *Storia illustrata* (January 1980).
59. Rochat, "L'impiego dei gas," 90, 103–104.

Part II

# **Colonization**

# State and Class Formation and Collaboration in Colonial Libya

*Ali Abdullatif Ahmida*

In early nineteenth-century Libya, townsmen, peasants, and tribesmen identified their interests according to kinship, regional, and religious ideologies rather than class affiliation. Although distinct classes existed, class formation was hindered by the self-sufficiency of seminomads and small peasantry, and the instability of the central state and private property. By 1911, when Italian rule began, the effects of eighty years of Ottoman state formation and the development of European capitalism had unsettled the old tributary social structure and fostered the emergence of more defined class configurations that differed markedly among the country's three regions. Tripolitania had an urban notable class, a peasantry, and tribal confederations, while Fezzan was dominated by tribal confederations, landowning clans, and sharecropping peasants. Cyrenaica had no peasantry, and the formation of the Sanusi state integrated tribal factions into one cohesive social force.

These differing class configurations and the socioeconomic processes that produced them were largely ignored not only by the Italian occupiers but also by several traditions of postwar scholarship that perceived pre-colonial Maghrib society as an agglomeration of tribes or tribal states that were isolated from the larger social and economic structures of the region and modernized only under European colonialism.<sup>1</sup> This chapter calls such Eurocentric theories into question. I show that the construction of a modern urban-centered state began in alliance with the Ottomans, and suggest that, under Italian colonialism, collaboration and resistance must be understood in reference to issues of state formation and political

economy. Differing class configurations and degrees of socioeconomic development in Tripolitania, Fezzan, and Cyrenaica must be factored to make sense of the extent and type of collaboration and resistance among classes, tribes, and ethnic groups in Libya.

From 1835, when Ottoman rule began, state formation had proceeded through policies that curtailed the power of autonomous tribal chiefs and established an army, schools, courts, and postal and telegraph systems.<sup>2</sup> The Ottomans also recruited from local populations for their police and army.<sup>3</sup> The abolition of tax exemptions and the institution of direct tax collection generated new revenues to support this state buildup. Yet many tribes refused to register their land, complicating tax collection.

Especially in Tripolitania, the strength of autonomous kinship ideologies also resisted and mediated Ottoman state formation for much of the nineteenth century. Kinship ideology symbolized the collective ownership of land. A belief in a common ancestor unified households, clans, and tribes, helping them survive in a harsh, arid environment with limited water and pasture land. Kinship ideology applied not only to full members of these groups but also to clients, slaves, and artisans with lower status.

The self-sufficiency of a tribe encouraged identification primarily with that tribe and secondarily with that tribe's allies.<sup>4</sup> Some of the most powerful tribal chiefs refused to relinquish their status and autonomy; others reconciled with the state. As a general trend, seminomadism coexisted and allied with merchant capital,<sup>5</sup> and merchants allied with whoever gave them security. If the state could protect their trade, merchants would pay it tribute. But in the hinterland, merchants of the Sahara trade had to pay tribal chiefs tribute to ensure free passage. Although private property existed in urban areas, in the hinterland collective tribal ownership still dominated.

### **Class Formation in Tripolitania and Fezzan**

The development of capitalism, which was fostered by Ottoman state reforms but also resulted from direct European capitalist intervention in the region, also acted to weaken the older tributary and pastoral economies. The decline of the Sahara trade devastated rural Tripolitania and especially Fezzan. Merchants were forced to return to their native towns,<sup>6</sup> and British and Italian capital created job opportunities for tribesmen and peasants in urban Tripolitania as wage laborers in mills, construction, and on farms, as did French capital in the colonial territory of Tunisia.<sup>7</sup> The Ottoman state encouraged tribesmen still tied to the traditional pastoral economy to settle, tying them to its administration

through incentives and taxes. After 1900, four classes emerged which coexisted alongside the tribal confederation: a salaried *'ayan* urban notable class, linked to the Ottoman state administration;<sup>8</sup> a *compradore* merchant class tied to British and Italian capital; a peasant class; and urban workers.

In Tripolitania, the decline of the Sahara trade and the development of capitalism facilitated new class formations through peasantization (settling tribesmen on the land) and proletarianization (the rise of wage laborers in towns).<sup>9</sup> Although class formations had existed during the first half of the nineteenth century, the instability of the central state and private property had meant that distinctions were not great. Now, the weakening of the major tribal confederation in the hinterland caused many tribesmen to lose their livelihoods as guides, lessors of animals, and tribute recipients. Agriculture became the only major activity apart from herding. New peasants either worked their own plots of land through extended family labor or served as sharecroppers for rich peasants and landlords. Other tribesmen worked as shepherds for rich tribal chiefs.<sup>10</sup> The Ottoman state encouraged settlement through land registration, security, a legal system that resolved disputes, and the introduction of new crops such as potatoes, cotton, coffee, and rice.<sup>11</sup> Through the payment of taxes, peasants became tied to the state administration and its courts. This peasantization was accompanied by small-scale proletarianization. Landless peasants and tribesmen moved to town and worked as wage laborers for British companies and Bank of Rome projects, or migrated to Tunisia.

This process of class formation was not necessarily deep, nor can it be viewed as replacing the old agro-pastoral and mercantile groups; rather, it ushered in changes such as increased urbanization, especially the development of Tripoli City as the larger urban market of the whole Regency. Tripoli City's population went up from twenty thousand to 29,664 between 1883 and 1911.<sup>12</sup> Tripoli also began to exert a degree of hegemony over the countryside, providing political and economic services to peasants, tribesmen, artisans, and merchants of the hinterland. As Tripoli's courts, banks, schools, and markets gained in importance, urban institutions began to replace tribal institutions. The Tripolitanian regional economy was, thus, in transition from a communal and self-sufficient tributary trading economy to a mixture of a tributary and capitalist economy. Capitalist penetration, while strong in coastal and eastern Tripolitania, did not much affect seminomadic tribes, which continued to reproduce their tributary social relations.

Fezzan was much more affected by the decline of the Sahara trade, since its historic importance derived from its rich and strategic trans-Sahara trade markets. In Fezzan, a thriving date industry was the locus of

transformations to settled agriculture. Yet by the turn of the century, social configurations revolving around Fezzan's rich trans-Saharan trade markets and a productive oasis agriculture had begun to give way to three distinct classes: landowners, mostly Arab, Tuareg, and Sharifian marabutic families, a small peasantry, and sharecroppers. Tribesmen, the peasantry, and the urban poor paid the price for these changes—through taxes, minimal wages, and the loss of tribal land.

The *compradore* merchant class benefited from the enhancement of Ottoman state authority and the transition to a more capitalistic economy that meant greater communication and trading between cities and the hinterland. Composed mostly of Libyan Jews or Europeans (in large part Maltese, French, and Italian) and dominant in local and import–export trading, this group had its own courts, some tax exemptions, and state protection.<sup>13</sup> A number of these merchants, including Libyan Jews, held European citizenship, and they defended European interests before and during colonialism. In the city of Tripoli alone, 8,609 Jewish-Libyan artisans and traders had Ottoman nationality, and five hundred others held French citizenship.<sup>14</sup>

The *'ayan*, or Muslim bureaucratic notable class, also benefited from the strengthening of Ottoman authority. These notables acted as intermediaries between the Ottoman state and the local peasants, artisans, and tribesmen in matters such as revenue collection. Although they already represented the most educated and wealthiest segments of the population, the centralization of Ottoman power provided them with many new opportunities for advancement. Men from the Tripolitanian notable class (the *'ulama*), the Cologhli (descendants of Turkish officers and local women), and the tribal elites provided the Ottoman state with authoritative religious interpreters, judges, court officials, teachers, and mosque *shaykhs*, filling most of the middle and lower administrative positions under the new system.<sup>15</sup> Although they increasingly fought over land and positions in the state bureaucracy, in the years preceding the Italian invasion of Libya—during the Young Turk rule—many of them found common ground in pan-Islamic ideology. This ideology did not replace tribal and religious affiliations, but rather reflected the rise of an articulate urban class that would constitute one base of resistance against the Italian occupiers.

### Class Formation in Cyrenaica

In Cyrenaica, the transformation of tribesmen into landlords, peasants, and wage laborers was the result of tribal wars, droughts, and state recruitment. Yet this process occurred mainly within the regional economy of Cyrenaica (the western desert and the Nile Valley of Egypt) rather than

inside Cyrenaica itself, since severe drought and intertribal war had forced some Cyrenaican tribes to migrate to Egypt starting in the eighteenth century. Exiled tribes fought over the best pastureland and water resources; throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, defeated tribes were pushed farther east into the Nile Valley, where they settled as peasants (*fallahin*). Understanding class formation requires us to look beyond colonial and nation-state boundaries, which are, after all, relatively recent and sometimes temporary creations.

In this region of Libya, the social and economic transformations that marked the years of Ottoman rule were shaped and managed by the Sanusi brotherhood. Originally a religious movement tied to anticolonial resistance, the Sanusiya grew by the early twentieth century into a *de facto* state that integrated both the elaborate Cyrenaican tribal system and the Sahara merchants. The Sanusi lodge system was crucial to the order's legitimation by both groups from the 1870s on. Since Sanusi lodges lay in between tribal lands, they transcended tribal affiliations, and they served as stations for trade, cultivation, agriculture, worship, education, and the courts. Diverse ethnic and regional groups were unified under the banner of trade and Islam.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Sanusi order had become deeply rooted as a state and as a religion: it organized trade, led prayers, and resolved disputes; it had territory, followers, and a judicial and bureaucratic structure. Thus it comes as no surprise that Sanusi followers voluntarily gave the Muslim *'ushr*, or tithe, to the Sanusi *shaykhs*, but refused to pay taxes to the Ottoman state. Indeed, since its inception, the order of the Grand Sanusi had aimed to educate its followers morally and socially to resist European colonial advances into North and Central Africa. As such advances intensified, so did Sanusi military training and education programs; students increased from five thousand in 1897 to fifteen thousand in 1900.<sup>16</sup> By the time the Sanusi, under the leadership of Ahmad-al Sharif, declared an official state in 1913 in response to the Italian occupation of Libya, the order had developed its own class structure, infrastructure, and ideology, and its lodges had effectively replaced the weak coastal towns of Cyrenaica as centers of economic, political, and civic life.

Sanusi social structure was by no means egalitarian. The dominant Sanusi family received a yearly tribute from their *waqf* land, which was exempted from Ottoman taxes. The brotherhood was dominated by two classes: the Ikhwan *'ulama* class of the Sanusi family, and Sahara merchants. The elite *'ulama* class intermarried with the Sanusi family but not with members of other groups.<sup>17</sup> The Ikhwan and the merchants received most of the surpluses from trade and agro-pastoral products. The merchants profited from their investments in the Sahara trade, and

the Ikhwan received yearly *'ushr* alms, as well as *zakat* or tributes in kind, such as wool, sheep, or grain.

The coming of European colonialism to the Sahara, which posed a threat to this power system, prompted a variety of responses. On the one hand, when the French expanded into Bilad al-Sudan (the “land of the blacks” in Arabic, which refers to the Sahara region from Sudan to Senegal), the Sanusi activated an armed resistance, fighting the French from 1897 to 1910 in what is now Chad. Yet they also demonstrated a pragmatic understanding of diplomacy, inviting the Ottomans to their territory in Cyrenaica in the wake of the French invasion in order to benefit from Ottoman diplomatic, legal, and military status. After a 1902 defeat by the French, for example, the head of the Sanusi order asked the Ottomans to send a government to its main center of Kufra, which prevented the French from invading there.

The most serious danger, of course, came from the north, beginning with the Italian invasion of Libya in 1911. When the Ottomans signed a peace treaty with Italy in 1912 and left Libya, they granted independence to the Libyans, giving the Sanusiya the opportunity to declare an independent state in 1913 with *jihad* as its ideology. By 1916, the Sanusi family governed Cyrenaica and Fezzan and was able to mobilize a large army that fought alongside the Ottomans against the British in western Egypt that year. Sanusi forces also offered the largest base of resistance against the Italians, and for twenty years Cyrenaica remained the center of Libyan opposition to colonial rule.

### **Class Structure and Collaboration during Italian Occupation**

In postcolonial Libyan historiography, collaboration with the Italian colonial state is poorly studied, in part because postindependence Libyan nationalism drew its stock of heroes, martyrs, and legends from the anti-colonial resistance. History was used politically by postcolonial states in both the monarchical years of 1951–1969 and the republican eras. Sources on collaboration, such as memoirs and other documents, are still guarded by concerned families; only after 1970 did new material become available to researchers. Postcolonial Libyan studies tend to reduce the motives of the *mutalinin*, the ones who “went Italian,” to a lack of moral character. Such reductionist views ignore the social background and the complexity of motives of these Libyans who lived through the Italian occupation.

Indeed, reactions to colonialism took many complex forms, including armed resistance, trade, negotiation, invasions, emigration, accommodations, and collaboration. The reactions of various factions of Libyan

society differed from one region to another as well as inside each region. This diversity stemmed from the unequal socioeconomic development of each region in relation to urban markets and the degree of capitalist penetration. Whereas Tripolitania was partially penetrated by finance capital and portions of its hinterland became integrated into Tripoli City, the Sanusi order had a weak socioeconomic relationship with the coastal towns.

In Tripolitania, Italian colonial policy makers tried to buy off local notables and merchants as early as the 1890s. Collaboration surfaced after 1918 as contradictions among Tripolitanian notables became exacerbated by the Italian exploitation of these contradictions through money, arms, and promises to appoint these notables as administrators. Yet collaboration among old-class notables was not the dominant pattern in Tripolitania. Rather, most of Tripolitania's urban notables, especially those who were pro-Young Turks, emerged as the main leaders of the resistance.

Big *compradore* merchants, especially those tied to the Bank of Rome, sided with Italy to protect their economic interests. Collaborators of this class, such as Hasuna Qaramanli, the mayor of Tripoli, powerful Muslim merchants like the Muntasir clan, and Jewish merchants such as the Halfuns family, not only facilitated Italian economic and cultural interests in Tripoli City, but also aided the Italian army in occupying the city.<sup>18</sup> Through the Italian consulate in Tripoli, Mayor Hasuna was in contact with the Italian government from 1890 on.<sup>19</sup> His motive for collaborating with the Italians was his ambition to become the ruler of Tripoli like his grandfather, 'Ali Qaramanli. Believing the Italians would install him as ruler of Libya in the same way the French alliance had installed the local Hussaynid dynasty in Tunisia after 1881, he helped the Italian army by collecting Ottoman-distributed guns from the city on October 4, 1911.<sup>20</sup> However, the colonial authorities did not appoint him ruler since he had no influence outside the city, instead awarding him the vice-governorship of the city.<sup>21</sup>

Another example of upper-class collaboration is to be found among the members of the Muntasir notable merchant class.<sup>22</sup> The Muntasir clan emerged as merchants in the coastal town of Mişrata during the second half of the nineteenth century, replacing their rival clan, al-Adgham, after the defeat of the latter in the rebellion of 1835–1858. 'Uthman al-Adgham, the Agha of Mişrata, allied with the rebels against the Ottoman state.<sup>23</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, 'Umar al-Muntasir and his sons became wealthy and rose to the top of the newly organized local bureaucracy. The wealth they accumulated from trade allowed them to build clientage and intermarry with members of other prominent clans in the region.<sup>24</sup> These kin connections with other notables help to explain why until 1908 the Muntasirs were accepted locally by other notables as administrators of Gharyan, Tarhuna, Mişrata, and Surt.

That year, though, the Muntasir clan and other urban merchants and notables working for the well-paying Bank of Rome sided with Italy against the government of the Young Turks. There were specific reasons for their enthusiasm. Like most collaborators, the Muntasirs justified their actions as a reaction to what they saw as harassment and a bias against their interests. As a merchant family, they wanted to retain their fortune and influence in the region. They were also motivated by a desire for revenge against their rivals in Tripolitania.<sup>25</sup> Ahmad Diya al-Din al-Muntasir was in Rome just before the invasion, consulting and advising colonial officials on Libyan affairs. His father, ‘Umar, used his influence to aid the army in occupying Tripolitania, Miṣrata, the city of Surt, and later Fezzan.<sup>26</sup> In exchange, the Italian colonial authorities kept them on as advisors and administrators.<sup>27</sup>

Jewish middlemen tied to Italian interests also welcomed and collaborated with the Italians prior to and during the occupation. Many merchants dominated the import–export trade with Italy and spoke Italian. When Italy began its policy of cultural and economic penetration, the Jews in Tripoli were eager to enroll in Italian schools, work in the companies of the Bank of Rome, and write for Italian newspapers. In 1907, the first Tripoli newspaper in a European language was the Italian *Eco di Tripoli*, edited by Gustavo Arbib.<sup>28</sup> In sum, economic interests motivated many merchants to collaborate with the colonial Italian state. Poor Jews were less enthusiastic than rich merchants; however, it seems most Jews welcomed the Italians.<sup>29</sup>

There were also collaborators whom one could call “waverers” in the Tripolitanian interior. Tribes that still lived on the periphery and had been rivals of the Ottoman administration, or that had been active in the resistance at other times, either did not view the Italian expansion into other areas as inimical or accepted Italian money and arms and fought on the side of the Italian army. These tribes saw their action not as collaboration but as a matter of “getting even” with their rivals. Other tribal leaders fought the Italians until they were killed or forced into exile. The explanation of such diverse actions depends on the issue of tribal politics in late nineteenth-century Tripolitania.

A review of oral histories collected by the Libyan Studies Center in Tripoli, and my own interviews, reveal a persistent trend: many notables and chiefs were eager to retain their administrative positions even after the Ottoman empire signed a peace treaty with Italy in October 1912 and withdrew from Libya. These positions gave local notables access to state salaries, as well as the ability to offer favors to their kin groups by using their influence in the bureaucracy. As the Ottomans withdrew from Libya and local notables began to make alliances, and certain notables were rewarded over others. These alliances affected some notables and

chiefs who became bitter and wanted to “get even,” or preserve their influence with those who threatened and imperiled their power by excluding them from bureaucratic leadership. Some of these notables and chiefs joined the Italian side to correct what they saw as injustices committed against them. In short, the Italian army was not the main enemy; many chiefs regarded rival chiefs as more urgent threats to their status and power. Since many chiefs did not have religious or nationalist goals, they had no difficulty collaborating with the Italian state to protect their tribal or economic interests. Colonialism was, for these chiefs and notables, a pragmatic way to preserve their interests and positions.

Collaboration and factionalism among notables ultimately undermined the Tripolitanian resistance, which had fifteen thousand fighters in 1913.<sup>30</sup> Over the next years, Ottoman arms and money strengthened the power of those notables and chiefs who had decided to resist Italian occupation, and in 1918 Tripolitanian urban notables and rural leaders reconciled and formed a Tripolitanian Republic (1918–1920), which, while unrecognized by Italian, French, and British governments, delayed the definitive Italian occupation of Tripolitania until 1923.

In Cyrenaica too, urban notables collaborated with the Italian state. This was particularly true of the coastal urban areas, which had only weak ties with the Sanusi-dominated hinterland. Further isolated under Italian occupation, they became targets of fascist propaganda, and many notables accepted the jobs and salaries proffered to them by the Italians. Yet years of education and mobilization by the Sanusi state had created cohesion among Cyrenaican tribes and an anticolonial mentality that fostered resistance. Sanusi forces prevented Italian troops from expanding past the coastal areas, and between 1916 and 1922, Italian colonial policy shifted its course to make peace with the Sanusi. The 1916 Agreement of al-Zuwaytina recognized Italian sovereignty along the coast and Sanusi sovereignty in the hinterland, allowed for free trade, exempted Sanusi land and lodges (*zawiya*) from taxes, and granted the Sanusi family and the senior Ikhwan monthly salaries in exchange for disbandment and disarmament of Sanusi tribes.<sup>31</sup> Some senior Sanusi tribal leaders refused to give up their arms, most notably *shaykh* ‘Umar al-Mukhtar, who was a veteran of the anticolonial wars against the French and the British. These men, who came from lower-status tribal backgrounds, espoused pan-Islamic anticolonial ideology, and became the protagonists of a protracted guerrilla war waged against the Italian fascist colonial armies between 1922 and 1932. In fact, this guerrilla resistance occasioned a social revolution inside Cyrenaica that pitted al-Mukhtar and other non-elite tribal commanders against a Sanusi leadership that had increasingly ceded to and collaborated with

the Italians. Mass deportations to concentration camps and other genocidal practices by the fascists succeeded in ending the resistance, but created martyr figures such as al-Mukhtar, who was executed at the age of sixty-nine in front of twenty thousand Cyrenaican tribesmen and tribeswomen in 1931.

### **Conclusion: Collaboration and Class Formation**

As in other peripheral societies, factionalism in Libya led to collaboration with oppressors. Each faction sought allies as the safest means to protect their authority and interests, especially in the context of colonial rule. Departure of the Ottoman army and bureaucrats after 1912 led to competition among notables over tax revenues and Ottoman and German aid, inhibiting the rise of unified leadership. Against this background several types of collaboration emerged motivated by class interests, the political ambition of upper classes, and ethnic divisions of labor. Exploited by the Italians through money, arms, and promises of political appointments, collaboration led to the early crushing of the resistance and the 1923 occupation of Tripolitania.

Reactions to colonialism took forms ranging from armed resistance, trade, negotiation, invasions, emigration, accommodation, to collaboration. The responses differed from one region to another as well as within regions depending upon socioeconomic development, availability of urban markets, and degree of capitalist penetration. As early as the 1890s, the Italian colonial policy makers used the ambitions of local notables and merchants to create friction among classes, tribes, and ethnic groups. To understand resistance movements, we need to examine why these groups were led to cooperate with the colonial state as guides, soldiers, or informants.

To conclude, as we have seen, these diverse regional socioeconomic changes that had occurred over the nineteenth century produced distinct classes in the three Libyan regions by the time the Italians occupied the country in 1911. In the last section of this chapter, I have examined how (in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica) socioeconomic differences affected collaboration with Italian colonialists, and why these groups cooperated with the Italian state as guides, administrators, soldiers, and informants in the first decade of the occupation. In Fezzan, the Riyah and the Magarha tribes who were rivals to Awlad Sulayman tribes before 1911 collaborated with the Italian state as a strategy to “get even” with their rivals. Similar cases can be seen in other regions as in the case of Warfalla and the Mashashiyya tribes in eastern Tripolitania. Such collaboration should be seen as self-interested action before the formation of modern Libyan nationalist

ideology. Further research needs to be done on the archival sources, family sources, and oral traditions to recover the agency of the various groups who collaborated. This will shed more light on the politics of collaboration, and move scholarship beyond both the idealization of colonial sources and the condemnations of the nationalist school of Libyan history.

### Notes

1. I am referring here primarily to the segmentary model of analysis as articulated by British social anthropologists, particularly Edward E. Evans-Pritchard and Ernest Gellner, and to the work of modernization theorists such as Daniel Lerner. See the classic work by Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), 59–60; Gellner's *Saints of the Atlas* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969), 35–70. Critiques of this model include David Seddon, "Economic Anthropology or Political Economy: Approaches to the Analysis of Pre-Capitalist Formation in the Maghrib," in *The New Economic Anthropology*, ed. John Clammer, 61–107 (London: Macmillan, 1978); Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1968), 8–11; Lila Abu-Lughod, "Zones of Theory in the Anthropology of the Arab World," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18 (1989): 280–287. Works informed by modernization methodologies include Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernization in the Middle East* (New York: Free Press, 1958); and Lisa Anderson, *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya, 1830–1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986). For a critique of this latter work, see my review of this book published in *The Arab Journal of International Studies* 1, no. 2 (1988): 110–115. Greater detail on this and other issues discussed in this essay is available in my book *The Making of Modern Libya. State Formation, Colonization, and Resistance, 1830–1932* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994).
2. On the state increasing its presence by building a modern network of telegraph communication, see Ahmad Sidqi Dajani and 'Abd al-Salam Ad'ham, *Watha'iq tarikh Libiya al-hadith: Al-watha'iq al-'Uthmaniyah, 1881–1911* (Benghazi: University of Benghazi, 1974), 169.
3. Michel F. Le Gall, "Pashas, Bedouins, and Notables in the Ottoman Administration in Tripolitania and Benghazi 1881–1902" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1986), 117.
4. Emrys L. Peters, "Cultural and Social Diversity," in *Libya Since Independence: Economic and Political Development*, ed. John A. Allan (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 106.
5. Bashir Q. Yusha', *Ghadamis, watha'iq tijariyah tarikhiyah ijtimaiyah (1228–1310 Hijri)* (Tripoli: Libyan Studies Center, 1982), 109; and Dennis D. Cordell, "The Awlad Sulayman of Libya and Chad: Power and Adaptation in the Sahara and Sahel," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 19, no. 2 (1985): 330.

6. Gustav Nachtigal, *Sahara and Sudan*, vol. 1 (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1974), 122; Francesco Corò, *Settantasei anni di dominazione turca in Libia, 1835–1911* (Tripoli: Dar al-Ferjani, 1971 [Tripoli: Maggi, 1937]); and Ettore Rossi, *Storia di Tripoli e della Tripolitania dalla conquista araba al 1911* (Beirut: Dar al-Thaqafa, 1974 [Rome: Istituto per l'Oriente, 1968]), 416.
7. On tribesmen and peasant migrations to French Tunisia, see Jean Despois, *Géographie humaine* (Algiers: Imbert, 1946), 182–183; and his *Le Djebel Nefousa (Tripolitaine): Étude géographique* (Paris: Larousse, 1935), 166–167; also J. Hilal, "Agriculture and Socioeconomic Change in the Region of Misallata, Tripolitania," *Dirassat: Libyan Economic and Business Review* (Benghazi University) 5, no. 1 (1969): 124. On migrations to urban Tripolitania, see Robert S. Harrison, "Migrants in the City of Tripoli," *The Geographical Review* 57, no. 3 (1967): 415; and Ahmad Sidqi Dajani, *Libya qubayla al-ihlil al-itali* (Cairo: al-Matba'a al-Faniyya, 1971), 222, 224, 238.
8. Le Gall, "Pashas," 93.
9. Ken Post, "Peasantization and Rural Political Movements in West Africa," *Archives européennes de sociologie* 8, no. 2 (1972): 229.
10. J. A. Noel Brehony, "Seminomadism in the Jabal Tarhune," in *Field Studies in Libya*, ed. S. G. Willimott and John I. Clarke, Research Paper Series, no. 4 (Durham, England: Durham Colleges in the University of Durham, Department of Geography, 1960), 63.
11. 'Umar A. Ibn Isma'il, *Inhiyar hukim al-usra al-qaramanliya fi Libya (1790–1835)* (Tripoli: Al-Ferjani, 1966); and Muhammed al-Twair, "Al-zira'ah fi waliyat tarabulus al-gharb athna' al-hukum al 'othmani al-mubashir laha, 1835–1911," *Revue d'histoire maghrébine* 12, no. 39–40 (1985): 515–516.
12. Le Gall, "Pashas," 93.
13. On the role of Jewish merchants see Rachel Simon, "The Socio-Economic Role of the Tripolitanian Jews in the Late Ottoman Period," in *Communautés juives des marges sahariennes du Maghreb*, ed. Michel Abitbol, 321–328 (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi, 1982). On Maltese merchants, see E. George H. Joffé, "British Malta and the Qaramanli Dynasty (1800–1835)," *Revue d'histoire maghrébine* 12, no. 37–38 (June 1985): 23–40.
14. Anthony J. Cachia, *Libya under the Second Ottoman Occupation, 1835–1911* (Tripoli: Government Press, 1945), 1021; Dajani and Ad'ham, *Watha'iq*, 296–298.
15. A. M. Al-Misurati, *Sahafat Libya fi nisf garn* (Beirut: Dar al-Kashaf, 1960), 18. On the role of the 'ayan in the Ottoman Empire, see Albert Hourani, "Ottoman Reforms and the Politics of the Notables," in *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. William Polk and Richard Chambers, 41–68 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).
16. Abdulmola S. El-Horeir, "Social and Economic Transformation in the Libyan Hinterland during the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century: The Role of Sayyid Ahmad al-Sharif al-Sanusi" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1981), 95.
17. Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, 81–82; Charles C. Adams, "The Sanusis," *The Moslem World* 36, no. 1 (1946): 32.

18. See reports of two British journalists: Ernest N. Bennett, *With the Turks in Tripoli: Being some Experiences in the Turco-Italian War of 1911* (London: Methuen, 1912), 186; and Francis McCullagh, *Italy's War for a Desert: Being some Experiences of a War-Correspondent with the Italians in Tripoli* (Chicago: F. G. Browne, 1913), 18.
19. McCullagh, *Italy's War*, 3; and Charles Lapworth and Helen Zimmern, *Tripoli and Young Italy* (London: Swift, 1912), 85.
20. Giovanni Giolitti, *Memoirs of My Life*, trans. Edward Storer (New York: Howard Fertig, 1973), 260, 279.
21. Tullio Irace, *With the Italians in Tripoli* (London: J. Murray, 1912), 20.
22. See the files of Libyan notable families held in the Archives of the Dar al-Mahfuzat al-Tarikhyya, in Tripoli: 188, "Malf al 'A'ilat al-Libiya."
23. Muhammad M. Fushaykah, *Ramadan al-Suwayhili: Al-batal al-Libi al-shahir bi-kifahih lil-talyan: Wa-fi al-kitab majmu'ah min al-suwar al-tarikhyyah* (Tripoli: Al-Ferjani, 1974), 29–33.
24. *Ibid.*, 112.
25. See Ahmad Dia al-Din al-Muntasir's letter to Sulayman al-Baruni, in *Safahat Khalida min al-jihad*, ed. Za'imah Sulayman al-Baruni (Cairo: Matabi' al-Istiqlal al-Kubra, 1964).
26. Enrico De Leone, *La colonizzazione dell' Africa del Nord (Algeria, Tunisia, Marocco, Libia)* (Padua: CEDAM, 1957), 390–391, 420; Aghil M. Barbar, "The Tarabulus (Libyan) Resistance to the Italian Invasion: 1911–1920" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1980), 266.
27. Tahir Ahmad al-Zawi, *Jihad al-abtal fi Tarabulus al-Gharb* (Beirut: Dar al-Fatah lil-Nashir, 1970 [1950]).
28. Simon, "The Socio-Economic Role of the Tripolitanian Jews," 324.
29. Renzo De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land: Libya, 1835–1970*, trans. Judith Roumani (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).
30. Rosalba Davico, "La guérilla Libyenne (1911–1932). Impérialisme et résistance anticoloniale en Afrique du Nord dans les années 1920," in *Abd el-Krim et la République du Rif. Actes du colloque international d'études historiques et sociologiques, 18–20 janvier 1973* (Paris: Maspero, 1976), 434–435; Rachel Simon, *Libya Between Ottomanism and Nationalism: The Ottoman Involvement with Libya during the War with Italy (1911–1919)* (Berlin: Klaw Schwarz Verlag, 1987), 188.
31. Al-Zawi, *Jihad*, 266–267; Rodolfo Graziani, *Cirenaica pacificata* (Benghazi: Dar al-Andalus, 1974), 89.

## The Early Years of the Agency for the Colonization of Cyrenaica (1932–1935)

*Federico Cresti*

The recent discovery of the archives of the Agency for the Colonization of Cyrenaica (*Ente per la Colonizzazione della Cirenaica*, or ECC)<sup>1</sup> provides scholars with a remarkable quantity of unpublished material regarding the agricultural colonization in Libya that began in the early 1930s. The study of these documents allows for a reexamination of the events concerning the ECC, whose presence in Libya extended well beyond the colonial period.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the Italians who settled in the ECC's agricultural developments before the war remained there through the British Military Administration of the northern Libyan territories, the country's subsequent independence, and a suspension of the Agency's activities that lasted until the Italo-Libyan accords of 1956.<sup>3</sup> The ECC's involvement in Libya finally ended with its dissolution in 1962. This newly recovered archive provides the basis for my analysis in this chapter of the ECC's early ventures in Cyrenaica from 1932 to 1935. The history of the ECC shows that state intervention in Libyan colonization was marked by uncertainties and inexperience and shaped by a consistent lack of funds; yet this period also laid the foundation for later, intensive programs of "demographic colonization."

The work of the ECC must be considered in the context of colonial policies that aimed to transform Libya into a fully Italian territory that would accommodate the unemployed Italian laborers who had constituted a significant portion of the global migrant labor force for some time. The most enthusiastic promoters of an aggressive colonial politics claimed that eventually, Libya would be able to sustain two or three million Italian migrants. More accurate knowledge of Libya, gained after the Italian

conquest, reduced these figures to a few tens of thousands, to be settled in Libya over the course of the next half-century.

The Cyrenaican land available for Agency colonization had entered the public domain in a variety of ways: by following the Ottoman land records; modifying the tribes' collective land holding statutes; and expropriating lands belonging to rebel tribes and the Sanusi confraternity in the course of "pacifying" the province. Lands on the Jabal Akhdar, where the ECC developed most of its settlements, were designated for Italian settlers after the pastoralists there had been sent away to concentration camps.

The project of a mass population transfer took shape under fascist rule in the 1920s. A 1927 Parliamentary speech given by Luigi Federzoni, the Minister of Colonies, mandated the settlement of almost three hundred thousand Italians in Libya in the coming decades. Once the regime had consolidated its control over Libya in the early 1930s, the government began to develop the tools for managing agricultural colonization on a large scale, aimed specifically at transferring the largest possible number of unemployed workers to the colony.

In June 1932, King Victor Emmanuel III signed the decree authorizing the creation of the Agency for the Colonization of Cyrenaica, overseen by the Migration and Internal Colonization Administration (*Commissariato per le migrazioni e la colonizzazione interna*, or CMCI) and the Ministry of Colonies.<sup>4</sup> As per its founding statute, the ECC's mission was to develop the public domain lands of Cyrenaica by settling national colonist families who would create small agricultural holdings. The colonist families, chosen by the CMCI, would work under the technical direction of the ECC. Land parcels assigned to families were to be endowed with livestock and supplies as an advance on settlers' agricultural production. Large families were preferred, especially those with many young and able-bodied members. All colonists underwent an initial probationary period, with fines and possible repatriation as punishment for those families found wanting as agriculturalists and colonizers.<sup>5</sup>

The ECC intended to exert tight control over colonist families, not only with regard to technical matters, but also to their relations within the community and their moral conduct. This strict management was the product of a militarized official mentality. As the Libyan Governor Italo Balbo told colonial functionaries, colonists were "soldiers in a great battle who should be ready to sustain sacrifices with a light heart."<sup>6</sup> This lack of freedom led to serious problems in relations between colonists and colonization agencies, and Balbo later ordered police and colonial officials to relax their vigilance and allow dancing, card-playing, gaming, and other "distractions" during breaks from work.<sup>7</sup>

The ECC's technical director was Antonio De Benedictis, who by 1932 had already been in charge of the agrarian service in Eritrea for twelve

years. Immediately upon his appointment, De Benedictis traveled to Cyrenaica to organize the ECC's local office and visit its land holdings. With the arrival of the first Italian settlers scheduled for spring 1933, construction of settlements had to begin immediately, despite heavy rain. Barce, as the Italians renamed al-Marj, was the site of the earliest operations. Topographic surveys were conducted to prepare houses and farm plots for the first contingent of colonists, which consisted of fifty families from the province of Bari, "where one finds elements highly adapted to the agricultural environment of Cyrenaica."<sup>8</sup>

Preparing the new settlement was no easy undertaking. Extensive road-work was needed, because the new agricultural areas were connected to Barce by dirt trails alone. And building materials were in short supply: they had to be made locally, insofar as possible. All of this slowed down the land reclamations, while at the same time the Agency was under severe political pressure to execute rapid operations. By March 1933, though, these efforts began to bear fruit, with thirty colonists' houses scheduled for imminent construction. The building of another 120 homes was to be entrusted to firms either in the home country or the colony.

The first area designated for settlement was Zawiya al-Bayda, formerly one of the principal seats of power of the Sanusi brotherhood. This confraternity had developed in eastern Libya and the Fezzan region in the late nineteenth century and become a de facto state whose local power rivaled that of the ruling Ottomans. After the Italian conquest of 1912, the Sanusi were the only leaders recognized by many of the local populations, and until the Sanusi-led resistance to Italian colonial rule was crushed by the fascist state in the early 1930s, the confraternity had continued to exert effective control over eastern Libya. Among the repressive measures that accompanied the Italians' crackdown was the confiscation of Sanusi lands, which were subsequently utilized for Italian agricultural colonization. Zawiya al-Bayda and its lands were most promising for agricultural settlement: they were relatively rich in water sources and vegetation, located in the highlands of the Jabal Akhdar, at an altitude of approximately six hundred meters.

Plans for four groups of colonists' houses not far from the village were developed in collaboration with the Government of Cyrenaica. When consultant Armando Maugini went to Cyrenaica in late April 1933 to survey the ECC's progress, he submitted a positive report about the settlement's progress. Old buildings, in particular two large hangars previously used by the Italian Air Force, had been adapted, and six farming families, totaling forty people, were already living in the area; they were housed in the military redoubt of the early occupation, and they had already begun work on the lands that were to be assigned to them. A total of seventy families were brought within the year.

A second village was also progressing in al-Abraq, with plans for colonists' houses between Cyrene and Zawiya al-Tert. Eighty families were to be moved to this reclamation area by the end of the year. The building work on these first houses was entrusted to "small local piece workers,"<sup>9</sup> whereas for the following 120 colonists' houses, a tender for contract had yet to be organized. On general principles of thrift and security, the farms were not isolated from each other: they were assembled in small groups, usually of four.

In all of these initiatives, frugality was essential, not only because of the ECC's scarce resources, but also because the colonists could not sustain a heavy financial burden. As it was, they were required to repay through their labor the costs of their houses and farms. Thus the ECC had to find ways to reduce the costs of the kinds of houses envisioned, for example, by the Office of Public Works of Cyrenaica. The Agency's president, Luigi Razza, suggested that it look into examples in the metropole, such as the dirt cheap rural dwellings constructed by the government for internal settlers in Apulia.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, the Cyrenaican government's offices were in charge of the public works connected to the colonization centers. This meant, above all, the construction of aqueducts for the first two settlements, as well as roads and various service buildings—all of which had to be ready in a few months. New names were proposed for the first villages: Zawiya al-Bayda was renamed Beda Littoria, and al-Abraq, Primavera. Instructions from Mussolini were awaited regarding the names of the next two villages, which were planned for 'Ain Messa and Zawiya al-Tert; they were eventually baptized Luigi di Savoia and Giovanni Berta.

Another ECC enterprise had also begun favorably: a livestock branch, for the purpose of supplying animals to the colonists' farms. The ECC had acquired over eight hundred of a projected four thousand sheep in Tripolitania and Surt, and was accumulating fodder for the farm animals; it expected to harvest about two to three thousand quintals of hay in the areas of 'Ain-Messa and al-Abraq. It planned to concentrate its livestock business in the Taknis region, where further colonist families would be located. Sheep-herding families began to arrive from Affile (near Rome) in May 1933, and despite financial difficulties in its first two years of activity, the ECC's building and settlement programs proceeded on schedule.

Maugini's survey of the ECC's activities also formed part of preparations for an imminent visit by the King, who visited the headquarters in Safsaf to view an exhibit on the progress of operations and receive the colonist families, who gathered to pay their respects. Although this display of the Ente's initiatives was hardly overwhelming, even these modest interventions had placed it in a financial crisis that was further exacerbated

by the lack of coordination between the fascist government and the agencies that the same government had chosen to finance the work of colonization.

The ECC's scarce resources meant that it was unable to fully exercise its right of preemption over lands in the public domain. Even though it could obviously not take over all the Cyrenaican lands that had agricultural potential, the Agency wanted to exercise its prerogative, or at least protect its rights for the future. By statute, it had right of priority over all the colony's public domain lands that could be developed in the framework of agricultural colonization. A case in point is that of the Nicolardi concession. In the latter part of 1933, one Major Nicolardi<sup>11</sup> requested from the colonial government a concession in the Wadi al-Atrun area, along the coast in Derna province. The area was favorable to agriculture, thanks to an abundant supply of fresh water. Although the Agency was little interested in coastal areas at the time, the presence of potable water made the land valuable for future development, and Nicolardi's request was denied. Undiscouraged, he made a second request for a concession in the Sidi Laguta area (not far from Ras al-Hilal, along the Wadi al-Glaa). With the aid of recommendations from powerful individuals, this time he received a positive response.<sup>12</sup> Even though the Wadi might be necessary in future (in drought years, herds could come down from the Jabal Akhdar for grazing and water), the ECC decided that a private concession within its purview would not impede its future activities.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout 1934, in the absence of budget increases, the ECC focused its colonization efforts on the strip of land on the Jabal Akhdar where the first reclamation districts had been created, and the area around Barce. According to a report Razza prepared for Mussolini, in the first year of the ECC's activities (March 1933–March 1934), 154 colonist families had been settled in the colony, or a total of 1,048 people.<sup>14</sup> If we add to this number the 249 heads of family who were undergoing a test period of preparing farmsteads, and who were headed for their permanent settlements in the new villages at Berta and Primavera, the Agency counted 1,297 Italians who depended on it directly. Besides the farmers, the ECC employed Italian and Libyan workers for various aspects of construction: 340 workers were Italian, and about seven hundred were Libyan. A total of 178 colonists' houses had been built, and a substantial part of the labor had been devoted to building cisterns. By the end of 1934, there were four hundred new colonist families in Cyrenaica; these would grow to five hundred by the end of March 1935. The new families were assigned to the existing villages, as well as other areas where the ECC intended to extend its operations.

Other reports to Mussolini in the same year highlight the settlers' good living conditions. Health service workers in Cyrene praised the colonists'

residences as “magnificent villas” that were “airy, sunny, and up to modern standards of hygiene.”<sup>15</sup> The organization of food supplies, assured by the ECC, was successful in preventing intestinal infections. In fact, there is no record of any illness due to hygiene problems. The farmers had adjusted to the climate without particular difficulty: the only item of note was “a few cases of excitement of the various organic functions, followed by a slight depression of short duration; especially in the female sex.”<sup>16</sup>

These gains were jeopardized, however, by the increasingly critical financial situation the ECC found itself in by mid-1934. Plans for the four colonization districts were scaled back; the first victims of this retrenchment were Libyan laborers, who had been hired for the heavier work, and had mostly been involved in creating roads and preparing the soil for cultivation. There were 665 Libyan workers at Primavera, distributed in work groups assigned to the vineyards, olive groves, and the construction of access roads. Of the 810 Libyan workers at Beda Littoria, 250 were assigned to break up soil for vine plantation; another 250 were charged with disforestation; the remaining 310 did excavation and roadwork. At Luigi di Savoia, the vineyard plantation was already near completion: only seven farmhouses were still unfinished. The Libyan workers worked especially at clearing out holes in the rockiest areas, which had been cleared with mines. In all, there were 563 Libyans, whereas at Giovanni Berta the Libyan workers were 123. The reduction of local manpower was drastic: the ECC laid off more than half the workers at Primavera (bringing the number from 665 to three hundred); at Beda Littoria, their number was reduced from 810 to three hundred; at Luigi di Savoia, from 563 to three hundred; and at Giovanni Berta, from 123 to fifty.

Moreover, the difficulties faced by the ECC as it entered its third year of colonization activities were not merely financial. Problems related to labor organization and the colony’s social and commercial situation (e.g., shortages of native labor and raw materials) also hindered the progress of the colonial machine. Still, the Agency’s range of activities increased in October 1934, when a decree authorized it to operate in Tripolitania; thus it became the Agency for the Colonization of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica (*Ente per la colonizzazione della Tripolitania e della Cirenaica*).<sup>17</sup> It was in this context that the involvement of the National Fascist Institute for Social Prevention (*Istituto Nazionale Fascista della Previdenza Sociale*, or INFPS) in Tripolitania began to take shape. Its president, Giuseppe Bottai, had intended to invest part of the INFPS’s finances in demographic colonization in Libya since the end of 1933. His project garnered preliminary approval from Italo Balbo, who had been Governor General of Libya since February 1934. But the INFPS’s involvement ran into opposition from the ECC, which did not look kindly on a competitor in a domain it

considered its own monopoly. Above all, the arrival of an organization with sizable capital (running into hundreds of millions of Lire) unsettled the ECC's management, which felt that its authority was being undermined. The ECC management also distrusted the INFPS's inexperience with land reclamation. These objections were expressed clearly by the ECC's new President, Giangiaco­mo Durini di Monza, who objected to a joint initiative with any agency, however flush, "for which the colonization of Libya would be merely a subsidiary, marginal activity . . ."18 Durini's concerns went unheeded: the INFPS was conceded land and went on to play a notable role in the colonization of Tripolitania.

In the spring of 1935, Durini made an inspection tour of the developments in Libya, from the coastal region of Derna to Tripoli. His findings, which he prepared in a report to Mussolini, constitute an obviously optimistic snapshot of the state of Libyan colonization. In the four districts that had been built so far, the lands under reclamation covered 5,877 hectares. On the whole, 321 buildings had been built, including colonists' houses and various other buildings. The Ente's husbandry division had reached notable dimensions, with more than twenty-three thousand heads. There were 2,252 Italians in residence. Nearly six hundred children attended the village schools, and overall the families had adapted well. Marriages and births were numerous. In the Syrtic area, Italian fishing families were awaited; they would help establish "agriculture and fishing" colonization at the villages of Zuwaytina, Surt, and Bu'ayrat al-Hasun. Plans for 1935–1936 included the creation of 155 new farms, and the transformation on a time and materials basis of about two thousand hectares in the al-Gharib area.

Ultimately, the ECC's difficult financial situation prevented the realization of these grand schemes. The original governmental decree had granted the Agency thirty-eight million Lire, but this amount had been reduced immediately to thirty-three million. The work done to date had cost twenty-nine million Lire, and the work planned for the near future would require another seventy million Lire. The amounts available were hardly enough to cover costs, although they would have sufficed to ensure the full efficiency of the three hundred farmsteads already in use, and to prepare another 365 of them in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. But it was obvious that new financial resources would have to be found right away if the ECC was to go beyond these limits. Although the fascist government responded to the Agency's repeated appeals for greater support—a decree of March 1935 conceded an annual contribution of five million Lire for fifteen years—this was hardly sufficient: it was but a drop of water that soon evaporated in the oppressive heat of Libyan colonization.

The first years of ECC initiatives, which we have summarized here, bring into relief a few characteristics of agricultural colonization in

Cyrenaica in the years immediately following the territory's definitive "pacification" in 1932. The creation of the ECC signaled a shift in colonization policies from a liberal-era approach (dominated by private capital) to total government control over initiatives and their financing. The ECC's early years were marked by improvisation: the government had begun a large-scale undertaking although it did not have the necessary capital to carry it through. The state's financial resources, already very limited in this period, went to more politically important enterprises, such as the coming war in Ethiopia. The pioneering realization of the first four settlement areas and the arrival of more than 2,200 colonists from Italy in these years were symbolically important, but they certainly did not match the fascist government's ambitions. In later years, thanks to Balbo's insistence, the finances of the organization (now operating as the ECL) improved in order to support the intensive programs of mass colonization realized in 1938 and 1939. This new financial solvency allowed for a few dozen new settlement areas and the arrival of about thirty thousand new colonists in the years preceding World War II.

### Notes

1. See Federico Cresti, "Documentario per la storia della Libia: L'archivio ritrovato dell'Ente per la Colonizzazione della Libia. Un inventario provvisorio," *Africa* 53, no. 4 (1998): 557–576. It should be kept in mind that the *Ente per la Colonizzazione della Libia* (ECL) only acquired that name in 1935: it was founded under the name *Ente per la Colonizzazione della Cirenaica* (ECC), and in 1934 was briefly called the *Ente per la Colonizzazione della Tripolitania e della Cirenaica*. The citations included here correspond to a preliminary inventory of the archive, which consists primarily of manuscript documentation of the organization's internal affairs and management, its personnel, and the colonists residing in the Libyan developments. There is also a good deal of material on financial issues, which is relevant for quantitative questions, even though at first sight it is only of minor historical interest. Finally, there are topographic and architectural plans and sketches, a few hundred photographs, and some printed materials.
2. For more details on the issues discussed in this essay, see Federico Cresti, "I primi anni di attività dell'Ente per la colonizzazione della Cirenaica attraverso i documenti del suo archivio," in *Un colonialismo, due sponde del Mediterraneo. Atti del seminario di studi storici italo-libici (Siena-Pistoia, 13–14 gennaio 2000)*, ed. Nicola Labanca and Pierluigi Venuta, 93–115 (Pistoia: Edizioni C.R.T., 2000). Other works on the Ente per la Colonizzazione have been based on published sources or documents in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome (Archivio del Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, or AMAI) and the Istituto Agronomico per l'Oltremare in Florence. This is the case for Gary Lane Fowler, "Italian Colonization of Tripolitania," *Annals of the*

- Association of American Geographers* 62, no. 4 (1972): 627–640; Gary Lane Fowler, “The Decolonization of Rural Libya,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 63, no. 4 (1973): 490–506; Gary Lane Fowler, “The Role of Private Estates and Development Companies in the Agricultural Colonization of Libya,” in *Social and Economic Development of Libya*, ed. E. George H. Joffé and Keith S. McLachlan, 117–141 (Wisbech, Cambridgeshire: Middle East and North African Studies Press, 1982); Pietro Ballico and Giuseppe Palloni, *L'opera di avvaloramento agricolo e zootecnico della Tripolitania e della Cirenaica* (Rome: ABETE, 1971), 150f. and 333f.; Claudio G. Segrè, *Fourth Shore. The Italian Colonization of Libya* (Chicago, and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 90f.; I. Persegani, “Per un riesame della politica economica italiana in Libia (1920–1940),” *Nuova rivista storica* 65, no. 5 (1981): 572–587; Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia. Dal fascismo a Gheddafi*, 2nd edn., (Milan: Mondadori, 1994), 256f. The materials published on the Agency during the fascist era (some of them by the Agency itself) are generally pictorial and propagandistic.
3. See Federico Cresti, *Oasi di italianità. La Libia della colonizzazione agraria tra fascismo, guerra e indipendenza* (Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1996), 265, n. 5.
  4. The decree (June 11, 1932, n. 696) was issued in response to a proposal from Mussolini (who was then Head of State, Prime Minister, and Secretary of State), and supported by Ministers De Bono (Minister of the Colonies), Mosconi (Minister of Finances), Bottai (Minister of Corporations) and Acerbo (Minister of Agriculture and Forestry). See the Archive of the Ente per la Colonizzazione della Libia (hereafter abbreviated as AECL), *cartella* 42, *fascicolo* 1. The decree passed into law on April 3, 1933 (n. 451).
  5. *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, December 16, 1932, n. 289.
  6. Instructions issued by Italo Balbo to colonial civil servants, January 30, 1940, cited in Cresti, *Oasi*, 73. The “militarization” of settlers has already been noted in Segrè, *Fourth Shore*, 123.
  7. Quoted in Cresti, *Oasi*, 73.
  8. AECL, Verbali del Consiglio di Amministrazione (hereafter abbreviated as VCA), n. 1, session of September 3, 1933, 7. I have not found any further detail on the colonists’ region(s) of origin. After the first eight families arrived in April and May, 165 Apulian heads of families reached Cyrenaica on July 25, 1933; half were sent to Zawiya al-Bayda (later named Beda Littoria), and half to al-Abraq (later named Primavera).
  9. Promemoria a S.E. il Capo del Governo, April 29, 1933, in AECL, *cartella* 43, *fascicolo* 1, *sottofascicolo* 1933, n. 7612.
  10. AECL, VCA.
  11. On Major Nicolardi (who by 1938 was Lieutenant Colonel), we find information in a letter from General Nasi, Commander in charge of Cyrenaica, supporting his request for a concession. Thus we know that in 1933, after seven years in Cyrenaica, Major Nicolardi “by law has to leave this Colony to which he has given so much of himself during the entire period of war to repress the

rebellion . . . Together with some of his brothers, he owns sizeable agricultural assets in Apulia . . . Major Nicolardi was a pioneer of automobile travel in the colony, where he opened up all the roads that penetrate the interior, and he brought military vehicles into areas that had been considered impenetrable. Furthermore, he assisted the Command in solving technical problems involved in the complex field of motorizing troops and services. He contributed greatly to the success of operations against the rebels by mobilizing automobile convoys, which he organized expertly and led enthusiastically. The accomplishments of this distinguished official were much appreciated by His Eminence General Graziani, who nominated him for a promotion on the basis of special merits.” (AECL, *cartella* 12, *fascicolo* R.2/c: “Azienda ex Nicolardi,” letter from Nasi to Razza, October 28, 1933).

12. AECL, *cartella* 12, *fascicolo* R.2/c: “Azienda ex Nicolardi,” letter from Razza to De Benedictis, November 10, 1933.
13. The Agency reserved the right to use water sources at a later date. AECL, *cartella* 12, *fascicolo* R.2/c: “Azienda ex Nicolardi,” letter from Razza to ECL-Barce, December 16, 1933; letter from Razza to Nasi, December 16, 1933.
14. At Beda Littoria, seventy-four families, totaling 480 people; at Luigi di Savoia, sixty-nine families, totaling 502 people; at Giovanni Berta, two families, totaling fourteen people; at Primavera, there were no families, but only three individuals (probably heads of families awaiting the arrival of their families); at Barce, seven families, totaling forty-one people; at Qsur Tecniz, two shepherd families totaling eight people (AECL, *cartella* 43, *fascicolo* 3, “RL / Relazioni all’Eccellenza il Capo del Governo,” March 24, 1934).
15. G. Massara, “Relazione sulle condizioni igienico-sanitarie dei nuovi villaggi rurali dell’Ente di colonizzazione,” n.d. [summer 1934], in AECL, *cartella* 42, *fascicolo* 1, *sottofascicolo* 3.
16. Ibid.
17. Decree of October 11, 1934. The Agency took on its definitive name, Ente per la Colonizzazione della Libia, about a year later (decree of September 25, 1935).
18. Giangiacomo Durini replaced Luigi Razza as head of the Ente when Razza had become Minister of Public Works. AECL, *cartella* 43, *fascicolo* 3, *sottofascicolo* 1935: “A Sua Eccellenza il Capo del Governo,” May 16, 1935.

# Empire Building and Its Limitations: Ethiopia (1935–1941)

*Haile Larebo*

The Italian colonial administration subscribed to the theory that colonies were an extension of the motherland to be populated by Italian settlers and exploited by Italian capital. The objective was to transform the colony into one region of a *Magna Italia*. The flow of emigrants was to be diverted from the Americas to Ethiopia, which would provide cheap food and raw materials for Italian industry and become a protected market for Italian products. Yet the colonial administration within which Italian policy developed was an understaffed and underfinanced machine with tangled lines of authority. Even the smallest internal matter had to be referred back to Rome, which directly controlled colonial policy. At the same time, overlapping military and civilian jurisdiction and influence wielded by the government and National Fascist Party officials (who played a far greater role in Ethiopia than in Italy) left the administration in a parlous state.<sup>1</sup>

Ruled by Emperor Haile Selassie until the Italians invaded in 1935, Ethiopia disappeared as a geographical unit under the Italian occupation. Its frontiers were dismantled and the old Ethiopian Empire was merged with the colonies Eritrea and Somalia to form Italian East Africa (*Africa Orientale Italiana*, or AOI). This was divided initially into five (six as of November 1938) semiautonomous governorships. While governorships changed hands rapidly, within a year or two, all fascist colonial governors were remarkable for their authoritarianism, paternalism, and racism.

An inevitable corollary of Italy's colonial policy, in Ethiopia as elsewhere, was the exclusion of the subject population from all forms of power-sharing.

Alessandro Lessona, the Minister of Colonies, made it clear that the aim of his native policy (*politica indigena*) was to subordinate the indigenous populations' interests to metropolitan politics. Rather than seeing this as incompatible with the humanitarian objective that Italy, as a "civilizing nation," claimed toward its Ethiopian subjects, he imagined that Ethiopians would be grateful and subservient.<sup>2</sup> Yet unlike surrounding colonial countries, Ethiopia possessed a growing and well-articulated intellectual elite, many of whom had attended schools and universities overseas. Fearing perhaps that their acclaimed racial superiority could be exposed or challenged, the Italians systematically eliminated these Ethiopians and any others who were suspected of having any meaningful education and restricted future learning to the elementary level.

During the occupation the Ethiopians had unprecedented employment opportunities, but they were relegated to the most demeaning jobs and explicitly excluded from participation in any sector of the economy where they might compete with Italians.<sup>3</sup> This policy culminated in laws that set out rigid rules of separate social and residential development based on race.<sup>4</sup> It entailed massive forced removal of Ethiopians from their residences to new quarters where they would live under a form of apartheid that mandated separate social amenities and ways of life for settlers and Ethiopians. The two communities were forbidden to have any social contact with each other except when the imperatives of the labor-exchange market required it. In large urban centers Ethiopian ghettos developed which Europeans needed a permit to enter.<sup>5</sup>

Attempts to isolate the Ethiopian population culturally and physically led to the expulsion and ruthless treatment of non-Italian missionaries, who were replaced by Italian clergy. With a handful of exceptions, mission properties were summarily seized, and no foreigner of any religion was allowed to set up schools in AOI. The largest beneficiaries of these practices were the Consolata Missions, which played a crucial role in the Italian penetration and occupation of the country, the Capuchin Order, and, to a lesser extent, the Verona Fathers, all of which ran newly organized schools that bore the names of Italian "heroes" who fell in the colonial wars.<sup>6</sup> The Italian Catholic Church had welcomed the occupation in the belief that it would better its opportunities for proselytizing, and indeed Ethiopia now became the exclusive field of operation of Italian Catholic clergy. Far from defending Ethiopian rights or condemning the excessive abuses of the Italians, the Church and its emissaries extended crude racial policies to liturgical spheres, alienating the population and causing serious friction between the followers of the Latin rite, who operated under the auspices of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide, and the

indigenous clergy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church rite, who were subject to the Sacred Congregation of the Oriental Churches.<sup>7</sup>

These and other discriminations were partly responsible for a protracted guerrilla war that sapped settlers' moral and material resources and led to a constant reshuffling of the administrative machine. The two thousand miles of roads that sixty thousand Italian workers built in just twenty-four months helped the pacification program, facilitating coordination and transport between military and civilian authorities. Yet the roads ate up a disproportionate amount of the budget and led the empire into near-bankruptcy. By May 1939 the Italian workforce was down to twelve thousand, while local Ethiopian labor had risen to fifty-two thousand.<sup>8</sup> Nor were the military objectives that justified these roads achieved. Organized armed resistance came to an end in the governorships of Härär and Galla and Sidamo with the capture and execution of *ras* Dästa in February 1937, but passive resistance continued in a variety of forms, and in the traditional Abyssinian heartland, Italian control was confined to areas close to highways and major towns. In the rest of the countryside, including other minor urban centers, the resistance front, albeit disunited, disorganized, badly armed, and ignored by the rest of the world, had a firm foothold.<sup>9</sup>

This situation aggravated the difficulties of a virtually permanent war economy caused by the imposition of sanctions and the immense cost of conquest. It led to high inflation, chronic problems in balance of payments, and a reduction of commercial contacts with the outside world. The rigid measures of autarky increased taxation and created a serious shortage of imported goods. The beleaguered economy only benefited the arms dealers who made fat profits, while business suffered from trade restrictions.<sup>10</sup> Soaring transport costs and expulsion of well-established foreign firms also hurt trade: non-Italian businesses of any importance were compelled either to liquidate or enlist Italian interests in partnership.<sup>11</sup>

As in Eritrea, this exclusion of foreign competition gave the new Italian businesses a protected market. By the early 1940s, about 4,007 industrial and 4,785 commercial firms with a total capital of about 2,700,000,000 Lire and 1,000,000,000 Lire respectively were authorized to work in AOI, and another 4,452 were under consideration. Out of these, 1,225 industrial and 1,435 commercial companies (with a capital of 458,598,000 Lire and 603,322,000 Lire, respectively), applied to work in the four Ethiopian governorships.<sup>12</sup> But only four hundred industrial and 650 commercial firms actually made some investment in the Empire; the remainder simply acted as distributing or purchasing agents for their mother firms in Italy.<sup>13</sup> As the economy was mostly run through large parastatal corporations, the

State remained the largest investor, and through a variety of exactions took a large percentage of private sector profits. Exercising near-monopolies in their particular sectors, the corporations were criticized for their abuses and their anti-entrepreneurial attitudes, even by the normally tight-lipped fascist press and officials.<sup>14</sup> Construction and transport industries were bonanza investment areas during the occupation due to their low risk, high turnovers, and state subsidies, as were trade in foodstuffs and import/export trading. Otherwise, Italian capital retained its traditional circumspection and timidity, and even enterprising private investors and merchants complained of the network of red tape, permits, and restrictions that hindered their business.

These factors, together with Italian unfamiliarity with Ethiopian business methods and psychology, reduced trade to a fraction of its former level. Italy's desperation to earn foreign exchange also contributed to this decline, since it led the government to try and force goods on to the world market rather than stimulate exports to Italy. Export to Italy of most of Ethiopia's principal products—coffee, hides and skins, leather, oilseeds, beeswax—was either forbidden or strictly controlled. Except in the flourishing black-market export of Lire, the policy of economic progress proved a dismal failure.<sup>15</sup>

Before the Italian occupation, a series of expeditions and studies had given the colonial administration considerable knowledge of Ethiopia's agricultural environment and productive potential. Yet the technical and agricultural experts who followed in the footsteps of the military conquest of the country warned that their information was "fragmentary and unreliable" and cautioned against the prevailing enthusiasm for mass settlement.<sup>16</sup> Mussolini's extravagant plans for large-scale settlement ignited the fantasies of the press, the public, and the pulpit, however, and Ethiopia emerged as the key solution to Italy's humiliating emigration and labor problems. Military factors also inspired the pro-settlement lobby, which pointed to the geographical distance separating the Empire from the motherland and the hostile colonial powers surrounding it.<sup>17</sup>

Although peasant settlement was the most archaic and expensive form of imperialism, Italian colonialists emphasized the uniqueness of this scheme of demographic colonization with respect to other European imperialisms. They boasted that it would avoid the plunder and exploitation of "traditional capitalist colonizations" that saw a small number of Europeans mercilessly exploiting the indigenous resources and population. As a respectable academic stated, "We cannot allow ourselves the luxury of 'doing it the English way', that is to live and get rich at the expense of others. We must take to our Empire our own peasants, artisans, and workers, who up to now wander around and are dispersed throughout the world."<sup>18</sup>

This scheme did raise worries that an influx of lower-class settlers might damage the prestige and dominance of Italians over subject Ethiopians. Other colonial powers had tried to avoid this by employing a relatively small number of Europeans in managerial positions, while the indigenous population did the heavy work. In the case of Italian colonialism, the “prestige of the White race” would be maintained by educating the workers in an imperialist mentality and employing a vigorous policy of racial segregation. The points of reference were the examples of native reserves in South Africa and Kenya.<sup>19</sup> In part to compensate for the lesser use of native labor, settlement was conceived of in the most grandiose terms, with figures arriving at 6,250,000 settlers who would be settled on 50,000, one-hectare plots.<sup>20</sup> Although the unrealistic nature of these claims was apparent within a few years of the invasion, Party officials and journalists continued to perpetuate the illusion.

Opinions were divided over how best to transform Ethiopia into a settlement colony. Lessona argued for state-sponsored demographic colonization. Lessona had guided colonization in Libya as Undersecretary of Colonies between 1929 and 1936. Now, as Minister of Colonies, he wished to make of Ethiopia a model colony where the shortcomings of the Libyan experience would be eliminated and experiments pursued on a wider scale. He was unsympathetic to private initiative, knowing from his Libyan tenure that it would lead to land speculation and the formation of *latifundia*. Lessona envisioned four distinctive forms of colonization corresponding to four categories of lands. First, national demographic colonization, to be implemented by state-run colonization agencies. Peasants would function as military garrisons and eventually gain possession of the land under cultivation. Second, small settlements, to be worked by Italian farmers who had modest initial capital and know-how. Third, industrial colonization: estates unsuited for demographic settlement would be given to competent fascist confederations that would work under government supervision. Fourth, native settlements, which included estates owned by Ethiopians who would be given tools, seeds, and instruction by the Italian government.<sup>21</sup>

The idea of state-supervised colonization was hardly new, having been supported years earlier by Armando Maugini, who had gained insight into settlement issues as an agricultural officer in Cyrenaica during World War I and later became the architect of Libyan colonization. During the Ethiopian conquest, Maugini became chief technical advisor to the Ministry of Colonies and Director of the Institute of Colonial Agriculture in Florence. Maugini emphasized that demographic colonization was a very costly affair, one that required solid financial, administrative, and technical organization. Like Lessona, he was unsympathetic to private agricultural enterprise.<sup>22</sup>

Opposition to such opinions came primarily from Giuseppe Tassinari, Undersecretary at the Ministry of Agriculture, who had traveled extensively in Ethiopia. Like Maugini, Tassinari stressed that colonization should be a gradual process. Unlike him, however, Tassinari felt that government should provide only the basic economic infrastructure. Implementation should be left to “private initiative” which “must be guided, directed, and controlled by the State in line with the fascist norms of life.” Economics guided Tassinari’s position, in particular his estimations of the enormous costs of settling families even in ideal economic conditions. Demographic settlement would also require roads, hospitals, churches, and schools, so that the settler’s lifestyle would not be “debased” to the Ethiopian level.<sup>23</sup>

Tassinari’s view was sustained by a commission of members of the Fascist Confederation of Agriculturalists, who had been dispatched on a fact-finding mission by Lessona himself. After weighing the problem of the availability of land, the costs of settlement, and the unsuitability of the country’s infrastructure to a massive influx of colonists, the Commission came out in favor of capitalist agriculture.<sup>24</sup>

The result of these conflicting interests and opinions was a stalemate, with the Ministry of Colonies uncertain how to proceed. The delicate relations between Tassinari and Lessona grew worse when the former published a section of his data in the *Corriere della Sera*, the country’s leading newspaper, claiming that his view corresponded to Mussolini’s thought.<sup>25</sup> Lessona felt obliged to defend his position in Parliament, and enlisted the cooperation of the Agricultural Council, a body of experts chosen by Lessona himself, to form a special commission representing the interests already operating or intending to operate in Ethiopia. Minutes of the eleven meetings held between April and July 1937 reveal conflicting views about the degree of State intervention but eventual support for Lessona’s ideas. The Commission’s statements about the most urgent objectives of Italian agricultural activity reveal the place of Empire within larger questions of the Italian economy. These objectives centered on achieving self-sufficiency in foodstuffs, freeing the Empire from dependence on external supply, creating settlement centers for Italian rural populations, and securing low-cost raw materials for the Italian economy to eventually create a new imperial economy that would capture neighboring foreign markets.<sup>26</sup>

Yet just how these goals were to be achieved remained up for debate. All agreed that the transplantation of Italian peasants and their way of life was the best means of guaranteeing Italian sovereignty, civilizing the indigenous population, and developing the colonial economy. To this end, the Commission urged the creation of parastatal colonization agencies dedicated to transforming landless and unemployed settlers into small

independent landowners. Yet the Commission also found a place for private commercial farming schemes to be undertaken if desired by these landowners. Finally, the Commission opposed the modernization of indigenous agriculture on the grounds that it could compete with settler agriculture and demands for cheap labor.<sup>27</sup>

The lack of sufficient vacant land had long been among the chief obstacles to Italian colonization. Maugini and others had advocated the strategy of *indemaniamento*, or the transformation of the estates belonging to the ex-Emperor, rebels, the Church, and Ethiopian notables into state-owned lands. Such practices had been common in other Italian colonies, but, as Maugini noted, the presence of life-long sharecroppers on such lands raised a “delicate problem that is not only economic, but above all political and social. Thus domanial land or land that has been confiscated is not necessarily to be equated with land disposable for colonization.” Maugini was alluding to the 1893 uprisings in Eritrea that contested General Oreste Baratieri’s expropriations there.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the creation of domanial lands proved long and arduous. The official in charge of this task, Francesco Caroselli, the Governor of Somalia from 1938 to 1941, established a five-member Land Survey Commission composed of experts from various ministries to study land ownership and devise strategies for the organization and operation of agriculture-related services.<sup>29</sup>

The program was threatened with crises from the start due to bureaucratic infighting, the reluctance of some of the Commission’s own members to have a permanent colonial posting, the unstable military situation, and the chronic shortage of skills and staff at the local agricultural offices upon whose work the Commission was to rely. Ultimately, the Commission’s survey of Ethiopian land tenure was based on inconclusive data from extremely restricted areas under Italian control, and as such its findings were open to many criticisms. Rather than launching a new policy, the Commission codified practices that were already in place, providing the State with a legal framework to pursue its policy of land alienation from the Ethiopians.<sup>30</sup> Such a policy emphasized political expediency rather than clear land regulation. Military tactics were combined with economic pressure, and the lands of rebel and exiled leaders were confiscated along with those of the royal family. These same measures had formed the pillar of Italian agricultural policy in Libya, Eritrea, and Somalia, where they were conceived as a means of asserting Italy’s sovereignty as successor to the vanquished State.

Eager to amass land for colonization, the government also targeted any land that could be claimed as domanial without political and social complications. This included land on which tax was owed (where Ethiopians were least able to prove their right), uncultivated land, and land the

government thought had not been cultivated efficiently or was in excess of the need of the local population.<sup>31</sup> This view failed to take into account communal grazing lands, land under fallow, or lands used for fuel or building material, or better, it was assumed that the Ethiopians had no claims on such lands. Confiscation began in November 1935: lands of some leading northern nobility were seized, followed by lands belonging to the royal family, exiled leaders, and resistance fighters in Härär, and Galla and Sidamo.<sup>32</sup> Few of these confiscations were preceded by a proper study of the status of land, but the government still claimed that its practices were more humanitarian than the brutal spoliation allegedly adopted by the British in their colonies or the French in Algeria.

This abundance of land did not mean that it could all be commercially farmed. In fact, most of it was unprofitable, being densely populated, intensely cultivated, and often consisting of fragmented small plots that were often intersected by other privately owned lands that the Italians had pledged to honor. The protection of Ethiopian interests and the development of settler agriculture remained difficult to reconcile, and many Ethiopians were moved off their lands to make room for Italian farms. Although they were given other lands in exchange, they relinquished those they owned only reluctantly and under severe pressure. This slow pace of land transfer angered the land-hunters and led to violent disputes with the colonial administration. The delays and difficulties in creating unified zones of colonization contiguous to one another led to the emergence of scattered settlement enclaves which isolated colonists from one another and created huge additional costs for the government; it also led demographic colonization agencies to sometimes settle areas that were unhealthy, of high political risk, or which had no possibility of expansion.

Ultimately, the settlement of large numbers of Italian peasant families—the main economic justification for the conquest—proved unworkable. Although the government claimed in 1940 that 3,550 families had been settled, no more than four hundred peasants actually moved to Ethiopia, and only 150 of these were joined by their families. As an outlet for emigration, then, Ethiopia was a failure. In 1939 the total Italian population in AOI was 130,000, sixty thousand of which was in Ethiopia. Yet the Italian population of New York was still ten times more than that of the entire Italian empire, and expatriate Italians tended to return to Italy rather than settle in the colonies.

Lack of employment soon dashed dreams of the Empire as a land of opportunity; many colonists experienced extreme poverty, housing shortages, and spiraling living costs. At the end of 1936 there had been 146,000 Italian workers in Ethiopia; by June 1939 only twenty-three thousand remained. Between six and seven thousand unemployed Italians lived in great

squalor in a camp on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, often begging Ethiopians for food—making a mockery of the so-called policy of racial prestige.<sup>33</sup>

Nor did Ethiopia ever provide many commercial advantages. The huge costs of administering the Empire far outweighed the tiny income from colonial imports that accounted for just two percent of total imports to Italy in 1938. That year even saw the start of a serious coffee shortage in Italy, despite Ethiopia's status as a major coffee bean provider. Moreover, Ethiopia had to import not merely industrial equipment but also food for Italy's expatriates. Far from solving Italy's economic problems, the empire only aggravated them.<sup>34</sup>

Underlying such poor achievement was bad planning, which can in part be attributed to the speedy conquest of Ethiopia. The Ministry of Colonies was unprepared to deal with the pressures that came from the unemployed who sought work and land in Ethiopia; from the demobilized masses of military recruits urgently needing settlement; and from a strong business lobby that wished to expand its enterprise. The pressures of these conflicting metropolitan and colonial interests pushed authorities into trying to implement bold programs of development on the basis of insufficient knowledge of the country, rather than waiting for studies of the land tenure system to be carried out.

The government's emphasis on demographic colonization and settlement meant that questions of land appropriation and land use were at the center of debates and policies of Italian colonialism. Indeed, one of the most notable legacies of Italian agricultural policy was the introduction of racial competition and conflict over land and production. If Ethiopians benefited at all from Italian colonization, it was only after the fall of the Empire in 1941. Whatever their motives and notwithstanding the brutalities they committed, the Italians did lay down developmental infrastructures and initiate agricultural policies that had the effect of vigorously forcing Ethiopians into greater participation in the world capitalist system. The regime also curbed the power of the traditional elites who had vetoed most of Emperor Haile Selassie's earlier attempts at land reform. Yet we still know little concerning the extent to which post-Independence planning in agriculture was inspired by the Italian experience. What is clear is that any economic benefits that may have accrued to the Ethiopians during the occupation resulted from accident and not design.

### Notes

1. Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Marshal Graziani Files (GRA) 46/41/9, Petretti to Graziani, May 13, 1937; Foreign Office (FO) 371/22021/J1224/40/1, Consul General (CG) Bird to Lambert, February 12, 1938; Angelo Del Boca, *Gli*

- Italiani in Africa Orientale. La caduta dell'Impero* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1982), 137–158; Davide Fossa, “L'intervento del partito nel governo dell'Impero,” *Rassegna economica dell'Africa Italiana* 20, no. 3 (March 1939): 255–262; Pier Marcello Masotti, *Ricordi d'Etiopia di un funzionario coloniale* (Milan: Pan Milano, 1981), 48.
2. Alessandro Lessona, *Memorie* (Florence: Sansoni, 1958), 298.
  3. ACS, GRA, 46/41/9, Petretti to Graziani, May 13, 1937; FO, 371/23376/J574/41/1, CG Bird to Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (PSSFA), January 2, 1939. Also Richard Pankhurst, “Fascist Racial Policies in Ethiopia, 1922–1941,” *Ethiopia Observer* 12, no. 4 (1969): 270–286; Luigi Goglia, “Note sul razzismo coloniale fascista,” *Storia contemporanea* 19, no. 6 (1988): 1223–1266.
  4. Camera dei Deputati (CD), Istituto Agronomico per L'Oltremare (IAO), Misc. 1038, Alberto Pollera, Europei e indigeni nella valorizzazione nell'economia dell'Impero, October 7, 1938, 2–5.
  5. Martino Moreno, “Politica di razza e politica coloniale,” *Annali dell'Africa Italiana* 2, no. 2 (1937): 456–457; FO, 371/22021/J3439/40/1, D. M. Riches (Acting Consul) to CG, August 12, 1938.
  6. FO, 371/22020/J369/40/1, Lord Perth to FO, January 24, 1938.
  7. FO, 371/20209/J8291/4321/1, Mallett (Holy See) to Eden, October 20, 1936; FO, 371/22020/J369/40/1, Lord Perth to Anthony Eden, January 24, 1938. Native clergy was forbidden from performing functions—in particular the celebration of Holy Mass—on altars destined for the Latin rite. Ethiopian clergymen told the author of Italian priests re-consecrating altars used for the Ethiopian liturgy on the grounds that such altars had been profaned.
  8. Cf. Fernando Quaranta, *Ethiopia: An Empire in the Making* (London: P. S. King and Son, 1939), 74–93.
  9. FO, 371/22021/J1321/40/1, Sir M. Lampson to PSSFA, March 21, 1938; FO, 371, 22021/J1221/40/1, Starling to Campbell, March 25, 1938. On the Resistance, see also Dämsé Waldä Amanuél, *Bä-Itteyopeya agärchen lay amnest amät läwärrärän assäqaqi yähüzän engurguro* (Addis Ababa: Täśfa Maryam Printing Press, 1951 Ethiopian Calendar); Garima Täfärra, *Gondäré Bägshaw* (Addis Ababa: Tasfa Gabre Sellassie Printing Press, 1949 Ethiopian Calendar); Richard Pankhurst, “Ethiopian Patriots: The Lone Struggle, 1936–1940,” *Ethiopia Observer* 13, no. 1 (1970): 40–56; Salome Gebre Egziabher, “The Ethiopian Patriots, 1936–1941,” *Ethiopia Observer* 12 (1969): 63–91.
  10. FO, 371/22020/J657/40/1, CG Bird to Lambert, January 14, 1938; Richard Pankhurst, “Economic Verdict on the Italian Occupation of Ethiopia,” *Ethiopia Observer* 14, no. 1 (1971): 76–77.
  11. FO, 371/22020/J641/40/1, CG Bird to FO, January 4, 1938; FO, 371/23376/J574/41/1, CG Bird to FO, January 2, 1939; FO, 371/24635/J466/18/1, Acting CG Gibbs to Cavendish-Bentinck, December 30, 1939.
  12. FO, 371/24635/J412/18/1, Sir P. Loraine to Halifax, January 29, 1940. Not only do figures given by the Italian sources conflict, but authors consider these simple authorization figures as actual investments. See Nino Villa Santa et al.,

- Amedeo Duca d'Aosta* (Rome: Istituto del Nastro Azzurro fra Combattenti Decorati al Valore Militare, 1954), 272–275.
13. The most unfortunate victims of this policy Italianizing businesses were the Indian house of G. M. Mohammedally and Co., a leading import–export company established in 1888; the Arabian Trading Company, trading in skins and hides; the Ethiopian Mechanical Transport Company, engaged in road construction; and the French firm A. Beese. FO, 371: 22020/J641/40/1, CG Bird to FO, January 4, 1938; 22021/J1221/40/1, Starling to Campbell, March 25, 1938; 22021/J1804/40/1, CG Bird to FO, April 2, 1938.
  14. FO, 371: 22021/J2376/40/1, Lord Perth to FO, June 11, 1938; 22021/J2926/40/1, CG Gibbs to FO, July 5, 1938; 23380/J296/296/1, CG Bird to FO, December 30, 1938; 24635/J412/18/1, Sir P. Loraine to Halifax, January 29, 1940; ACS, Segreteria Particolare del Duce (SPD), 44/242/R/39, Farinacci to Mussolini, April 24, 1938 and December 25, 1938.
  15. Richard Pankhurst, “A Chapter in Ethiopia’s Commercial History: Developments during the Fascist Occupation of Ethiopia, 1936–1941,” *Ethiopia Observer* 14, no. 1 (1971): 47–67.
  16. Ministero dell’Africa Italiana, *La costruzione dell’Impero (Annali dell’Africa Italiana* 3, no. 1 (1940)): 947; CD, IAO, AOI, 1923, Promemoria per il Sign. Direttore Generale dell’AOI circa lo studio del problema fondiario ai fini della formazione di terreni per uso agricolo, July 1, 1936.
  17. Attilio Teruzzi, “L’economia dell’Africa italiana nel secondo anno dell’Impero,” *Rassegna economica dell’Africa Italiana* 26 (1938): 366; G. De Michaelis, “La valorizzazione agricola dell’Impero,” *Rassegna economica dell’Africa Italiana* 26, no. 1 (1938): 6.
  18. Giulio Gennari, “La colonizzazione agraria di popolamento nell’economia corporativa dell’Impero: osservazioni di un legionario,” *Georgofili* 6, no. 2 (1936): 511.
  19. Carlo Giglio, *La colonizzazione demografica dell’Impero* (Rome: Rassegna Economica dell’Africa Italiana, 1939), 10; Gennari, “La colonizzazione agraria,” 508; Lessona, *Memorie*, 298.
  20. CD, AOI, 1778, C. Poggio, “Rilievi e proposte per la pronta valorizzazione dell’Impero” (October 1936), 13–14.
  21. ACS, GRA, 45/4/4, Lessona to Governatore Generale AOI, 8; Lessona, *Memorie*, 303–304; Richard Pankhurst, “A Page of Ethiopian History: Italian Settlement Plans during the Fascist Occupation of Ethiopia, 1936–1941,” *Ethiopia Observer* 13, no. 2 (1970): 145.
  22. Archivio Thaon di Revel (AtdR) 24/100, Relazione Prof. Maugini sul viaggio compiuto al seguito di S. E. Tassinari, January–February 1937, March 26, 1937, 14–16.
  23. CD, AOI 1990, G. Tassinari al Duce, Relazione del viaggio compiuto attraverso il territorio dell’Impero, January–February 1937, March 23, 1937, 7–9, 15.
  24. AtdR 24/103, Relazione di una missione di agricoltori in AOI, March 5–April 9, 1937, (Florence, 1937), 45.
  25. Lessona, *Memorie*, 285.

26. CD, IAO, AOI, 1776, Relazione della Consulta per l'Agricoltura al MAI sui problemi relativi all'avvaloramento agrario dell'Impero, September 23, 1938, 3–4, published as Consulta, "L'avvaloramento agrario dell'Impero," *Rassegna economica dell'Africa Italiana* 25, no. 10 (October 1937): 1561–1575.
27. CD, IAO, AOI, 1776, Relazione, 2, 42; Consulta, "Avvaloramento"; CD, IAO, AOI, 1775, Seduta, July 15, 1937.
28. AtdR, 24/100, Relazione Maugini, 2, 12–13.
29. Archivio Storico dell'Africa Italiana (ASMAI), PB5, Colucci to De Rubeis, Schema di studi sul regime fondiario in AOI, September 28, 1937; Royal Decree of June 3, 1938, no. 965, published in *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, July 16, 1938.
30. ASMAI, PB5, Colucci to De Rubeis, Schema, 1–2; Ministero dell'Africa Italiana (MAI), "La valorizzazione e colonizzazione agraria," *Annali dell'Africa Italiana* 2, no. 3 (1939): 197.
31. ASMAI, PB5, Mussolini to Governatore Generale, AOI, May 19, 1936 [1938]; CD, AOI, 1926, Teruzzi to Mussolini, April 27, 1936.
32. Governmental Decrees of July 30, 1936, no. 135, published in *Gazzetta Ufficiale* 2/8 (supplement), April 26, 1938, and of October 15, 1937, nos. 738, 751, 752, published in *ibid.*, November 16, 1937 and December 1, 1937.
33. ACS, SPDR, 44/242/R/39, Farinacci to Mussolini, April 24, 1938; FO, 371/24635/J467/18/1, ACG Gibbs to PSSFA, December 28, 1939.
34. See the memoirs of the former Minister of Foreign Trade, Felice Guarnieri, *Battaglie economiche tra le due grandi guerre*, vol. 2 (Milan, 1953), 404, 198; Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), 121.

Part III

# **Practices and Ideologies**

# Patrilinearity, Race, and Identity: The Upbringing of Italo-Eritreans during Italian Colonialism

*Giulia Barrera*

In 1940, the “Norms Concerning Children of Mixed Race” (law of May 13, 1940, n. 822) prohibited Italians from acknowledging the children they had had with Africans and from helping to support them; as for the “mixed-race” children (*meticci*), the Norms assigned them the juridical status of colonial subjects.<sup>1</sup> This law was the culmination of a campaign against “the plague of miscegenation” that arose after the Ethiopian conquest in 1935–1936. It marked a distinct change from preceding policies, under fascist rule as well as liberal-era governments. Indeed, up to that point, the government had not only allowed Italian men to acknowledge and support the children they had with African women: it had encouraged them to do so, and children acknowledged by their Italian fathers had acquired Italian citizenship automatically. Moreover, a law of 1933 had created the possibility for “mixed-race” children unacknowledged by their fathers to obtain Italian citizenship also.<sup>2</sup> This law gave legal force to the practice of assimilating unacknowledged Italo-Eritrean children into the Italian community, which colonial governments had sanctioned in practice since 1917.

Depending on particular political contingencies, Italian colonial governments employed different and sometimes contradictory strategies toward those of “mixed race,” resulting in seemingly irreconcilable criteria for racial classification. But even though the consequences of these policies differed dramatically, both of them—assimilating Italo-Eritreans into the

Italian community, and classifying them as Africans—supported the same goal: to build a two-tier society in which the distinction between colonizers and colonized was clear.

Categorizing “mixed-race” individuals as Africans, on one hand, had its ideological basis in biological racism, according to which the mixing of whites and blacks led to racial degeneration. Assimilating them as part of the Italian population, on the other hand, depended on an understanding of racial identity as determined by paternal descent alone: following this view, an Italian father’s child was considered Italian regardless of who its mother was.<sup>3</sup> The Ethiopian war marked the threshold between the ascendancy of views based on patrilinearity and biological views. Nonetheless, both ideas—that individuals of “mixed race” were biologically inferior, and that they were Italian because their fathers were Italian—circulated in Italy and the colony throughout the entire period, fostering contradictions that were never resolved.

In these pages I discuss why the idea that paternity determined race prevailed during most of the Italian colonial period in Eritrea. This propensity derived from what might be called a “patrilinear convergence” between colonizers and colonized: for both groups, paternal descent defined individual identity. In particular, the attitudes of the colonized toward descent and identity played a crucial role in shaping an Italian identity for Italo-Eritreans.

By “Italo-Eritreans” I mean the children of one Eritrean and one Italian parent; in this period, the Italian parent was always the father and the Eritrean parent was always the mother. Italo-Eritreans perceive the term *meticcio*, or “mixed-race” (or worse, *mulatto*) as offensive, and this was equally true in the 1920s<sup>4</sup>: I therefore avoid using it whenever possible. Still, I cannot do without the term in analyzing Italian colonial ideas and policies, as this was precisely the category Italians employed. Today, many Italo-Eritreans consider themselves Italian; others consider themselves Eritrean (especially if they reside in Italy); others still define themselves as Italo-Eritrean; and yet another group rejects all ethnic labels. Ultimately, the underlying theme of this essay is the contingent, situational, and historically determined character of such ethnic and racial definitions.

### Demographic Background

The Italian community was very small in the early decades of colonialism in Eritrea. The number of military men diminished from several thousand before the 1896 Italian defeat at Adwa, to 854 in 1905, and to approximately five hundred in 1931. The civilian population had been very small prior to Italy’s defeat at Adwa in 1896, but it entered a period of slow,

constant increase thereafter: from 1,499 in 1905, it grew to 3,688 in 1931.<sup>5</sup> The community grew more by natural increase than by immigration from Italy: in fact, in 1931, a good forty percent of Italians in Eritrea had been born there. About a third of these Eritrea-born Italians, approximately 515 individuals, had an Italian father and an Eritrean mother.<sup>6</sup>

Initially, the sex ratio among Italians had been extremely uneven, even without taking military men into account. In fact, the early white settlement had essentially consisted of single men. In 1905, about eighty percent of the European men over the age of sixteen were unmarried, and many of the married men were there without their wives. The colony's Europeans numbered over 1,300 unmarried men and only seventy-three unmarried women.<sup>7</sup>

Governor Martini (1897–1907) disapproved of officials' concubinage with Eritrean women, and his successor, Raggi (1907–1915), prohibited Italian functionaries from cohabiting with Eritrean women. But the government had neither the means nor the political authority to implement the migration of Italian women to the colony, as Mussolini would after 1935. Only the gradual equalizing of the sex ratio among Italians in the two decades following World War I led to any significant decrease in interracial sexual relations.

In Martini's time, then, concubinage with Eritrean women was extremely widespread among Italians of all social classes. Numerous progeny were born of these unions, although we can only quantify them very approximately. The only certain datum is that 515 children of Italian fathers and Eritrean mothers were registered in 1931 in the civil status ledgers. According to the registry, in other words, about one out of eight Italians had an Eritrean mother, as the total number of Italians—including the military—was 4,188.<sup>8</sup> Of course, we cannot gauge how many Italo-Eritreans were not registered. But in any case, the percentage of Italo-Eritreans in comparison to the Italian community was very significant. It was clearly not uncommon for Italian men in Eritrea to have children by Eritrean women.

### Colonial Paternities

Italian men who had children with African women did not all behave identically. A significant number of them raised their own children and recognized them legally; many, however, abandoned them. In so doing, the latter were partly repeating behavioral models that were widespread in their home country. I am referring specifically (although not exclusively) to the practice of sexually exploiting domestic workers, and then firing them if they became pregnant. In this relationship between employer and servant,

class and status differences facilitated male abuses and child abandonment. Child abandonment was even easier for Italian men in Eritrea, due to colonial power relations, the distance from Italy, and racial prejudices.

The sole factor that appears to have been linked to men's attitudes toward their children is the duration of their stay in the colony. Men who chose Eritrea as their permanent home seem to have been more inclined to recognize their children; men who were only there for a finite period were more likely to abandon them. The lives of men in this second category were fully based in Italy, and their stay in Eritrea amounted to a parenthesis that could be dismissed as an adventure. Such men were mostly officials, who seem to have been the ones most often responsible for child abandonment.

Of course, this was a general pattern rather than a strict rule. In fact, the first Italian man to recognize his Italo-Eritrean child seems to have been a member of the military, Captain Francesco Carchidio Malvolti. His son Michele, by a local woman, was born in 1891; in 1893 Malvolti disposed in Michele's favor in his will, and the following year he died in combat. Michele grew up in Italy with an aunt on his father's side, the Contessa Paziienza Laderchi Pasolini dall'Onda. Following his father's steps, he pursued a military career, reaching the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He also married an Italian woman.<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, an overwhelming majority of Italian officials abandoned their children in Eritrea. They frequently provided for mother and child before leaving—by buying them a house, for example, in order to clear their conscience. Some fathers placed their children in one of the Catholic mission institutes for “mixed-race” children, Eritrea's only Italian boarding schools at the time. These men left a small payment, and then vanished. From their letters to the bishop we can decipher the contradictions with which they struggled. They recognized their paternity privately, but denied it publicly. They wanted to remove the children from their mothers' care and guarantee them an Italian upbringing, but they were not prepared to recognize them legally (which would provide them with Italian citizenship) or take charge of their upbringing. Finally, they wanted to save their own souls and yet preserve their social standing.

The letters they wrote to the bishop betray both masculine arrogance and racial prejudices, but they also convey the view that the children of Italian men were unlike Eritrean children and should grow up as Italians. This idea appeared consistently in texts concerning “mixed-race” children up through 1935: many Italians simultaneously claimed that Italo-Eritreans were Italian and yet inferior to Italians. Thus they deemed it inappropriate for an Italian man's child to live as Eritreans did, and yet they would not accept an Italo-Eritrean among their own ranks.

Despite the widespread negative stereotypes that circulated even in the liberal era, the importance of paternity was never in doubt among Italians. According to both the law and common sense, it was paternal descent that made an individual Italian. To deny this premise would have amounted to questioning paternal supremacy, which was a fundamental element of the social order, gender hierarchy, and masculine identity itself. In fascist Italy, paternal supremacy received further governmental encouragement, with ironic outcomes in the colonies. In fact, even after the Ethiopian war, when fascist propaganda depicted “mixed-race” people in the worst possible light, some Italians—even some fascist leaders—continued to see those of “mixed race” as Italian, and worthy of their fathers’ acknowledgement and care.

Some prominent colonists gave theoretical dignity to the notion that the father—and not the mother—shaped the child’s identity. For example, Alberto Pollera, a colonial official and ethnographer who legitimized and raised his own Italo-Eritrean children, stated with conviction: “As is well known, the male parent’s traits prevail over the mother’s.”<sup>10</sup> In 1905, His Majesty’s Attorney General Ranieri Falcone clarified that mixed unions were acceptable only so long as they involved white men and colonized women, rather than vice-versa. Otherwise, “hoping for the offspring to receive a civilized upbringing would be in vain. Ethnic traits and genetic phenomena cannot be denied.”<sup>11</sup> Following this philosophy, the government moved energetically to prevent sexual relations between white women and Eritrean men. In sum, Italian colonizers could only view interracial sexual relations and progeny with approbation so long as hierarchies of both race and gender coincided and reinforced each other.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to recognizing their paternity, some Italian fathers had a significant affective investment in their children, and were committed to their upbringing and schooling. Quite a few members of the colonial elite brought their children abroad (to Egypt and/or Italy) to receive higher education, and passed on their patrimony to them. As a consequence, some Italo-Eritreans reached prominent economic status. The fathers of such Italo-Eritreans had made Eritrea their permanent home and their children the center of their affective lives. One case we know in some detail is that of Giuseppe Pastacaldi, a commercial agent in Harar: letters he wrote to the bishop of Asmara provide insight into his emotional ties to his children. He entrusted his older sons Michele and Giorgio to the Capuchin institute for “mixed-race” children in 1914, to ensure that they would have an Italian education. The affection he felt for them is evident from the terms he used—“my babies” or “my two sons”—other fathers used expressions such as “the *meticcio*” or “the child”—and from the anxiety it caused him not to have had news of them for two months. It is also worth noting that in 1915, the children’s paternal grandmother thanked the bishop for

his care of “[her] grandchildren.” Clearly, Pastacaldi’s Italo-African children were members of his family.

At the same time, Italian men distinguished strongly between the relations they had with their sexual partners and the children they fathered with them. Marriages between Italians and Eritreans were extremely unusual. When they did occur, they were usually only religious rather than civil, and they were often *in articulo mortis*. In other words, although many men assumed a paternal role as they would have with children born of an ordinary marriage with an Italian woman, their relations with African women were markedly colonial, comporting a much greater difference in status than was typical within Italian couples (except in a very few exceptional cases). And as we have already seen, many men who cared for their children abandoned the mothers of those children nonetheless.

A typical example of Italian men’s differentiation between their Eritrean sexual partners and the children they fathered with them is that of Marino, a Neapolitan agricultural concessionaire in the highlands. He legitimized his Italo-Eritrean children—four girls and a boy—whom he had fathered with three different women. We are familiar with his household thanks to the detailed description recorded by English journalist Owen Tweedy in his diary when he visited Eritrea in 1928 and spent a day in Marino’s house. With Marino lived his five children as well as the mother of the youngest two. Throughout Tweedy’s visit the woman stayed in the shadows. She was not introduced, and she was only referred to as “the mother.” The children, on the other hand, were all introduced, and the boy was presented with special pride. An astonished Tweedy records how Marino’s mother (who also lived with him) explained: “Marino is so proud of his son and heir. He has made such a difference to *us all*.” Apparently, the Englishman expected to find a system of classification like the one in the United States, where one drop of black blood made a person black. Thus for him, it was incomprehensible that “a real black sambo of a boy” (in his words) could be considered a legitimate heir. And it was equally surprising that the Italian grandmother hugged and kissed the children, demonstrating her joy over her “black and tan grandchildren.”<sup>13</sup> Unlike Tweedy, Marino and his mother inhabited a system of racial classification based on paternal descent; therefore, they had incorporated the children fully into the paternal family, all while marginalizing the children’s mothers.

Undoubtedly, the ideal remained to build a conventional family with an Italian wife.<sup>14</sup> But given that conditions in the colony often made such an option impracticable, children by an African woman could serve equally well to realize men’s wishes for fatherhood. These fathers claimed their paternity proudly, energetically affirming their children’s full and exclusive

Italian-ness. Paradoxically, in their Italianization of Italo-Eritreans (and concomitant denial of their Eritrean identities), Italian men found accomplices in Eritrean society generally, and in the very mothers of their children.

### **Building Identity: Tigrinya Women, Mothers of Italians<sup>15</sup>**

The women involved with Italian men were almost all Tigrinya, belonging to the dominant ethnicity in highland Eritrea. For the Tigrinya, a child's social identity is defined by its father's social identity. Children are expected to follow the customary laws of their father's village, to speak their father's language, and to practice their father's religion. In conformity with these norms, Tigrinya women believed that their Italo-Eritrean children were Italian because of their Italian paternity.

Tigrinya norms further dictated that the father, or his extended family, take responsibility for the children. Children usually had access to land along lines of paternal descent. Women abandoned by their children's fathers therefore found themselves in particularly difficult economic straits. And yet, how they reared their children did not reflect the bitterness many of them felt toward the men who had abandoned them. Paradoxically, honoring Tigrinya social norms governing descent and identity meant that even abandoned women encouraged children to identify with their father's culture. This pattern demonstrates that the Italianization of Italo-Eritreans was hardly a one-sided effort on the part of Italians: it was also—and perhaps especially—an effect of Tigrinya attitudes and actions.

For the Tigrinya, who practice Orthodox Christianity, religion constituted a crucial difference between themselves and Italians. Several religions coexisted in Eritrea, and still do. But Eritrean Christians and Muslims alike firmly believed that children should observe their father's religion, thus expecting Italo-Eritreans to be raised as Catholics even if their fathers had decamped. If the father had not seen to the child's baptism, colonial authorities, Catholic activists, or even the mother herself did.<sup>16</sup> The mothers, meanwhile, usually remained faithful to their own original creed. So, for example, within the same family composed of a single mother and her Italo-Eritrean child, the mother might strictly observe Orthodox Christian food interdictions, while her child would not. On Sundays, an Italo-Eritrean woman explained to me, her mother used to accompany her to the Catholic Church, before going to attend the Orthodox service.<sup>17</sup> The Catholics and the Orthodox Christians follow two different liturgical calendars. As a consequence, mothers and children celebrated Christmas on two different days. One day they would have typically Italian Christmas food, while on the other they would have typical Tigrinya food.

Just because they were committed to raising their children as Italians does not mean that abandoned Eritrean women wished to live as Italians themselves. They encouraged the children to speak Italian; they clothed them like Italians, and styled their daughters' hair in the Italian way, even while they continued to observe local habits. It is important to note that rearing their children "as Italians" was not a generalized aspiration among Tigrinya mothers. Only women who had children by Italian men did it.

In order to understand how Tigrinya women could encourage their children's identification with their paternal culture even though the children's fathers had abandoned them, we must consider that for Eritrean women—even more than for Italian men—the quality of their relationship to a sexual partner did not determine the quality of their relationship to the child of that sexual partner. Many abandoned women—and we can safely presume that many of them had been exploited, sexually and otherwise—were fully emotionally invested in their Italo-Eritrean children. It is even possible that the paternal abandonment led the mothers to Italianize their children more energetically, in hopes of compensating for the father's absence and to solidify the children's sense of their own identity. Idelfonso Stanga, a Milanese agronomist who visited Eritrea in 1912–1913, noted:

It is amazing how much these hybrids love, think, and act like Italians! They seem to dread . . . being considered anything less than authentically Italian; as a result they end up displaying an Italian-ness even greater than our own.<sup>18</sup>

Such a strong cultural identification helps explain why Italo-Eritreans volunteered to serve in World War I, and later on, in the war against Ethiopia. Some became career officers; many joined fascist mass organizations; and some even joined the Fascist Party.<sup>19</sup>

We must also consider that among the Tigrinya, children who did not know their fathers' identities were very rare and highly stigmatized. According to customary law, women had every right to identify their children's fathers. A woman's word under solemn oath was probative in establishing paternity, and the man she indicated received all the honors and duties of fatherhood.<sup>20</sup> As a consequence, the only individuals who did not know their fathers' identities were born either of relations so dishonorable that the mother did not dare admit to them (such as incest, liaisons with slaves or other "ignoble races"), or of mothers who lived "in the most abject prostitution."<sup>21</sup> Birth out of wedlock, instead, for the Tigrinya bore no stigma, and all children were equally entitled (in theory, at least).

In Italy, on the other hand, the civil code explicitly prohibited inquiries into paternity. Nor did it allow for legitimizing children born of extramarital

relations; even when their fathers recognized them, natural children held a disadvantaged status. For Eritreans, their encounter with this Italian legislation was traumatic: it was incomprehensible to them that Italian law would allow fathers to abandon children, and even more so that an abandoned child could not carry his or her father's name.

One should consider, at this point, that because of the peculiar Tigrinya naming system, children who did not have their father's names were immediately identifiable. This put such children in a very uncomfortable situation, and often made them the target of cruel teasing. After the collapse of colonial rule, unrecognized Italo-Eritreans thus engaged in a long struggle to get their father's names. They were helped by an Italian law of 1947 that abolished the 1940 "Norms Concerning Children of Mixed Race" and introduced for such children a facilitated procedure of obtaining Italian names and citizenship.<sup>22</sup> However, the Italian civil code provision that prevented parents from recognizing children born out of wedlock remained in place until 1975. In quite a few cases, Italian fathers were willing to recognize their Italo-Eritrean children, but could not, because they fathered them when they were already married. In other words, many Italo-Eritreans suffered not only due to the colonial relationship, but also because of the patriarchic imprint of the Italian legislation.

Finally, one should note that the effectiveness with which Eritrean mothers raised their Italo-Eritrean children as Italian created a constant and significant pressure on the colonial government. The presence of numerous individuals who saw themselves as Italian and were considered such by Eritreans—even though they were not legally Italian—wreaked havoc on the hierarchies the colonial government wanted to maintain, which forced the government's hand toward formally sanctioning the Italian-ness of Italo-Eritreans. This explains the fact that in 1917, the government began to include Italo-Eritreans abandoned by their fathers in the civil registry, on its own initiative. From the 1920s on, the government also used treasury funds to place abandoned Italo-Eritrean children living in poverty with missionary institutions: it was too embarrassing for colonial rulers to have poor children identified as Italian by the Eritreans wandering the streets of Asmara.<sup>23</sup>

### Conclusion

Interracial sexual relations in colonial settings have attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years. Understandably, historians and anthropologists have pointed out the exotic and erotic representations of colonized women and highlighted the violence colonizers perpetrated against them. Such studies have inevitably tended to concentrate on the colonizers

rather than the colonized, and on the sexuality of white males in nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonialism. Even the few existing works on children born of interracial sexual relations in the colonies have emphasized the colonizers, focusing on their discourses and policies relative to the “mixed-race” population.

The Eritrean instance allows us to perceive certain crucial elements that researchers have ignored due to the reasons I have just outlined. In particular, it enables us to appreciate how understandings of paternity—on the part of colonizers *and* colonized populations—shaped attitudes toward those of “mixed race” and influenced government policy. The masculinity of white men in the colony, in other words, was not exclusively predicated on sexuality: for many, paternity was equally crucial to their fulfillment as men. And for a minority, albeit a significant one, their desire to be fathers was granted thanks to colonized women. These children enabled them, furthermore, to build satisfying affective lives for themselves in the colonial setting.

Including considerations of paternity and emotional fulfillment in analyses of the status of children of interracial sexual relations need not imply a romanticization of the colonial experience. Instead, it helps us to grasp the complexity of the needs European men brought with them to the colony. Material goals were not the only ones they pursued in their colonial lives; emotional ones figured as well. Italian men affirmed their prerogative as colonizers by abandoning children to their Eritrean mothers, but they also achieved their goals by marginalizing the mothers and asserting their children’s Italian-ness. A distinctly *colonial* paternity was at work in both cases.

As I have already underscored, the Italianization of Italo-Eritreans was the result of Eritrean efforts even more than of Italian ones. Understanding this point confirms the necessity of analyzing the ideas and behaviors of the colonized *alongside* those of colonizers in order to fully understand how the fates of children born of interracial relations took shape.

Some painful paradoxes emerge from the construction of Italo-Eritreans’ Italian identity. Those who probably played the most important part, namely colonized women, were also the weakest link in the hierarchy of colonial power relations. To uphold Tigrinya principles of descent and identity, they raised their children to identify with the culture of the colonizers: should we interpret this as resistance or complicity on their part? The greater their success, the greater the cultural estrangement between their children and themselves: should their behavior then be seen as subservience to cultural traditions, or subversion? In the end, binary analytical categories are hopelessly inadequate in the face of these afflicted colonial lives.

## Notes

1. On racial norms in the Italian colonies, see Richard Pankhurst, "Fascist Racial Policies in Ethiopia, 1922–1941," *Ethiopia Observer* 12, no. 4 (1969): 270–285; Luigi Goglia, "Note sul razzismo coloniale fascista," *Storia contemporanea* 19, no. 6 (December 1988): 1223–1266; *La menzogna della razza: documenti e immagini del razzismo e dell'antisemitismo fascista* (Bologna: Grafis, 1994); Angelo Del Boca, "Le leggi razziali nell'impero di Mussolini," in *Il regime fascista. Storia e storiografia*, ed. Angelo Del Boca, Massimo Legnani, and Mario G. Rossi, 329–351 (Rome: Laterza, 1995). On "mixed-race" policies, see Gianluca Gabrielli, "Un aspetto della politica razzista nell'impero: il 'problema dei meticci,'" *Passato e presente* 15, no. 41 (1997): 105; Barbara Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi. Antropologia, discorso giuridico e politiche sessuali interrazziali nella colonia Eritrea (1890–1941)* (Naples: Liguori, 1998); and Giulia Barrera, "Colonial Affairs: Italian Men, Eritrean Women, and the Construction of Racial Hierarchies in Colonial Eritrea (1885–1941)" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 2002). For an overview of studies on Italian colonial racism see Nicola Labanca, "Il razzismo coloniale italiano," in *Nel nome della razza: Il razzismo nella storia d'Italia, 1870–1945*, ed. Alberto Burgio, 145–163 (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999).
2. Law of July 6, 1933, n. 999 (Ordinamento organico per l'Eritrea e la Somalia), art. 18.
3. In German colonies, a similar tension between these two different systems of racial classification surfaced, as Lora Wildenthal has pointed out in her "Race, Gender, and Citizenship in the German Colonial Empire," in *Tensions of Empire. Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, 263–283 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
4. Mauro Da Leonessa, *Pro infanzia africana: Per la tutela dei meticci* (Rome: Società antischiavista d'Italia, 1932), 6.
5. Gabriele Ciampi, "La popolazione dell'Eritrea," *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana, serie 11*, 12 (1995): 487–524.
6. Vittorio Castellano, "Considerazioni su alcuni fenomeni demografici della popolazione italiana dell'Eritrea dal 1882 al 1923," *Rivista italiana di demografia e statistica* 2 (1948): 386–417; Vittorio Castellano, "La popolazione italiana dell'Eritrea dal 1924 al 1940," *Rivista italiana di demografia e statistica* 2, no. 4 (1948): 530–540.
7. F. De Angelis, "Il censimento del 1913 della popolazione italiana ed assimilata nella Colonia Eritrea," *L'Africa Italiana. Bollettino della Società Africana d'Italia* 40 (1921): 65–73.
8. Castellano, "La popolazione."
9. Michele Carchidio Malvolti, memorandum, n.d. [1946?], Archivio Vicariato Apostolico, Asmara, 87/5/18.
10. Luigi Goglia, "Una diversa politica razziale coloniale in un documento inedito di Alberto Pollera del 1937," *Storia contemporanea* 16, nos. 5–6 (1985): 1077. On Alberto Pollera, see Barbara Sòrgoni, *Etnografia e colonialismo. L'Eritrea e l'Etiopia di Alberto Pollera, 1873–1939* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001).

11. Ranieri Falcone, "L'amministrazione della giustizia nella colonia Eritrea," in Ferdinando Martini, *Relazione sulla Colonia Eritrea del R. Commissario civile deputato Ferdinando Martini per gli esercizi 1902–1907*, Atti parlamentari, Camera dei Deputati, legislatura XXIII, 1909–1913 (Rome: Camera dei Deputati, 1913), 323.
12. Cf. Ann Laura Stoler, "Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race, and Morality in Colonial Asia," in *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge. Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era*, ed. Micaela di Leonardo, 51–101 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
13. Owen Tweedy, *Diary*, book V, February 12, 1928. St. Anthony's College, Oxford.
14. Alberto Pollera, *La donna in Etiopia* (Rome: Grafia, 1922), 76.
15. My analysis of how Tigrinya mothers reared their Italo-Eritrean children is based on about forty in-depth oral interviews with Italo-Eritreans and Eritreans, carried out mostly in Rome and Asmara in the years 1995–1998.
16. Interview with Giovanni Barzano, Asmara 1998; Interview with Donata (pseudonym), an 80-year-old Italo-Eritrean woman, Asmara 1998.
17. Interview with Lucia Letenkiel (Italo-Eritrean woman), Rome, 1995–1998.
18. Idelfonso Stanga, *Una gita in Eritrea* (Milan: Cogliati, 1913), 195.
19. N.a. [Michele Carchidio Malvolti?], "Elenco dei meticci Eritrei che hanno raggiunto una posizione economica di qualche importanza o si sono comunque distinti" (Asmara: private archive, n.d.); interview with Laura Casi, Asmara 1998; interviews with Maria Messina, Rome 1995–1998.
20. Carlo Conti Rossini, *Principi di diritto consuetudinario dell'Eritrea* (Rome: Unione Editrice, 1916); Giovanni Barzano, *Valore e diritto della prole negli statuti consuetudinari dell'altipiano eritreo* (Asmara: Francescana, 1979).
21. Pollera, cited in Goglia, "Una diversa politica," 1084.
22. Decreto-legge c.p.s., August 3, 1927, no.1096.
23. I have discussed governmental policies toward Italo-Eritrean children more extensively in my "Sex, Citizenship, and the State: The Construction of Public and Private Spheres in Colonial Eritrea," in *Gender, Family, and Sexuality: The Private Sphere in Italy 1860–1945*, ed. Perry Wilson, 157–172 (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

# The Ideology of Colonialism: Educational Policy and Praxis in Eritrea

*Tekeste Negash*

This chapter seeks to explain colonial relations in Eritrea by focusing on Italian colonial educational policies and the extent to which they were put into practice. The colonial state was solely responsible for educational policies, but it shared responsibility for their implementation with the Catholic mission.<sup>1</sup> The questions I aim to answer are: (1) what role did colonial education play in the maintenance of colonial rule? (2) how did the colonial state perceive the spread of education and what measures did it take to regulate and streamline it?

The main problem for a study of colonial native education policy is the paucity of source materials published during the colonial era and the fragmentary nature of archival sources. Colonial era sources can be divided into two types: those concerned with an empirical description of school organization, and those explaining the motives that gave rise to this particular educational system. Both types of sources leave much to be desired, and the few policy-oriented studies that exist are highly eulogistic of fascist reforms.<sup>2</sup>

A far more serious shortcoming is the fragmentary nature of the archival source material. This results from the fact that schools were not required to provide reports to the colonial administration until 1932, when the post of School Superintendent in Eritrea was established. Nevertheless, the archival source material from the Italian Foreign Ministry's Eritrean Archive and the Comitato archive,<sup>3</sup> however incomplete, have been invaluable for information on the organization and functioning of the school

system and have made it possible to show the gap between policy and practice. The second type of source is the colonial textbooks used in Eritrean native schools. These textbooks, published in Eritrea, provide insights into the praxis of colonial education.

### **The Colonial Government and Native Education**

Although the colonial government was not alone in furthering native education, it was, however, responsible for defining its orientation, and three policies can be distinguished that correspond to various phases of colonial rule. During the first decade of colonial rule, from 1897–1907, the colonial administration perceived native education as a means by which the native would be elevated to intellectual parity with Italian citizens. This process, it was thought, could give Eritreans the basis to challenge colonial rule by undermining the aura of prestige that surrounded the colonizer. Justifying his refusal to open schools for the native population, the Eritrean Governor Ferdinando Martini wrote:

First point, no, and again no to mixed schools for whites and blacks. The native child, more agile and alert, has the intelligence of the white child; therefore avoid comparison. . . . Schools for blacks? Is it worth establishing them? We cannot use the native in postal and telegraph services. And happy the day when we will not even require their services as interpreters. . . . As for aping some Italian, they can learn it by themselves.<sup>4</sup>

For Martini, the colonial dictum ran as follows: the business of colonialism was absolute domination over the colonized in the interests of the colonizer. At a time when colonial rule was not yet firmly established, Martini's negative views on native education were generally accepted by others, but the policy of no-schooling for Eritreans was drastically changed by Governor Salvago Raggi, who succeeded Martini at the beginning of 1907. A career diplomat with long service in Cairo and Beijing, the new Governor established state schools. The first, founded in Keren in 1911 for the children of Muslim chiefs and other notables, was modeled on British colonial schools in the Sudan and Egypt.<sup>5</sup> In a reversal of Martini's views, this and subsequent schools were expected to provide educated workers for the postal and telegraphic services. The schools' curricula were developed on an ad hoc basis, and were different from those used in Italy.<sup>6</sup> Rome remained the ultimate source of authority, though, and it was the Foreign Minister Di San Giuliano, not Governor Salvago Raggi, who outlined the ideological framework for native education.<sup>7</sup>

In 1916, the colonial state issued a policy document on native education that responded to political concerns about the potential of schools to

transform the spirit and intellect of Eritreans. Traditional schools run by monasteries and mosques were encouraged, and private school organizers were asked to develop a program distinct from Italian education and to limit native schooling to the equivalent of the first three years of elementary education in Italy.<sup>8</sup>

In 1927 the Minister of Colonies Luigi Federzoni wrote that the natives twenty years hence would be what the Italian educational institutions had made them. The minister did not give the details of what kinds of Eritreans Italy wanted to create through education—this was presumably left to experts on the subject such as Rodolfo Micacchi, the Director of Education in the Ministry of Colonies, who was instrumental in implementing school reforms in the Italian colony of Libya.<sup>9</sup> Professor Mininni Caracciolo argued that education did not have to be a force for the subversion and dissolution of colonial domination: if controlled and adapted to native needs and conditions, it could be a useful instrument of peaceful penetration and moral conquest.<sup>10</sup>

Thus from 1934 onward, native education in Eritrea was primarily justified for its usefulness in consolidating colonial rule. According to the Superintendent of Schools, Andrea Festa,

The child ought to know something of our civilization in order to make him a conscious propagandist among the families who live far away inland. And through our educational policy, the native should know of Italy, her glories and her ancient history in order to become a conscious militant behind the shadow of our flag.<sup>11</sup>

To this end, Festa expanded courses in geography and hygiene and dropped the teaching of contentious historical issues such as the Risorgimento, further differentiating the educational program from that available to Italian nationals.

The establishment of the Italian Empire in 1936 brought a new wave of arguments to limit native education to lower elementary school. The view that Africans were pathologically inferior now assumed more relevance. At a 1938 international conference organized by the Italian Academy, the anthropologist Lidio Cipriani argued that the destiny of Africa was to be ruled by Europe because the retarded mental capacity of Africans left them unable to rule Africa to Europe's satisfaction. Contending that the purpose of colonialism was to rule, Cipriani challenged the representatives of France and Britain to admit this truth and desist in a false policy of preparing Africans for autonomy.<sup>12</sup> Cipriani's assertions found support among the ex-Governor of Somaliland, who wrote that the continued presence of colonialism depended, in addition to the use of force, on the

separation of races at all levels and in particular in the schools. “Endowed with good memory which is less distracted by observation and reflection,” he argued, “the native child excels with respect to his white counterpart in the first years of schooling.” For his part, the fascist Minister of Education Giuseppe Bottai wrote that prestige dictated instruction rather than education for the indigenous. Native education (“instruction”) aimed not to produce masters of European skills but expert manual laborers who would work to the best of their limited capacities.<sup>13</sup>

### **Colonial Educational Policy and the Catholic Mission**

As we have seen, the Italian state and the colonial government firmly believed in the transformative impact of education on the Eritrean and in the possibility of using education to create a compliant native population. Since the Catholic mission carried out most of the teaching, the relationship of the State and the Church is of considerable relevance for assessing educational policy.

The colonial administration saw the Catholic mission as an institution which pursued its educational activities in an acceptable and appreciated manner. As early as the 1890s, the colonial government was aware that Italian missionaries were useful in facilitating the spread of Italian culture and the consolidation of colonial rule. The separation between Church and State, which was such a divisive issue within Italy, was virtually non-existent in the colony.<sup>14</sup>

While the Catholic mission used its own teaching manuals in Eritrea long before colonial experts began theorizing about native education, the aims of the colonial state and the Catholic mission were strikingly similar. Both emphasized the greatness of Italy and its civilization, and a presumption that Eritreans owed Italy obedience and gratitude. Thus it is hardly coincidental that the colonial administration handed over the running of government schools to the Catholic mission. This can be seen as a reward to the Church for having carried out its patriotic obligations to the satisfaction of both the colonial government and the Italian state.<sup>15</sup>

If the Catholic mission and the Italian state shared the same goals and objectives for native education, the two diverged on the issue of training priests. In the seminary at Keren, the Catholic mission attempted to train Eritrean novices with the same curriculum as in Italy. Although the Keren seminary only had the competence to provide a twelve-year academic and religious training, its graduates could pursue their theological studies at the recently reestablished Ethiopian College in the Vatican. Between 1894 and 1930, the Keren seminary produced eighty-four priests, an average of slightly over two graduates per year.<sup>16</sup>

The Church's universalistic approach toward the recruitment and training of clerics and the autonomy with which the Catholic mission pursued its spiritual activities contravened policies pursued by the colonial administration and the Italian state which were based on the alleged pathological inferiority of the native. In at least one of its textbooks, a 1920 volume that told the story of an Eritrean youth who was eventually adopted by his Italian mentor, the Catholic mission preached assimilation,<sup>17</sup> while the colonial state implemented a policy of racial separation (or "association"). These universalist and racialist positions might have made for conflict but none was manifest during the colonial period.

### **The Organization of the School and Enrolment**

Although the education of Eritreans continued by the Catholic and Swedish missions came under close surveillance by the colonial administration, it is the schools established and financed by the colonial state that most clearly demonstrate the interaction between policy and practice.

In 1911, the colonial government established the first school of arts and crafts for the sons of Muslim chiefs and notables. Boarding students received elementary education in additional practical crafts such as carpentry and leather-tanning, whereas day students were trained only in crafts. Five years later, the colonial state established a similar school for Eritrean Catholics at Segeneiti and an agricultural school for members of the Ethiopian Church.<sup>18</sup> Although the schools had been formed on the initiative of the colonial governor, apart from limiting education to the first three years of lower studies, curriculum design was left to lay teachers and missionaries, and there was little participation by the Ministry of Colonies. The Muslim and Catholic schools aimed to produce clerks, interpreters, and skilled crafts workers, and impart knowledge of modern agricultural practices. The school for members of the Ethiopian Church was much narrower in outlook and was only meant to impart better training in agricultural husbandry.<sup>19</sup> By 1930, though, all but one of these schools had closed their handicrafts sections. Children of the nobility and senior colonial soldiers who aspired to clerical jobs were only interested in learning to read and write; a "radical social prejudice" stigmatized the learning of crafts, which were reserved for the lower classes.<sup>20</sup>

A 1921 reorganization of the educational system resulted in four schools with a total of 260 students (up to ninety per school); the schools were funded by the state and had an admission rate of thirty students per annum. The aim was to introduce greater flexibility in native education in recognition of the exigencies of commerce, industry, and colonial administration.<sup>21</sup> The decree mandated three types of schools: (1) schools of arts and crafts,

(2) elementary schools, for which Eritreans had exerted considerable pressure on the colonial state, and (3) a two-year superior school that would consolidate and complete earlier education as well as add new training in calligraphy, typewriting, and topography.<sup>22</sup> This last school never came into being, but further legislation in 1926 established a school in Asmara that combined elementary and superior instruction and extended the elementary program from three to four years.<sup>23</sup> To solve the problem of prejudice against crafts training, a 1931 decree required all schools to provide elementary education as well as arts and crafts but also preserved purely academic elementary schools.<sup>24</sup> As in 1921, plans were drafted for a two-year middle school, but the Superintendent of Schools blocked its realization on the grounds that it would create false pride among Eritreans, who had begun to demand such an institution. Thus, although an administrative reorganization in 1932 recognized the need for further complementary schooling, only a few selected students were allowed to continue with a two-year program.<sup>25</sup>

The creation of the Italian East African Empire in 1936 led to yet another reorganization of the educational system. The 1936 decree, which was the first direct legislation from Rome, once again limited native education to three years, and made local languages as well as Italian as the media of instruction.<sup>26</sup> The creation of a "Greater Eritrea," which incorporated a large part of what had been northern Ethiopia, posed additional problems for the local bureaucracy, namely the opening of new schools in the incorporated areas. Although the complementary school systems continued to exist, it appeared that student intake was extremely small; an early postcolonial report lists a total of ten students enrolled in the complementary school for 1939.<sup>27</sup>

This said, it is difficult to gain accurate figures of school enrolments. Archival material on enrolment figures is extremely fragmented and figures do not distinguish between grades and ages. The first accurate enrolment was compiled in 1910 when there were twelve Swedish mission schools with 810 students and seven Catholic mission schools with 350 students. In the 1916–1917 academic year, the four government schools had altogether eighty-seven boarding and seventy-one day students.<sup>28</sup> The model school at Keren had fifty-two students in its four-year program, which meant that around fifteen new students were admitted each year. Five years later, enrolment had increased for all four schools to a total of 260 students, and by 1925, the government schools had a total of 360 students. Enrolment increased dramatically after the 1926 establishment of the school in Asmara: it rose from around 1,100 in 1930 to two thousand in 1935, and to five thousand in 1940.

Although it is not easy to estimate the size of the educated population, an attempt can nevertheless be made to describe the possible performance of

the school system. Assuming that a maximum of twenty percent of the total number of students in any given year were in their final year of schooling, it is possible to calculate the yearly number of school leavers and thus arrive at an aggregate figure for the approximate size of the educated population. Of 9,962 students enrolled between 1921 and 1934, according to my calculation, just under two thousand had probably completed their education during this period.<sup>29</sup> This figure, based on a rather generous assumption, can be taken as representing the colonial state's role in the education of its colonized subjects. The census returns of 1931 appear to further strengthen the figure of 2,000 as a plausible indicator. According to the census there were 6,181 Eritreans, or 1.1 percent of the general population, who could read and speak Italian. The colonial school thus remained an elitist institution accessible to no more than two percent of the population.<sup>30</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

Sources on the relationship between education and colonial rule are extremely fragmentary for the early period and highly polemical for the later period, namely, 1931–1941. According to the superintendent of Eritrean schools, Andrea Festa, the colonial school had fulfilled its function in the production of the “future soldiers of Italy.” The colonial school system was reviewed in 1918, and then by Andrea Festa himself from 1934 onwards.<sup>31</sup> The conclusion that I draw from such reports is that the colonial administration succeeded in controlling the quality and intake of entrants. Neither in the public literature nor in the archives do we find that the government school system produced results that complicated colonial rule.

Unlike the major colonial powers,<sup>32</sup> Italian policy makers perceived education merely as an instrument for enhancing colonial rule. Italian educational policy attempted, and with considerable success, to prevent the evolution of an Eritrean intellectual elite. If, prior to 1932, such a policy was advocated on grounds of practical exigencies, the implementation of a racialist ideology from 1932 onward precluded the spread of education beyond indoctrination. Conscious of the impact of Western education upon the intellect of the colonized, the colonial administration adopted a policy of limiting education to lower elementary instruction, thus ensuring that its colonial rule would not be challenged through its own language.

### Notes

1. The Catholic and Swedish Evangelical missions had schools in Eritrea long before the Italian occupation. See Donald Crummey, *Priests and Politicians: Protestant and Catholic Missions in Orthodox Ethiopia, 1830–1868*

- (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972); Richard Pankhurst, "The Foundations of Education, Printing, Newspapers, Book Production, Libraries and Literacy in Ethiopia," *Ethiopia Observer* 6, no. 3 (1972): 241–290; Gustav Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia: Origins of the Evangelical Church in Mekane Yesus* (Stockholm: EFS-förl., 1978); and, on the later history of the Swedish Evangelical mission and its expulsion from the colonies in 1936, Viveca Halldin Norberg, "Swedes in Haile Selassie's Ethiopia, 1924–1952: A Study in Early Development Co-operation" (Ph.D. diss., University of Uppsala, 1977), 74; and Gerald K. N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition, 1941–1952* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 33.
2. The most relevant studies are Mininni Caracciolo, "Le scuole nelle colonie italiane di diretto dominio," *Rivista di pedagogia* 23, nos. 3–5 (1930): 183–207 and 273–298; Rodolfo Micacchi, "L'insegnamento agli indigeni nelle colonie italiane di diretto dominio," *Atti del secondo congresso di studi coloniali (1934)*, vol. 4, 226–256 (Florence: Olschki, 1935); Enrico De Leone, "Politica indigena e scuola," *Rivista italiana* 231 (1937): 3–15. Roland De Marco, *The Italianization of African Natives: Government Native Education in the Italian Colonies, 1890–1937* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1943), is unreliable on many accounts. Richard Pankhurst, "Education in Ethiopia during the Italian Fascist Occupation, 1936–1941," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 5, no. 3 (1972): 361–396, is useful but too general on Eritrea.
  3. The Foreign Ministry's Eritrean Archive (the Archivio Eritrea, or AE) was shipped from Eritrea in 1947. The archive of the Comitato (*Archivio del Comitato per la Documentazione delle Attività in Africa*) was compiled by a group of scholars and colonial experts who were brought together in 1952 by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Italian Africa.
  4. Ferdinando Martini, *Il diario eritreo*, 4 vols. (Florence: Vallecchi, 1942–1943), vol. 2, 472, entry of May 27, 1901; also Martini to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Asmara, April 26, 1901, in Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Archivio Ferdinando Martini, *busta 4*; and Renato Paoli, *Nella colonia eritrea. Studi e viaggi* (Milan: Treves, 1908), 96.
  5. Colonia Eritrea, *Istruzione Pubblica* (Asmara: n.p., 1914), 9; Commissariato di Cheren to Asmara, July 12, 1918, "Scuola d'arti e mestieri in Cheren. Pregi, difetti, e proposte," 2, in Archivio Storico del Ministero dell'Africa Italiana (ASMAI), vol. 3, *pacco 37, busta 4*.
  6. See Colonia Eritrea, *Istruzione Pubblica*, 34–49, for the curriculae followed at the Adi Ugri school. Students were obliged to wear uniforms similar to those of colonial soldiers, and military instruction (theory and practice) was provided throughout the four-year course of study.
  7. ASMAI, *posizione 31/1, fascicolo 10*, July 5, 1910, Di San Giuliano to Salvago-Raggi.
  8. AE 402, Circolare: Pubblica Istruzione, Cheren, December 31, 1916.
  9. Federzoni quoted in Micacchi, "L'insegnamento agli indigeni," 7–8; also De Marco, *The Italianization of African Natives*, 19.
  10. Caracciolo, "Le scuole nelle colonie italiane," 186–187.

11. Andrea Festa, "Le istituzioni educative in Eritrea," *Atti del secondo congresso di studi coloniali (1934)* (Florence: Olschki, 1935), vol. 2, 294; the same views were expressed by Festa in "L'istruzione per i bianchi e per indigeni," *Etiopia* 2, no. 4 (1938): 55.
12. Lidio Cipriani, "Razze africane e civiltà dell'Europa," in *Convegno di scienze morali e storiche. Tema: L' Africa*, ed. Fondazione Alessandro Volta, 2 vols. 598–599 (Rome: Reale Accademia d'Italia, 1939). Cipriani had long argued this point: see his *Considerazioni sopra il passato e l'avvenire delle popolazioni africane* (Florence: Bemporad, 1932), 17, 20, 111–114.
13. Maurizio Rava, "Politica sociale verso gli indigeni e modi di collaborazione con essi," in *Convegno di scienze morali e storiche. Tema: L' Africa*, ed. Fondazione Alessandro Volta, 2 vols. (Rome: Reale Accademia d'Italia, 1939), 771; Giuseppe Bottai, "La scuola fascista nell'Africa italiana," *Etiopia* 3, no. 3 (1939): 3.
14. The Catholic mission consisted of the Capuchin Fathers, established in Eritrea since 1894; the Daughters of St. Anna, established in 1878; and the Sisters of Pia della Nigrizia, established in 1910. These orders replaced the French Lazarists, who were active in Eritrea prior to Italian colonization and were replaced by Italian orders for patriotic reasons. See ASMAI, *posizione* 33/1, *fascicolo* 8, Governor Baratieri to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 9, 1894, and *ibid.*, *posizione* 33/2, *fascicolo* 6, Foreign Minister Blanc to Governor Baratieri, January 21, 1895; also Cesare Marongiu Buonaiuti, *Politica e religioni nel colonialismo italiano, 1882–1941* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1982), 61–62. According to Metodio Da Nembro, *La missione dei Minori Cappuccini in Eritrea (1894–1952)* (Rome: Institutum Historicum Ord. Fr. Min. Cap., 1953), 74, by 1923 all three public schools had been handed over to the Catholic mission, a strong indication that the state was satisfied with the mission's performance.
15. See Festa, "Le istituzioni educative in Eritrea," 128, and his "Presupposti e fini dell'azione educativa dell'AOI," *Atti del terzo congresso di studi coloniali* (Florence: Istituto Coloniale Fascista, 1937), 128.
16. Metodio Da Nembro, "Genesi e sviluppo del clero nativo, etiopico fino alla costituzione della gerarchia," *Euntes, Docete* 6 (1953): 308–309. By 1940, there were forty Eritreans studying in the Ethiopian College at the Vatican. ACS, Ministero dell'Africa Italiana (MAI), *busta* 15, December 20, 1940. Figures on number of graduates from Keren seminary are drawn from Da Nembro, *La missione dei Minori Cappuccini*, 319.
17. Missione Cattolica, *Embae . . . (Vittoria del lavoro): Libro di lettura Italiano-Tigrài ad uso delle scuole indigene* (Asmara: n.p., 1920).
18. ASMAI, vol. 3, *pacco* 37, *busta* 4, Commissariato regionale di Cheren to Asmara, November 10, 1910, report on the schools; *ibid.*, Promemoria "Scuole ed ordinamento scolastico in Eritrea," n.d. but no later than 1931.
19. ASMAI, vol. 3, *pacco* 37, *busta* 4, Commissariato regionale di Cheren to Asmara, November 10, 1910, report on the schools. After 1921 (Government Decree of September 12, 1921, no. 3808) the Ethiopian Church school also provided elementary education.
20. ASMAI, vol. 3, *pacco* 37, *busta* 4, Promemoria "Scuole ed ordinamento scolastico."

21. Government Decree no. 3809, September 12, 1921; figures from Angelo Piccioli, *La nuova Italia d'oltremare: L'opera del fascismo nelle colonie italiane* (Milan: Mondadori, 1934), vol. 2, 1149.
22. Decree no. 3809, September 12, 1921, articles 1 and 4.
23. ASMAI, vol. 3, *pacco 37, busta 4*, "Scuole ed ordinamento scolastico."
24. *Ibid.*, Promemoria "Colonia Eritrea", n.d. but end of 1933; Governmental Decree of April 8, 1931; Piccioli, *La nuova Italia d'oltremare*, vol. 2, 1152.
25. ASMAI, vol. 3, *pacco 37, busta 4*, "Scuole ed ordinamento scolastico." According to Festa, the aim of the complementary school was to complete what was learned in the earlier years.
26. Royal Decree of June 13, 1936, no. 136, Ordinamento e amministrazione dell'Africa Orientale Italiana, article 31.
27. ASMAI vol. 3, *pacco 37, busta 4*, Andrea Festa, "Scuole elementari dell'Eritrea, 1936–1937." Of the twenty-five newly opened schools, thirteen were located in the newly incorporated part of Eritrea. Also Foreign Office (Great Britain), 371/69370, Four Power Commission Report on Eritrea, 1948, Chapter Six: The Administration and Judicial System, 70.
28. Gaspare Colosimo, *Relazione al Parlamento sulla situazione politica, economica ed amministrativa delle colonie italiane presentata alla Camera dei Deputati il 23 febbraio 1918 ed al Senato del Regno il 28 febbraio 1918* (Rome: Tipografia del Senato di G. Bardi, 1918), 375–376; also De Marco, *The Italianization of African Natives*, 49. By 1916, the Swedish Evangelical mission in Eritrea had a total of 1,250 students, of which about a third were females. Boys' schools were organized into four years of primary education followed by a three-year post-primary program. For girls, education lasted three years and was designed to make good housewives out of them. According to Piccioli, *La Nuova Italia d'oltremare*, vol. 2, 1149, the number of students in the Swedish mission schools fell from 1,400 in 1922 to three hundred in 1932 (when those schools were closed down). Among the reasons for the decline was the opening of the Vittorio Emanuele School in Asmara in 1926.
29. We should add to this number the students from the Swedish and the Catholic missions.
30. VII Censimento generale, 1931, 39. The approximate figure of two percent is based on the assumption that the school-age population constituted about twenty percent of the population. According to the 1939 census the population of Great Eritrea amounted to 1,537,213 (Vittorio Castellano, "Il censimento del 1939 della popolazione indigena della Eritrea e lo sviluppo della popolazione indigena della Eritrea storica, in un cinquantennio di amministrazione italiana," *Rivista italiana di demografia e statistica* 2, no. 2 (1948): 270–271). Thus of a school age population of over three hundred thousand, the total enrolment of five thousand amounted to about 1.7 percent of all school age children and much less than one percent of the total population.
31. ASMAI, vol. 3, *pacco 37, busta 4*, Commissariato di Cheren to Asmara, July 12, 1918, "Scuola d'arti e mestieri in Cheren. Pregi, difetti, e proposte." Reviewing the performance of the school from its establishment in 1909, the district

governor reported that the school was engaged mainly in literary subjects and warned that the educated natives, respected by the population, would want to consider themselves as equal to their Italian masters. He suggested the abolition of literary subjects and a concentration on arts and crafts. His warning was heard, as the 1921 decree mandated that the Keren school concentrate only on arts and crafts.

32. See, for example, on British educational policy in Ghana, Geoffrey B. Kay and Stephen Hymer, eds., *The Political Economy of Colonialism in Ghana: A Collection of Documents and Statistics, 1900–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 278–304; Hanns Vischer, “Native Education in British Tropical Africa,” in *Convegno di scienze morali e storiche. Tema: l’Africa*, ed. Fondazione Alessandro Volta, 2 vols., 949–969 (Rome: Reale Accademia d’Italia, 1939); O. F. Ogunlande, “Education and Politics in Colonial Nigeria: The Case of King’s College, Lagos, 1906–1911,” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 7, no. 2 (1974): 325–343; Prosser Gifford and Timothy Weiskel, “African Education in a Colonial Context,” in *France and Britain in Africa: Imperial Rivalry and Colonial Rule*, ed. Prosser Gifford and William R. Louis, 662–711 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971).

## Mussolini, Libya, and the Sword of Islam

*John L. Wright*

As a socialist agitator, Benito Mussolini was imprisoned in 1911 for a violent protest against the Italian invasion of Turkish Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. As fascist Duce, he visited the Italian colony of Libya three times, in 1926, in 1937, and in 1942. In 1926 he was still consolidating the power he had assumed less than four years before, and he was concerned mainly with the still unsettled state of the colony and its prospects for agricultural development. In 1942 he went to Libya in anticipation of a triumphant entry on a white charger into newly conquered Alexandria; instead, he spent three weeks waiting in vain for an Axis breakthrough at al-Alamein. The 1937 visit was altogether the most successful. Despite some embarrassing news from Spain and Ethiopia, it provided a suitably striking public setting for important initiatives in fascist colonial and imperial policies.<sup>1</sup>

Mussolini's purpose in his 1937 visit was to present himself to the Libyan people as "Founder of the Empire" and "defender of the prestige of Rome, the common mother of all Mediterranean peoples."<sup>2</sup> Or, as the Rome correspondent of *The Times* of London interpreted it, the visit was "primarily intended to affirm Italy's increased prestige and demonstrate her military and naval strength."<sup>3</sup> This "increased prestige" was due to the surprisingly swift if superficial conquest of Ethiopia and the proclamation of the New Roman Empire in May 1936; the surviving of half-hearted international economic sanctions; and the growing international awareness of Italy's ability to intervene simultaneously in Spain and the Balkans, in the Middle East and in North and East Africa.

The Duce's tour of Libya, and in particular his inspection of the new public works of fascism, was an official endorsement of the three-year-old

governorship of Air Marshal Italo Balbo. An early and dynamic leader of fascism in his native city of Ferrara in northeast Italy, the organizer of the March on Rome that brought the fascists to power in October 1922 and a dazzlingly successful aviator, Balbo sought to make Libya into Italy's "fourth shore," a showplace of fascist colonial achievement. This was to be the "brightest jewel" in the Italian imperial crown, despite the allure and seemingly vast potential of Ethiopia, which Mussolini never visited. Libya was the intended setting for the unique social, economic, and political experiment of "demographic colonization," or the settlement of thousands of landless Italian peasants, who were also potential soldiers for further African conquests. Yet Balbo was no friend of the Duce. Indeed, it has been suggested that Mussolini visited Libya not so much to flatter Balbo as to deprive him of the public satisfaction of opening the colony's greatest single public work, the Litoranea, or coastal road.<sup>4</sup>

Mussolini's first big official duty in Libya was to open the new Litoranea highway on March 12, at Amseat on the Egyptian frontier, where the metalled surface ended abruptly in the open desert. Skirting the coast from Tunisia to Egypt, and passing through most of the towns and population centers, this highway was one of the more impressive works of fascism—"a triumph of organization over natural difficulties."<sup>5</sup> In the mid-1930s, the easiest travel between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica was, as it had always been, by sea: steamers sailed fortnightly from Tripoli to Khums, Zliten, Surt, Benghazi, and Tobruk. By 1935 roads had been built from Zuara to Mişrata, in Tripolitania, and from Derna to Ajdabiya, in Cyrenaica. But, apart from minor missing links, over five hundred kilometers of highway across the waterless Syrtica was still needed to join the two provinces of northern Libya. This work, started in late 1935, was completed in less than eighteen months.<sup>6</sup>

The project's necessary impetus came from the Ethiopian War. Hostile international reaction alerted Italian military planners to the need of quickly moving forces to meet the possible intervention of Britain from Egypt or France from Tunisia. Viewed in other lights, the road led eastward toward the Suez Canal, or westward toward the French naval base at Bizerte. Although the Italians insisted that the road had been built to promote trade and tourism, the correspondents of *The Times* and the *Manchester Guardian* asserted that it had "undoubtedly been built for military purposes," while other foreign observers declared it to be "nothing but a military highway thinly camouflaged as a road to encourage the motoring tourist."<sup>7</sup> And the special correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* in Libya in 1938 pointed out that the road made the policing of the colony by motorized troops easier and cheaper because the number of garrison posts could be reduced. As the correspondent noted, "troop movements,

at any rate on a small scale, could be carried out with lightning rapidity," a consideration of some value in a colony only fully conquered and "pacified" a few years earlier.<sup>8</sup>

To allay Egyptian suspicions about Italy's newfound ability to move motorized troops to their border, Mussolini reassured Egyptian journalists who covered the opening ceremony that the road was destined to have a decisive influence on economic and tourist relations between Egypt and Italy. It was, as he later told the *Daily Mail*, "a highway of European civilization, [something] that only fascism could have conceived and completed so quickly."<sup>9</sup>

From Amseat, Mussolini returned to Tobruk by the Litoranea, and then flew to Derna, where another aim of the tour became clear: to show Italy's sympathy for Islam. Indeed, the Qadi of Derna greeted him with a public assurance that the world's four hundred million Muslims would not remain indifferent to the particular attention he had shown to the Muslim world. After Derna, Mussolini spent two more days touring northern Cyrenaica by car, visiting Benghazi, the provincial capital, and the restorations of the ancient Greek city of Cyrene. On Monday, March 15, he left Benghazi for Tripoli along the Litoranea. Libyans had gathered in small groups beside the road to watch him pass: many had ridden for days for this fleeting glimpse. As the motorcade approached Tripoli, the visit began to take on the character of baroque spectacle, although parts of it might have seemed pallid alongside the vice-regal ceremonial of contemporary British India.

Mounted on a charger and flanked on foot by two Libyan soldiers carrying the Roman Lictors' fasces—the literal symbol of fascism—Mussolini rode on the evening of Tuesday, March 16, into the crowded, floodlit, city: "a truly Roman entry," as *The Times* called it.<sup>10</sup> The next day he changed his means of transport yet again, and in a four-horse open carriage drove to open the Tripoli Trade Fair. Later, after inaugurating a colossal statue of Julius Caesar with features curiously similar to his own, he addressed some of the relatively few Italians then settled in the colony, giving reassurances of imperial Italy's anxiety to cooperate with other powers. Although his journey was "imperialist" in nature, the Italians harbored no hidden designs or aggressive aims against anyone.<sup>11</sup> The words had a false ring because news was just then beginning to emerge of the massacres of Ethiopians in Addis Ababa a month beforehand, following an attempt on the life of the Viceroy, Rodolfo Graziani.

The following afternoon, Thursday, March 18, the visit came to a climax with the extraordinary ceremony at which Mussolini was presented with the "Sword of Islam." Accompanied by two thousand Libyan cavalrymen, he rode on a black stallion to a selected sand dune outside Tripoli. The

horsemen, drawn up round the foot of the dune, greeted him as “Founder of the Empire” with a triple war cry. Two men chosen from the Libyan heroes of the Ethiopian campaign then advanced from the main body, dismounted and, while the drums rolled and cannon banged in the background, one offered him the sheathed “Sword of Islam.”<sup>12</sup>

In the name of the soldiers and Muslims of Libya, proud sons of fascist Italy, I have the honor to offer the victorious Duce this well-tempered Islamic sword. At this moment, with our hearts beat those of all Muslims of the Mediterranean shores who, filled with admiration and hope, perceive in you the great statesman who guides our destiny with a sure hand.

Mussolini took the sword, unsheathed it, and flourished it into the air to make its steel blade and gold chasing flash in the sunlight, at the same moment letting out a great war cry. As the anonymous correspondent of the *Popolo d'Italia* who witnessed the sight wrote:

There stands the upright figure of the Duce, his strong features bronzed by the sun, high on the dune, outlined majestically against the shining serenity of the sky. Simultaneously, the two thousand horsemen rise on their stirrings and respond in unison with mighty war cries. Cannon boom in the distance. . . . These symbolic rites have the severe simplicity of military ceremonial.<sup>13</sup>

Followed by his two thousand cavalry, and still brandishing his sword, Mussolini galloped back to Tripoli, trailing a cloud of dust. In place of a saddle, he rode on a black cloth embroidered with gold fasces; two Libyan *zaptie* in scarlet and white uniforms rode before him, bearing great wooden fasces. Mussolini rode into Tripoli's main square, the Piazza Castello, where he addressed the assembled crowds from the ramp of the Castle.<sup>14</sup> Stabbing the air with his sword to emphasize his points,<sup>15</sup> and speaking slowly and distinctly, he exclaimed:

Muslims of Tripoli and Libya! Young Arabs of the Littoral!<sup>16</sup> My august and powerful sovereign, His Majesty Vittorio Emanuele III, King of Italy, Emperor of Ethiopia, has once again sent me, after an interval of eleven years, to this land where the tricolor flies, to learn of your needs and to meet your just desires. You have offered me the most precious of gifts: this sword, symbol of strength and justice, a sword that I will take back with me to Rome and keep among the most precious mementos of my life. In accepting your gift, I wish to tell you that a new year has dawned in the history of Libya. You have shown your loyalty to Italy, exercising the greatest discipline at a time when Italy was engaged in a distant war, and you offered thousands of volunteers who made a valuable contribution to our victory. . . . After

these trials, fascist Italy intends to guarantee the Muslim people of Libya and Ethiopia peace, justice, well-being, respect for the laws of the Prophet: and it wishes, moreover, to demonstrate sympathy towards Islam and towards Muslims the world over. Soon, with its laws, Rome will show how anxious it is for your future welfare. Muslims of Tripoli and Libya! Pass on my words through your towns and villages, right into the tents of the nomads. You know that I am temperate in my promises, but what I promise, I fulfill!<sup>17</sup>

Despite his rhetoric and showmanship, Mussolini carried a serious message. Two contemporary observers judged the “Sword of Islam” episode to have been “no empty theatrical gesture, but a serious bid for the patronage of the Muslim world.”<sup>18</sup> Muslims had not overlooked the harsh behaviors of both liberal and fascist Italy during the twenty years (1911–1931) it took to conquer and “pacify” them. “No one had forgotten the horrors of the conquest of Cyrenaica,” wrote Elizabeth Monroe in 1938. “I heard it mentioned by Ulemas in Algeria, by the Destour in Tunisia, by a taxi-driver in Syria, and with quivering hatred by one or two Egyptians.”<sup>19</sup>

Yet the rapid conquest of the Ethiopian empire in 1935–1936 had brought many more Muslims under Italian rule: those of Eritrea, Somalia, Libya, and Ethiopia were by 1936 estimated at about nine million. Italy had thus become a leading “Muslim” power, conscious that her imperial record provided a means of enhancing or damaging her standing in Islamic opinion everywhere, but most particularly in the increasingly nationalistic Arab world. Moreover, the ability to conduct a mature and internationally acceptable Islamic policy, based on the parallel but separate development of the Italian and African races—in effect, a form of fascist apartheid—was intended to reinforce Italian claims to further imperial responsibilities elsewhere in Africa and the Mediterranean.<sup>20</sup>

There was also a clear intention to offer a striking contrast with contemporary French colonial policies elsewhere in North Africa, and with those of Britain in Egypt and Palestine. In the aftermath of the Palestine Arab revolt of 1936, it was easy enough to generate anti-British propaganda: the mandatory power was unable to reconcile the incompatible pledges it had made to Zionist and Arab interests twenty years earlier. One implication of the “Sword of Islam” episode is that Italy would offer defenseless Muslims a true “Roman” (and thus, universal) champion against the pusillanimous colonialism of the two leading Western democracies.

In the late 1930s, Rome accordingly began to claim much more for its brand of imperialism. Such propaganda tools as the Arabic-language broadcasts of *Radio Bari* began to lay particular stress on material and social progress and on the benefits of “Roman” justice. Italy needed the docile cooperation and goodwill of its Muslim subjects: she needed them

as workers in the more menial tasks of empire-building, as clerks and minor civil servants in the colonial administration, and as soldiers in the increasingly likely event of another world war.

By 1937, Libya had become one of four components of Italian strategic, economic, and political policy in and around the Mediterranean basin. The others were Albania, the central Mediterranean island of Pantelleria, and the Dodecanese, off southwest Turkey, occupied during the Libyan War in 1911. Italy was judged at the time to occupy a “magnificent strategic position astride the center of the [Mediterranean] sea. . . . Strategically the colony [of Libya] represents an asset . . . troops stationed there can threaten Egypt or Tunisia, while ships and airplanes based on Tobruk command the two hundred-mile channel between Cyrenaica and Crete. Italy strengthens the garrison there whenever she wants to exercise pressure on a rival.”<sup>21</sup> Mussolini also had other reasons for insisting on Italian “rights” to what he, following the Romans, called *Mare Nostrum*. By 1938 three-quarters of Italy’s imports and ninety-eight percent of her oil imports reached her through the Mediterranean.<sup>22</sup> Geography, history, and increasing need for Middle East crude oil and oil products prompted fascist Rome to view the eastern Mediterranean as a rightful field for commercial and, eventually, political influence.

Mussolini’s rhetorical flatteries were also intended to anticipate rewards to Libyans for their work in transforming their country into a showplace of fascist progress, and even more for the remarkable demonstration of loyalty and military achievement by more than nine thousand Libyan volunteers who fought in the Ethiopian campaign. The Libyan Division participated in twenty-two engagements on the southern (Somali) front, with 1,300 killed and two thousand wounded.<sup>23</sup> The rewards were to take the form of *cittadinanza italiana speciale* (Special Italian Citizenship). Libyans who had in one way or another identified with and accepted Italian rule could apply for the petty privileges from mid-1939 on; indeed, many in official positions were expected to do so.

Yet if the “Sword of Islam” speech reflected real Italian ambitions, there was at the time little evidence that the necessary preparations for achieving those ambitions had been made. International opinion was largely taken by surprise, and reactions ranged from the cautious skepticism of the Arab press to the thinly disguised nervousness of some British and French commentators.

Reviewing Mussolini’s tour at its mid-point, the Egyptian daily *Al-Ahram* said that the time had passed when Muslims considered the building of a mosque or a visit to a tomb of a saint as marks of friendship or sympathy toward Islam. The paper warned that the methods the Italians were using in Libya and elsewhere could backfire, adding that

“the Arabs, even if they sought the friendship of Italy, had never asked for its protection.”<sup>24</sup> In British-mandated Palestine, the journal *Filastin* welcomed the signs of further tensions in the Anglo-Italian relationship aroused by Mussolini’s Libyan visit as an advantage for the Arab cause. In its next issue, *Filastin* quoted the ‘*alim* of Acre, Assad al-Shuqairi, as approving the welcome and honors given to Mussolini by the Libyan religious leadership, since he had repented for the injustices committed by his government, and had gone to Libya to expunge evil with good. According to *Filastin*, al-Shuqairi had suggested that Palestine and Libyan ‘*ulama* invite Mussolini to adopt a policy of non-cooperation with Zionists.<sup>25</sup> The Cairo newspaper *Al-Balagh* recalled that the German Kaiser Wilhelm II had declared himself ready to protect Islam when he had traveled to Constantinople in 1898 to meet Sultan Abd-al-Hamid II before going on to Jerusalem and Damascus. *Al-Balagh* was puzzled as to how the Duce intended to be the “protector” of the far greater number of Muslims living under British and French rule than under Italian rule, and concluded that the self-proclaimed role of “Protector of Islam” would be of relevance only to the estimated nine million Muslims (perhaps two percent of the then world total) within the Italian colonial empire.<sup>26</sup>

A tone of greater skepticism was sounded by the Arab press just after the “Sword of Islam” ceremony. *Al-Balagh* quoted the rector of Al-Azhar University in Cairo as saying that the only man who could proclaim himself as “Protector of Islam” was a Muslim, a believer in the mission of Islam, and one actively engaged in the diffusion of Islamic teaching. Whoever claimed to be a protector of Islam without such credentials could not be recognized as such by Muslims.<sup>27</sup> A later Arab press comment came from Damascus, where *Alif-Ba* declared that the conduct of Britain in Palestine and India did not encourage much optimism about the promises of Mussolini in Libya.<sup>28</sup>

Among the British press, the *Daily Telegraph* sounded an unfortunate note for Anglo-Italian relations with the publication on March 15 of what its correspondent called an “official document” released in Benghazi the day Mussolini left that city for Tripoli. The *Daily Telegraph* quoted the “document” as saying with reference to Muslim unrest in Palestine, Iran, Syria, and Egypt, that “no power has a more strongly sympathetic policy towards these Islamic states and their legitimate claims than has Italy.” Publication of this and other quotations from the *Daily Telegraph* report caused uproar in Italy and elsewhere, and helped provide substance for Italian complaints of general British hostility to the Libyan visit.<sup>29</sup> In the event very little opinion, hostile or otherwise, was expressed about the visit in British newspapers. But *Le Temps* of Paris did take a pessimistic view of Mussolini’s entire Libyan venture. A leading article in that newspaper in March commented that Libya now represented the starting point for

an immense Italian effort to develop an empire in Africa. The newspaper saw the visit as an end to hopes of eventual cooperation between France, Britain, and Italy in the Mediterranean and Africa.

The Duce's Libyan visit came to an abrupt and rather inauspicious end. On Friday, March 19, he drove up the Litoranea to the Tunisian frontier. That evening he went back to Tripoli by way of Sabratha, where he witnessed a performance of *Oedipus Rex* at the heavily restored Roman theatre. During the performance he heard news of the Italian defeat in the Spanish Civil War at Guadalajara by the International Brigade. As Denis Mack Smith has observed, "so much had been written about fascist martial qualities and superiority in battle that this minor reverse came as a stunning blow to morale, all the more depressing in that the victors were anti-fascists—many of them Italian anti-fascists."<sup>30</sup> There was thus no opportunity to end the visit on a climax, with a great speech proclaiming the fall of Madrid to the Nationalists. Mussolini was to have spent two more days in Tripolitania, but a moderately severe Saharan windstorm which made flying impossible provided him with a plausible excuse to return to Rome early to deal with the Spanish crisis.

The "Sword of Islam" was not a happy souvenir. When Mussolini returned to Libya in 1942, he hoped to carry it triumphantly into a newly conquered Alexandria; instead, he spent three weeks waiting for Axis forces to break through at El-Alamein. It was then stolen at the time of his fall from power the following year, and has not been seen since.<sup>31</sup> Nor were the Duce's pretensions to be "Protector of Islam" ever fulfilled: indeed, it is questionable whether the practicalities and implications of a policy proclaimed with such drama at Tripoli in March 1937 had ever been properly considered. As for the 1937 visit itself, it seems to have further antagonized Italy's chosen rivals and potential enemies (France and Britain) without really convincing Libyans in particular, Muslims in general, and the smaller Mediterranean powers (Egypt, Turkey, Yugoslavia) of the sincerity of Italy's proclamations of good will. Yet, as a contemporary British commentator noted,

Much of Italy's propaganda would fall on deaf ears were it not the extraneous factor which has won her a hearing—namely, her success in a war of conquest. The Near and Middle East are impressed less by her broadcasts, her bribes, her newsreels than by the fact that she flouted Great Britain and pursued her Ethiopian plans, despite the massing of the British fleet at Alexandria. Arabs draw the conclusion that she is a force to be reckoned with.<sup>32</sup>

The visit therefore established Libya's newfound place in the forefront of Italian imperial (African) and strategic (Mediterranean) calculations.

As another contemporary commentator emphasized, “Libya can no longer be counted out, as a sort of no man’s land of small significance: its resources are limited, but they are being exploited to the utmost, while its strategic value has become very great.”<sup>33</sup> Such widely accepted perceptions ensured the colony’s full, if largely passive, participation in World War II. Libya was to become a battlefield for some thirty destructive months, not because it was a desirable territory in itself, but because of its importance to the strategic control of the central Mediterranean.

### Notes

1. For a pictorial record of the tour, see *Il Duce in Libia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1938).
2. Proclamation by Governor-General Italo Balbo to the Libyan people, March 10, 1937.
3. *The Times* (March 10, 1937).
4. Giordano Bruno Guerri, *Italo Balbo*, 324 (Milan: Vallardi, 1984); Claudio Segrè, *Italo Balbo: A Fascist Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 271f.
5. Martin Moore, *Fourth Shore: Italy’s Mass Colonization of Libya* (London: G. Routledge and Sons, 1940), 196.
6. For details, see *La strada litoranea della Libia* (Verona: Mondadori, 1937); Giovanni De Agostini, *La Libia turistica* (Milan: De Agostini, 1938), 19–28; Alice Polleau Guibon, *Routes fascistes: Au Volant sur la Translibyenne* (Dieppe: Floride, 1939).
7. *The Times* (March 11, 1937); *Manchester Guardian* (March 12, 1937); Maxwell H. H. Macartney and Paul Cremona, *Italy’s Foreign and Colonial Policy, 1914–1937* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 4; David W. Macarthur, *The Road to Benghazi* (London: n. p., 1941), 51.
8. Moore, *Fourth Shore*, 199, 209.
9. Mussolini, interview with D. Ward Price, *Daily Mail* (March 19, 1937); Benito Mussolini, *Scritti e discorsi: Un impero per l’Italia* (Florence and Rome, 1984), 98. The skeptics’ fears were fully realized during World War II, when the Litoranea became a two-way invasion route, carrying Italian or Italian–German armies into Western Egypt in 1940, 1941, and 1942, and British forces into Italian Libya between 1940 and 1943.
10. *The Times* (March 17, 1937).
11. Mussolini, *Scritti e discorsi*, 93.
12. Although supposedly of local Libyan workmanship, the sword was in fact the work of Florentine swordsmiths and goldsmiths: Guerri, *Balbo*, 326. According to the *Daily Telegraph* (March 19, 1937), it had cost £2,000 Sterling, an immense sum at the time.
13. *Popolo d’Italia* (March 19, 1937).
14. Piazza Castello, together with the adjoining Piazza d’Italia and intervening buildings, now demolished, today form the Green Square (*Maidan al-Akhdar*)

- that provides modern Libyan leaders with an open space for public gatherings several times larger than that considered necessary by either Balbo or Mussolini.
15. *The Times* (March 19, 1937).
  16. Literally Young Arabs of the Lictor, this organization was founded by Balbo as the Libyan equivalent of the fascist youth organization, the Balilla.
  17. Gaspare Ambrosini, *I problemi del Mediterraneo* (Rome: Istituto Nazionale di Cultura Fascista, 1937); Mussolini, *Scritti e discorsi*, 94–95.
  18. Macartney and Cremona, *Italy's Foreign and Colonial Policy*, 187.
  19. Elizabeth Monroe, *The Mediterranean in Politics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 168.
  20. See John Wright, "Italian Fascism and Libyan Human Resources," in *Planning and Development in Modern Libya*, ed. Mukhtar M. Buru, Shukri M. Ghanem, and Keith S. McLachlan, 46–56 (Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, U.K.: Middle East and North African Studies Press, 1985), 47.
  21. Monroe, *The Mediterranean*, 166.
  22. *Ibid.*, Map III, 138. Although the presence of oil was already suspected in Libya, its large commercial fields were not to be discovered until after independence in the 1950s.
  23. M. Bovini, "Valore militare delle truppe libiche nelle operazioni dell'Ogaden," *Rassegna sociale dell'Africa italiana* 4 (April 1939); Angelo Del Boca, *La guerra d'Abissinia, 1935–1941* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1978), 176–178.
  24. *Al-Ahram* (March 16, 1937).
  25. *Filastin* (March 17, 1937); *ibid.* (March 18, 1937).
  26. *Al-Balagh* (March 16, 1937); Ulrich Trumppener, "Germany and the End of the Ottoman Empire," in *The Great Powers and the End of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Marian Kent, 111–140 (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1984), 112.
  27. *Al-Balagh* (March 18, 1937).
  28. *Alif-Ba* (March 30, 1937).
  29. In the 1930s, media reportage and comment tended to be more restrained and genteel than today. The Arabic-language broadcasts of Radio Bari, which were considered to be strongly anti-British propaganda, and prompted the British to start the BBC Arabic Service in January 1938, would be thought quite unexceptional by present-day standards. See the monthly *Radio araba di Bari: Pubblicazione mensile della stazione radio di Bari*; C. A. MacDonald, "Radio Bari: Italian Wireless Propaganda in the Middle East and British Counter-Measures, 1934–1938," *Middle East Studies* 12 (1977): 195; Public Record Office, Kew, London: Foreign Office Files: FO 371/18958, FO Memo "Anti-British Propaganda in Arabic Broadcasts from Italian Wireless Station at Bari," September 23, 1935.
  30. Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), 211.
  31. Guerri, *Balbo*, 327.
  32. Cited in Monroe, *The Mediterranean*, 202.
  33. Jane Soames, *The Coast of Barbary* (London: J. Cape, 1938), 277.

# Preservation and Self-Absorption: Italian Colonization and the Walled City of Tripoli, Libya

*Mia Fuller*

Scholars periodically return to the study of how French administrators and architects handled urban settings in North Africa, beginning with the occupation of Algiers in 1830. Italian occupation of Libya began much later, in 1911, but in the thirty-two years of their effective rule, Italians also had sufficient time to be both destructive and constructive in significant ways. In this chapter, I discuss attitudes to the walled city of Tripoli on the part of military personnel, government bureaucrats, and planners—the people who decided how to reshape Tripoli, and whose voices fill the documents in the archives of the colonial administration. In these policies, I read what looks like Italian *actions* leading to the relative preservation of Tripoli's walled city as a series of planning choices that were, in reality, more passive than active. There was no detailed program to preserve old Tripoli, but decisions were made to shore it up just enough so that the city would require the least attention and investment possible. The Italian treatment of Tripoli's walled city is thus a negative instance of preservation policy, or a case of preservation by default.

I formulated the questions posed here in response to the rich scholarship on French demolitions and constructions in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. A relatively unilinear progression in these settings has been charted, beginning with rash demolitions in Algiers and a colonial architecture in a “conqueror's style,” shifting to an interest in documenting and restoring local monuments after 1865, and taking a turn after 1900 to

a “protector’s style” of government-mandated neo-Moorish syncretisms.<sup>1</sup> The “protector” attitude in French colonial architecture reached its apogee in Morocco, where the French protectorate was declared in 1912. Maréchal Lyautey’s famous building program, fully formulated by the early 1920s, was equally based on the active preservation and renewal of indigenous forms and the separation of European and Moroccan urban habitats.<sup>2</sup>

Why compare Italian Libya with the French Maghrib? Because we know so much more about French city planning in North Africa, and may learn some things about Italian colonialism from French colonialism. This is not so much because they were alike, although French and Italian colonizers did face similar planning problems and often used similar solutions, but because comparison can help us to better distinguish between the two. It is too often assumed that Italian colonial history is a minor variation on French colonial history, and that Italian actions and beliefs were much like those of the French. Indeed, planning decisions that may seem to have been alike did not always stem from the same priorities, and Italian policies concerning the walled city of Tripoli are a case in point. On one hand, Italian officials were more protective of the walled city than French officials in the same position in Algiers had been, and their low interference with the existing town allowed much of it not to be destroyed. But on the other hand, whereas French officials later became active in their preservation of indigenous architectural forms, Italian officials opted for a less enterprising role.<sup>3</sup>

### City Plans

The city the Italians took over in 1911 was already many-layered. Phoenicians founded the original settlement, and the site had been occupied continuously ever since. Almost all traces of the lengthy Roman and Arab periods, however, had been destroyed by the Spanish, who controlled Tripoli from 1510 to 1535, and razed most of it in 1511. Apart from the Castello and the city walls, in 1911 Tripoli’s monuments and residences almost all dated from sometime during Ottoman rule, which had lasted since 1551 (interrupted only by temporarily successful bids for power by the local Qaramanli dynasty).<sup>4</sup> A certain sprawl was already developing outside the city’s walls. The roads leading away from the city in a radial pattern would become the major arteries of the booming “new quarters.” Throughout the oasis, which extended mostly eastward of the walled city, stood small settlements; some of these would be dismantled under Italian rule (a Bedouin camp at Tajura, a “Negro village”<sup>5</sup>), while others (such as the Dahra area, to the far east of the oasis) became more permanent as the Italian-controlled city grew.

The most pressing problem the planners faced was the need to halt speculation outside the city walls, not only because of the potential loss of economic control and the risk of ever-worsening housing shortages, but also because of public indignation.<sup>6</sup> In the documents they left behind, Italian officials in Tripoli presented themselves as trying to please both Italians and Muslims. (They did not pay particular attention to minority groups such as Jews or non-Italian Europeans, who were almost all Greek or Maltese.) Their early policies emphasized their attempts to balance the public interests of the Italian state with the private ones of both Italians and Libyans, leaving everyone as content as possible.<sup>7</sup>

The essential principles of the master plan were hammered out during the winter of 1912.<sup>8</sup> This first plan was completed in Rome, on the basis of inadequate site data, and was sent to Tripoli. Its main guideline was to shape the ongoing growth of the new town, while leaving the original one nearly untouched. This premise remained unchallenged through the various later stages of the city's development, even during the increased attention that was paid to the old city in the early 1920s and in the second master plan, drawn up in 1931–1933.<sup>9</sup> The policy resembled recent legislation for Rome: it entitled the municipality to subsidies from the Treasury and gave it the right to purchase all necessary plots in the city, as well as to resell those that were not needed for public construction.

The plan only comprised non-military projects. General Salsa, who was in charge of both the political-military and the civil affairs departments in Tripoli, reported that its realization was expected to take twenty-five years. To the extent that the walled city figured in the agenda, the most urgent plan for it was rehabilitation. This did not include aesthetic changes or widespread demolitions, but simply the strengthening of whatever was already standing. Planners successfully worked out the increase of the water supply from outside the city. They also improved the existing sewage system—something the French did not do in Rabat, for fear that “sewers would ruin its charm”<sup>10</sup>—and built one in the rapidly expanding new part of the city (figure 11.1). At the heart of the system was a large reservoir built to surround the walled city. When it came to other aspects, both interior and exterior, of buildings in the walled city, Italians left the inhabitants to their own devices, and were generally inclined to leave alone what was already in place.<sup>11</sup>

This phase of Italian policy, which ended roughly in 1921 with the arrival of Governor Giuseppe Volpi (later, Count Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata) and 1920s developments in city planning, overlaps with the period of major effort in Lyautey's Moroccan cities. Lyautey's Residency lasted from 1912 to 1925, and his chief architect, Henri Prost, drew up his series of master plans from 1913 to 1923. Although their crowning



**Figure 11.1** Italian manhole cover, sewage system, Tripoli (photo by author, from author's collection).

achievement, Rabat, was not completed until 1930, the overall project of Moroccan colonial urbanism was set in motion with legislation passed in 1914. But while Rabat was being subjected to the most comprehensive colonial planning to date, Italians were instead taking a more “surgical” approach to the old city of Tripoli. It was to be improved where necessary, but no attempt was made to use it in the same way that the French had initially used Algiers, performing extensive demolitions and attempting to adapt the environment to European needs. Far from drastically altering old streets, the Italian municipality restored and maintained their original surfaces, whether these were paved with stones or macadamized.

### City Walls

Ottoman administrators had begun to tear down some of the city's walls in the late nineteenth century, “either for reasons of urbanistic necessity or because they were no longer militarily effective. . . . For the same reasons, but with a heavier hand, the Italian occupiers attacked the walls of Tripoli.”<sup>12</sup> Their demolitions were mostly executed in 1914 and 1915, despite some administrative opposition and almost immediate regret on the part of archeologists. In the end, all but two major stretches of the wall were obliterated: the western one linking Bab al-Jadid to the northern

corner of the city, by the sea; and the shorter, southeastern stretch linking Bab al-Hurriya to the wide, arched (and Italian-made) city gate at the southern corner of the Castello. The old core of Tripoli can hardly be called a “walled city” any longer.

While much of the older wall was being destroyed, Italian forces also erected new defensive walls between 1912 and 1915. These “new walls” (*Mura Nuove*) encircled the old city along with the oases immediately nearby, and the outlying settlement area of al-Manshiya. Undoubtedly, this new construction, performed in one motion with the destruction of the older wall, occurred for the same reasons as the late nineteenth-century ones: their defensive purpose was no longer being served, and the old walls impeded increased traffic. But the fact that the military focused its energies well outside the city itself, and that the projects within the walls were entirely non-military, also suggests that from the Italian point of view, Tripoli’s urban space itself was, from the start, secure. The sedentary occupants of the city and its oases were presumably benign. On the other hand, Italians saw the non-sedentary populations outside the urban areas as embodying opposition to the occupation, and expected them to attack the city in raids.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the walls were built in the precise area where Italian troops had encountered their greatest difficulties in the early 1910s, sustaining surprise attacks at Shara Shatt and Sidi Mesri in 1911.

### National Heritage and Tourism

Within the walls, the most sizable and pressing order of Italian business early on was to clear the area around the Roman-era arch of Marcus Aurelius, and return it to good condition (figure 11.2).<sup>14</sup> At the time of the Italian occupation, the Arch was being used for movie projections.<sup>15</sup> Administrators were horrified by this blemish on Italian national dignity, and moved urgently to monumentalize the arch. As the Lieutenant General, Caneva, put it in his 1912 report, “not only artistic reasons but also reasons of national decorum demand that the distinguished monument be carefully liberated from the surrounding old and dark little houses that are oppressive and damaging to it.”<sup>16</sup> Negotiations were undertaken to purchase all the surrounding properties, and the purchases and the arch’s “isolation” were complete by 1918.

In this early colonial period, Italians did not frame the walled city as possessing artistic merit, but this is not to say that they believed it to be without touristic appeal. By the mid-1930s, tourism was not only taken into consideration, but it was touted as a patriotic duty. Italians were urged to visit “their” colonies in countless propaganda sources. Before the 1930s, however, few texts explicitly mentioned tourism as a factor in colonial



**Figure 11.2** Arch of Marcus Aurelius, Tripoli (photo by author, from author's collection).

urban planning; and when they did, it was usually in connection with nature, sports, or classical ruins. Engineer Luiggi, who was in charge of the original master plan, approved of the walled city's aesthetic qualities—he deemed the alleys “narrow but picturesque,” and the little houses “unusually clean”—but he expected tourists would use the railway (under construction in 1914) to visit golf or polo greens, or camping grounds, rather than the heart of the city.<sup>17</sup> Yet it is clear here and in other Italian colonial areas, Rhodes in particular, that Italian planners and administrators were sensitive to growing tourist potential all the same. We can safely read between the planners' lines their awareness that less modification of the old urban fabric, plus increased traffic flow, would be beneficial in this regard. Scrutiny of both government documents and materials for tourists indicates that it was taken for granted that Italian tourists would visit the more exotic “highlights” of the new Mediterranean colony, and yet that these “highlights” were of secondary importance. Italian priorities lay very clearly with remains of the classical era, namely the arch of Marcus Aurelius, and the staggering ruins of Leptis Magna and Sabratha outside Tripoli. In comparison, the walled city was not rhetorically marked as either very positive or very negative—its image was reduced to a dioramic quaintness. This is exemplified in the dismissive remark by a colonial propagandist, following a lengthy paean to Italian constructions in the new

part of Tripoli, that “in sum, Tripoli is truly a new city. Which does not mean that the old one has disappeared, with its somewhat dark appeal and its enigmatic enchantment. The old Tripoli . . . is still intact, for those who love local color.”<sup>18</sup>

During the rule of Libya’s first fascist governor, Giuseppe Volpi (1921–1925), a certain level of Italian interest in local architecture became a government mandate.<sup>19</sup> After 1921, two major lists of “notable” Muslim architecture were compiled as an index for preservation and restoration. They comprised various mosques, tombs, city gates, and some instances of residential architecture. By this time, of course, Rabat, along with the interest in local forms that influenced its plan, were almost old hat; yet colonial architectural design and its relation to local forms, as a subject of artistic debate among Italian architects, was not to emerge until the end of the 1920s.<sup>20</sup> In the mid- to late 1930s, under the governorship of Italo Balbo (1934–1940), fascist policies in Libya and elsewhere became more pronounced and bombastic. Interventions in the walled city reached their greatest momentum, although their purposes were unchanged. The arch of Marcus Aurelius was given a broader setting by drastically “clearing” more of the surrounding structures,<sup>21</sup> and a direct path was cut leading from the arch to the harbor. Outside the old city, the widening of a main artery, the Corso Sicilia,<sup>22</sup> led to the wholesale razing of eight *funduqs*.<sup>23</sup>

### Interpretations

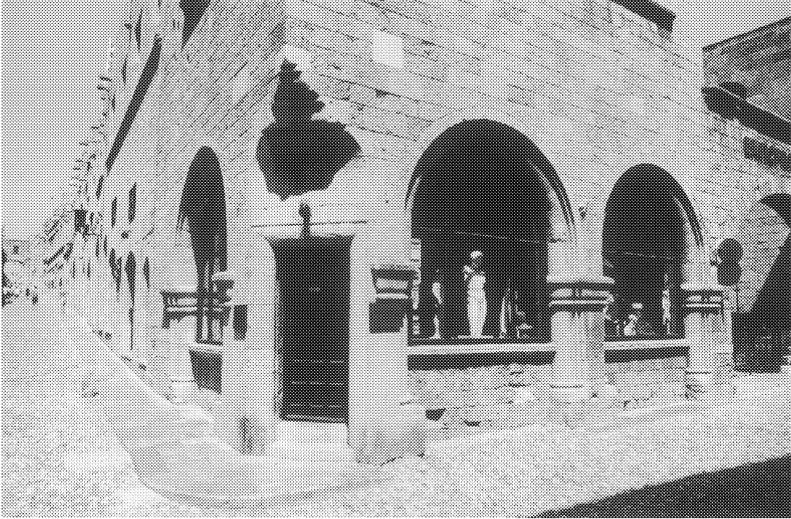
The single most powerful image in the discourse of Italian colonization in Libya was that of prior possession, and the notion that Italians were “returning” to North Africa dominated the rhetoric and ideology of occupation.<sup>24</sup> In a symbolic tautology, because the acquisition of Libya was justified by the fact that it had been colonized by Rome centuries beforehand, Tripoli was often framed as “already” Italian by virtue of its Roman occupation. Italian expansionists saw themselves as immediately, inherently tied to the area. This is not to suggest that urban Libyans were treated as though they were Italian, although there were indeed ambiguities in how Italians viewed them. But they were implicitly believed to have pre-existing ties to Italian culture and history, due to their sustained contact over several centuries in the Mediterranean Basin, and Italians often perceived them as having become the safekeepers, albeit unconsciously, of Roman vestiges and legacies, for instance in vernacular house forms.

Far from seeing the old city as the site of Otherness and opposition to Italians, then, Italian administrators and planners tended instead to see it,

subtextually and *a priori*, as a once-Roman domestic space, one that they could take over without formulating much of a definition or a program concerning the city as a whole or its inhabitants. Through their appropriation of old Tripoli as a historical and imaginary site, they could complacently forego the kind of politicization to which they relentlessly subjected the non-urban spaces of the interior and Cyrenaica. The Italian military's construction of new defensive walls outside the city, and its lack of concern with containing or controlling the population of the old city, can be seen as more than a practical one; instead, it was an overdetermined one in light of Italians' preconceived notions about a Tripoli that was "already" theirs.

The difference and importance of the old city were also minimized in the city's depictions in colonial propaganda. Certain things—the restored arch, the 1920s concern with "Muslim architecture"—were "worth" writing to the government in Rome about, and even publishing in architecture journals; the rest were not. I emphasize this because it shows that the Italians concerned did not feel that their work in the walled city was representative, definitively, of Italian art or potential. The walled city was not a perceived showcase of modern Italian national self-representation, unlike the new city, which was documented and portrayed over and over again. In this respect it differed strongly from the French works in North Africa, particularly in Rabat, which was published internationally and with some fanfare.

In terms of the balance of preservation and destruction, it is important not to minimize the impact of Italian occupation on Tripoli; but it is also important to contextualize that impact, by gauging the extent of Italian destruction in relation to what was done elsewhere. Demolitions in Tripoli were relatively few, not only compared to French Algiers and Rabat, but even compared to other Italian enterprises in the Mediterranean. In Rhodes, Italians, in concert with French and other archaeologists and historical experts, not only demolished portions of the city walls in order to open up new gates for modern traffic, but they went much further in their interventions within the walls. They "cleansed" all internal buildings of traces hinting at the five-century-long Ottoman possession of the island (although they left the mosques standing), and "restored" the streets of the walled city to the modern conception of their medieval (and European) appearance in the days of the Knights of Saint John of Jerusalem (figure 11.3).<sup>25</sup> In Rome itself, planners and administrators mercilessly stripped away the "characteristic" (which almost entirely consisted in habitations) so as to privilege the "monumental," in the process forever changing how Romans live.<sup>26</sup>



**Figure 11.3** Avenue of the Knights, Rhodes (photo by author, from author's collection).

To conclude, Italian treatment of the walled city seems somewhat more balanced, and certainly less intensive than the various French approaches had been. Yet it would be facile to claim that Italians were, therefore, better planners, or more attuned to the locals, than the French. Instead, we must ask ourselves if the Italian stance was any less noxious, in its premises if not its effects, than the French one. Just as “the effect of dominance is not always the result of an intention to dominate,”<sup>27</sup> non-destruction is not always the consequence of benevolence; and what may appear as more benign can also be understood as simply more self-absorbed. Italian planners acted, upon their arrival in Tripoli, on the same urban concerns that were troubling them at home—namely, how to balance conserving the old with accommodating the new—and they did so without any great worry about differences this setting might have presented from their own familiar ones. This attitude was accompanied by a felicitous lack of urgency where local buildings were concerned, leading Italians to practice an almost unwitting preservation. Because Italian administrators most vividly *saw* what reminded them of Rome—such as the Arch of Marcus Aurelius—and thus what spoke to them of Italy, they were not inclined to eradicate what was, in reality, Other. Eventually, they were willing to preserve it, but without necessarily exploring its Otherness.

## Notes

1. François Béguin, Gildas Baudez, Denis Lesage, and Lucien Godin, *Arabisances, décor architectural et tracé urbain en Afrique du Nord 1830–1950* (Paris: Dunod 1983), 13 and 20. For more information on these issues, see my eponymous article published in *The Journal of North African Studies* vol.5, no. 4 (2000): 121–154, from which this chapter is drawn.
2. Janet Abu-Lughod, *Rabat. Urban Apartheid in Morocco* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1980); Paul Rabinow, *French Modern. Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1989); and Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago, and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
3. Comparing Italian and French architecture in the Maghrib is also useful for understanding modernist theorizations in the 1930s: see Mia Fuller, “Mediterraneanism,” in *The City in the Islamic World*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Renata Holod, Attilio Petruccioli, and André Raymond (Boston, and London: East-West Nexus/Prota, in press).
4. See Gaspare Messina, “La Medina di Tripoli,” *Quaderni dell’Istituto Italiano di Cultura di Tripoli (nuova serie)* 1 (1979): 6–36, for the history of Tripoli’s morphology since its origins; and Muhammad Warfelli, “The Old City of Tripoli,” in *Some Islamic sites in Libya: Tripoli, Ajdabiyah and Ujlah*, a special supplement to *Art and Archaeology Research Papers* 9 (1976): 2–18. Also see Nora Lafi, *Une ville du Maghreb entre ancien régime et réformes ottomanes. Genèse des institutions municipales à Tripoli de Barbarie (1795–1911)* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2002), on the social and institutional history of the city prior to Italian occupation.
5. This “Negro village” usually appeared in pre-1911 travelers’ chronicles, rather than Italian government documents. It was mentioned as late as 1925: see Gordon Casserley, “Tripolitania, where Rome Resumes Sway,” *National Geographic* 48, no. 2 (August 1925): 131–161; 157.
6. For example, G.B.C., “Tripolitania. Il caro alloggi,” *L’esplorazione commerciale* 35, no. 1 (31 January 1920): 22–24.
7. For instance, see Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), *fondo* Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (PCM), 1912, *busta* 6/442, *fascicolo* 190: Decreto relativo al piano regolatore della Città di Tripoli, March 20, 1912, 2.
8. The most detailed works on this subject are Marida Talamona, “Addis Abeba capitale dell’Impero,” *Storia contemporanea* 16, no. 5–6 (1985): 1093–1130; Marida Talamona, “La Libia: un laboratorio di architettura,” *Rassegna* 51, no. 3 (1992): 62–79; Marida Talamona, “Città europea e città araba in Tripolitania,” in *Architettura italiana d’oltremare 1870–1940*, ed. Giuliano Gresleri, Pier Giorgio Massaretti, and Stefano Zagnoni, 257–277 (Venice: Marsilio, 1993); and Ornella Sangiovanni, “La Medina di Tripoli. Dal piano regolatore del 1912 ai lavori del 1936–37,” *Islam. Storia e civiltà* 9, no. 1 (January–March 1990): 49–61.
9. See Maurizio De Rege, “Il nuovo piano regolatore di Tripoli,” *Urbanistica* 3 (1934): 121–128.

10. Shirine Hamadeh, "Creating the Traditional City. A French Project," in *Forms of Dominance. On the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise*, ed. Nezar AlSayyad, 241–259 (Aldershot: Avebury, 1992), 253.
11. Some buildings were torn down for reasons of public safety. A few such demolitions took place after 1922 in the Jewish quarter, in the western, and poorer, part of the old city. See Luigi V. Bertarelli, *Guida d'Italia del Touring Club Italiano. Possedimenti e colonie, Isole Egee, Tripolitania, Cirenaica, Eritrea, Somalia* (Milan: Touring Club Italiano, 1929), 251.
12. Messina, "La Medina di Tripoli," 14.
13. See David Atkinson, "Nomadic Strategies and Colonial Governance: Domination and Resistance in Cyrenaica, 1923–1932," in *Entanglements of Power: Geographies of Domination/Resistance*, ed. Joanne P. Sharp, Paul Routledge, Chris Philo, and Ronan Paddison, 93–121 (London: Routledge, 2000).
14. The arch was the subject of many celebratory publications, such as Salvatore Aurigemma, *L'arco di Marco Aurelio e di Lucio Vero a Tripoli* (Rome: Libreria dello Stato, 1938).
15. Bertarelli, *Guida d'Italia del Touring Club Italiano. Possedimenti e colonie*, 289.
16. ACS, PCM, 1912, busta 6/442, fascicolo 261: letter from Lieutenant General Caneva to the Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri (Giovanni Giolitti), May 26, 1912, 1.
17. Luigi Luiggi, "Le opere pubbliche a Tripoli. Note di viaggio," *Nuova Antologia* 242 (March–April 1912): 115–130; see 115 and 127.
18. Angelo Piccioli, "La rinascita della Libia sotto il regime fascista," in *L'impero coloniale fascista*, ed. Mario Giordano, 461–496 (Novara: Istituto Geografico de Agostini, 1937), 474.
19. As described in Sangiovanni, "La Medina," and Talamona, "La Libia" and "Città europea."
20. For a range of discussions of post-1929 approaches to Tripoli and architectural theorizations, see: Mia Fuller, "Building Power: Italian Architecture and Urbanism in Libya and Ethiopia," in *Forms of Dominance. On the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise*, ed. Nezar AlSayyad, 211–239 (Aldershot: Avebury, 1992); Krystyna von Henneberg, "Piazza Castello and the Making of a Fascist Colonial Capital," in *Streets. Critical Perspectives on Public Space*, ed. Zeynep Çelik, Diane Favro, and Richard Ingersoll, 135–150 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Mia Fuller, "Carlo Enrico Rava, the Radical: First Formulations of Colonial Rationalism," *Journal of the Islamic Environmental Design Research Centre* 15–16, no. 1–2 (1994–1995): 150–159; Brian L. McLaren, "Carlo Enrico Rava—'Mediterraneità' and the Architecture of the Colonies in Africa," *Journal of the Islamic Environmental Design Research Centre* 15–16, no. 1–2 (1994–1995): 160–173; Krystyna von Henneberg, "Imperial Uncertainties: Architectural Syncretism and Improvisation in Fascist Colonial Libya," *Journal of Contemporary History* 31, no. 2 (1996): 373–395; Krystyna von Henneberg, "The Construction of Fascist Libya: Modern Colonial Architecture and Urban Planning in Italian North

- Africa (1922–1943)” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1996); Brian L. McLaren, “Mediterraneità and Modernità. Architecture and Culture during the Period of Italian Colonization of North Africa” (Ph.D. diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001); and Mia Fuller, *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities, and Italian Imperialism* (London: Routledge, in press).
21. Itemized in Sangiovanni, “La Medina,” 54–56.
  22. The Corso Sicilia, now named the Sharia ‘Umar al-Mukhtar, remains the main artery traveling southwest from Tripoli.
  23. Sangiovanni, “La Medina,” 52–53.
  24. For a detailed analysis of this point, see Fuller, *Moderns Abroad*.
  25. On archeology, architecture, and planning in the Dodecanese Islands, see Leonardo Ciacci, *Rodi Italiana 1912–1923. Come si inventa una città* (Venice: Marsilio, 1991); Monica Livadiotti and Giorgio Rocco, eds., *La presenza italiana nel Dodecaneso tra il 1912 e il 1948: La ricerca archeologica, La conservazione, le scelte progettuali* (Catania: Edizioni del Prisma, 1996); and Simona Martinoli and Eliana Perotti, *Architettura coloniale italiana nel Dodecaneso 1912–1943* (Turin: Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1999).
  26. See Spiro Kostof, *The Third Rome, 1870–1950. Traffic and Glory* (Berkeley, CA: University Art Museum, 1973), on demolitions throughout Rome starting in 1870. For this particular distinction, see 14.
  27. Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don’t Understand. Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990), 18.

Part IV

# **Representations**

# Pioneering Female Modernity: Fascist Women in Colonial Africa

*Cristina Lombardi-Diop*

This chapter attempts a redefinition of models of female subjectivity under fascism through an investigation of autobiographical and fictional works written in the 1930s by Italian women who traveled to colonial Africa. It is divided in three parts, dedicated to Anna Messina's *Cronache del Nilo* (Nile Chronicles) (1940), Augusta Perricone-Violà's *Donne e non bambole* (Women, Not Dolls) (1930), and Alba Felter Sartori's *Vagabondaggi, soste, avventure negli albori dell'impero* (Wanderings, Halts, and Adventures at the Dawning of the Empire) (1940), respectively. The texts I include in my analysis significantly challenge critical readings of both male-authored colonial writings and female subjectivity under the regime by complicating critical paradigms of fascist metropolitan models of femininity. I claim that fascist colonial writings by Italian women display a model of European female subjectivity that is racially and class specific. Moreover, these texts enlist and are complicit with different dominant colonial discourses, such as the cultural and technological superiority of Western modernity and a belated form of Orientalism, peculiar to Italy's belated colonial enterprise.<sup>1</sup>

In the first half of the 1920s, by traveling to colonial Africa, Italian women marked their entrance within the circuits of modern tourism and signaled their newly found mobility outside the domestic realm. Progressively, in the course of the 1930s, Italian middle-class women found in the African colonies a space for political participation, while mobility and racial superiority provided an empowering means of subjective identification not always available in the *madrepatria*. Studies of Italian colonial literature have

focused almost exclusively on male authors and travelers.<sup>2</sup> If the Italian colonial paradigm is male, scholars of other colonial literary traditions have in turn reconsidered the crucial role of European women and their involvement in the sexual politics of imperialism.<sup>3</sup> In the Italian case, we are just beginning to discover the symbolic but also political role of Italian women as rural settlers, nurses, cultural operators, and political agents.<sup>4</sup> In the 1930s, the regime ambiguously hailed its female subjects with the promise of modern life and political participation, a promise made particularly seductive in the colonies, where the fascist political organizations invited women to take full advantage of their racial superiority and gendered social functions. Significantly, during the Ethiopian military campaigns, the regime experimented with new possibilities of class and subjective interpellation of its female citizens.<sup>5</sup> While little is yet known of the experience of rural female settlers in the Italian colonies, the authors of the texts hereby considered show us the complex web of racial politics, class antagonism, and sexual positions which saw women at the center of the colonial arena.

Just recently, scholars who have searched for alternative models to Piero Meldini's monolithic category of consent identified with the fascist maternal woman<sup>6</sup> have identified elements of resistance to the regime, precisely in the daily expressions of female modernity and mobility such as leisure, consumption, sport activities, and reading choices.<sup>7</sup> While these studies shed new light on metropolitan models of female subjectivity, I intend to show how the colonial paradigm complicates the simple opposition of tradition/consent versus modernity/dissent. As the fascist iconography of femininity shows, the construction of the opposition of modern versus traditional women followed class lines. By the 1930s, the nationalization of fashion style spurred by mass consumption created the illusion of a classless urban and modern femininity, to which both peasant and working class women could aspire. In reality, the consensual *massaia rurale* (rural housewife) model identified by Meldini specifically targeted peasant and non-urban working-class women. In the second half of the 1930s, the increasing militarization of women allowed the creation of a model of female subjectivity, the so-called *cittadina* (citizen),<sup>8</sup> apt to overcome class boundaries and serve as a national prototype.

### **Class, Region, and Race: Anna Messina's *Cronache del Nilo***

While the fascist propaganda machine oscillated between the celebration of the *massaia rurale* and the idealized figure of the *cittadina*, Italian women who traveled to colonial Africa experienced material conditions that required new models of domesticity and femininity. In particular, they had to deal with the disruption of bourgeois domesticity and its reconstruction on foreign soil, where class affiliation had to meet the

requirements of racial superiority. The focus of Anna Messina's attention in her *Cronache del Nilo* (CN, 1940)<sup>9</sup> is not only European and Egyptian women of the middle classes, but also their servant classes, a whole array of butlers, cooks, and female domestics whose entire lives revolve around their European employers. The book, narrated in the first person, is based on autobiographical material and reconstructs the author's bourgeois upbringing in Egypt of the 1930s. Messina's father was the Sicilian magistrate Salvatore Messina, who was appointed as consul to Egypt in 1916 and relocated to the Courts of Law of Alexandria in 1936. The Egyptian milieu of the Messina family is, like all colonial societies, an eclectic community divided by class antagonisms and political frictions. European women for instance, who are the wives and daughters of diplomats, governors, and doctors, mingle and share social practices with their Egyptian counterparts, that is, the wives and daughters of Jewish or Arab lawyers, bankers, and businessmen. Beyond national and ethnic differences, class solidarity is what binds them together and opposes them to local artisans, workers, street-vendors, cooks, and domestic servants.

For both national groups, class differences are insurmountable barriers, and yet national divisions hide deeper racial and ethnic conflicts. Despite the existence of forms of socialization between Egyptians and Europeans, such as common schooling and leisure activities, what destines the members of the groups to live apart are racial, rather than national, differences. Aesha, for instance, the Egyptian female protagonist of the story titled *Tre segni* (Three Signs), is abandoned by her wealthy Jewish fiancé when he discovers that she has a Berber ancestor. In another story, a young Syrian bank clerk fails to marry a rich French girl for reasons that the author condenses around the girl's "clear world of light and terse colors" (CN, 68), obviously in contrast with the man's dark skin. Egypt's labor market is divided according to national and ethnic groups that reflect the country's great migratory history but also class hierarchies: "shoemakers and tailors are almost always Armenians, souvenir street vendors are Indians" (CN, 40). Significantly, the same is true for Italians, for whom class differences are determined by regional origins: "Calabresi are renowned for being hard-working women. They are clean, eager, and honest as it should be" (CN, 117).

Italian nationals of the subaltern classes undergo a process of regionalization in this text that reduces them to racial others within their own national community. As servants, they are no longer Italian, but Calabrese or Sicilian; as such, they are closer to the Berbers and the impoverished Jews than to the members of the Messina family and their peers. Domestic work for instance, usually performed by local men, is carried on in one Italian family by Rosa, an immigrant woman from Calabria. Rosa embodies the model of colonial immigrant woman whose proletarian status was used by colonial propaganda as a justification for Italy's need for colonial expansion. In this 1940 text,

she is an “uncouth” peasant (CN, 120) who cannot yet belong to the Italian national community. As a typical Calabrese, Rosa cannot feel the sense of racial pride the Messinas share with their compatriots who belong to the hegemonic class and race. The sense of racial superiority and national belonging, which in a colonial context should erase class differences, is in this text reaffirmed in order to reinforce racial hierarchies.

What *Cronache del Nilo* ultimately tells us about the regime’s attempt to mobilize women in favor of the colonial enterprise, is that class determinations also produced different modes of female presence in colonial Africa. In Italy, the regime’s propagandistic reinvention of rural life reconfined women within the strict ideological space of patriarchal gender divisions. After 1937, the extension of the rural model to the colonies followed the migration of Italian women as rural settlers in Libya and the newly pacified *Africa Orientale Italiana*. In 1937, as the Fascist Party instituted training courses in all major Italian provinces in order “to prepare woman for colonial life,”<sup>10</sup> propaganda began to explore the colonial past retroactively in search of figures of female colonial pioneers. One of them was Maria Fioretti, in Eritrea since 1887, who “translated her pioneering virtue by cultivating, laboring, tooling,”<sup>11</sup> and who later became head of the female delegation of the Fascist Party in Eritrea. In 1939, when, according to fascist commentator Ciro Poggiali, over ten thousand Italian women were present in the whole of AOI,<sup>12</sup> the regime’s sexual politics reached the Italian colonies. “Woman’s presence is necessary in order to prevent the denaturalization, under the African sun, of the incomparable gifts and qualities of the Italian stock,” a fascist policymaker commented.<sup>13</sup> As late as 1942, the Fascist Party undertook a series of statistical polls on the fertility and productivity of rural female settlers from northern and southern regions who migrated to Libya in 1939.<sup>14</sup> And yet, the regime’s idealization of the countryside as a model of national traditions threatened middle-class women’s mobility, as well as their emancipation and active participation in the political and social life of the colonies.

### **Tradition versus Modernity: Perricone-Violà’s *Donne e non bambole***

Since traditional metropolitan models of femininity posed a series of limitations to middle-class women who traveled to colonial Africa, Augusta Perricone-Violà effects a productive reversal of the binary polarization that equates Islam with tradition and Europe with modernity. In her collection of short stories, titled *Donne e non bambole*<sup>15</sup> (DNB, 1930), the fascist model of the maternal mother is projected onto Islamic women, who become bearers of traditional family values. According to this reversed logic, what must be contested is not the traditional aspect of

Islamic culture, but the emancipatory tendencies that progress has made available for Western women. This inversion supports Meldini's interpretation of the anti-modernist and regressive tendencies of the fascist ideology of the family. Meldini's idea is that this represented an attempt to re-establish a precapitalist familial model as a reaction to its crisis. In the colonial case, though, Islamic women are the ones who must carry the burden of this return to patriarchal and precapitalist familiar structures. In the words of Emilio De Bono, Minister of the Colonies and author of the preface to the book, Islamic women are in fact "women of absolute devotion, women who feel the joy of abandonment and sacrifice, exemplary wives. And they are also good housewives, weavers, and farm laborers" (DNB, ii). De Bono further claims that the colonial system of agricultural exploitation of female native labor can be kept in place through the preservation of traditional female values, such as dedication to men and maternal self-abnegation. What was attempted at home, then, could also work in Italy's African colonies.

In her re-evaluation of precapitalist models of femininity, Perricone-Violà anticipates 1930s fascist critiques of modernity. In a 1930 article published in *Critica Fascista*, fascist commentator Manlio Pompei argued against women's "excess of civilization, indigestion of civilization, dynamism, mechanization, and crazy hedonism." In place of these, Pompei championed "a resolute and brave backward jump, towards savagery, towards our lost primitive humanity."<sup>16</sup> Civilization, Pompei affirmed, was the disease that had affected Italy's birthrate and women's morality. In his popular essay "Revolt against the Modern World" (1934), Julius Evola pointed to Islamic and Hindu women as examples of women who respected patriarchal traditions through their sacrifices. Traditional forms of sacrifice, such as Hindu *sati*, "which to the eye of the European is a pure barbarity," Evola deemed as the supreme culmination of gender relations.<sup>17</sup>

In *Donne e non bambole*, Islamic women take upon themselves the burden of tradition that Italian middle-class women no longer intend to carry. Perricone-Violà counteracts the dominant exotic trend with a more realistic vision of Islamic women as devoted wives and mothers. In a central story, the author appears as an autobiographical "I" in order to testify to an exemplary event. One night, when her infant child is about to die for lack of maternal milk, she receives generous help from a Berber woman. In this symbolic passage of maternal function, framed within a Christian iconography of female devotion, the native woman loses all her erotic fascination to become a "little blue Madonna of the oasis" (DNB, 131).

The sublimation of Arab women's sexuality into a maternal function moves the poles of the opposition of sexual versus maternal from native women to Italian women, thus offering a representation of white femininity

as aesthetically and sexually charged. Islamic women are said to be excluded from all forms of “our dizzy and dazzling modern soul” (DNB, 135), since they are “solitary and enclosed like nuns who, humble and secluded, live in obedience and renunciation” (DNB, 137). Italian women, instead, are “little modern women, lazy and arrogant,” who live “a complicated and dizzy life, caught in a surge of emotions and feelings, from the lobby of a cosmopolitan hotel to the golden hall of an ancestral palace, from the ballroom to the tearoom, from summer holidays to winter resorts” (DNB, 136). Following the dominant metropolitan discourse, according to which all the attributes of feminine modernity, embodied in fashion, cosmetics, mobility, and work, made women sterile, Perricone-Violà constructs a rigid opposition between modern Italian women’s lack of traditional values and traditionally maternal Islamic women, seemingly favoring the latter against the former.

Against female modernity, “obsessed with the myth of progress and with a rush to what is fastest, more refined, more civilized,” Manlio Pompei had opposed a “primitive, simple, linear” form of femininity, which Perricone-Violà attributes to Islamic women. The author strives to construct white and black women as antagonistic opposites, embodying binary oppositions such as modernity versus tradition, and sexuality versus morality. This effort aims at a shift in perception anticipated in the title, by which white women become “dolls,” prospective sexual partners, while black women become simply “women,” that is, the moral and maternal beings the regime wanted women to be at home. Although the author’s ironic distance from the scene reveals a moralizing intent, the sexualization of the Italian female body responds to the objective of charging Italian women in the colonies with the precise sexual function of providing the only suitable mate for the Italian officers in Libya. Even before the implementation of fascist racial policy, it appears clear how fascist propaganda tried to invade the domain of sexuality in order to impose racial segregation. Moreover, despite the author’s subtle critique of the transforming effects of modernity on gender relations, she also makes clear that Italian women’s mobility and sexual liberation are indeed made possible by fascist colonial modernity. While emancipatory modernity is simultaneously embraced and refused in this text, colonial mobility often posed a threat to the regime’s gender politics by allowing forms of heroic and modern traveling, whose destabilizing effects I will explore in the following concluding section.

### **Pioneering Female Modernity: Alba Felter Sartori’s Imperial Wanderings**

After the occupation of Ethiopia and the 1937–1938 implementation of racial policy, the fascist government felt the need to theorize a model of

fascist femininity that could be adapted to the colonial environment and yet maintain intact the delicate balance between tradition and emancipation, peasant and middle-class belonging, coercion and consent. One of the paradoxes of fascist female policies in the colonies was that while the regime gradually barred women's access to the labor market in the metropole, Italian women were invoked to fill the needs of tertiary services in colonial cities such as Tripoli, Massawa, Addis Ababa, and Asmara. Women were called to enter the colonial labor market as secretaries and accountants in governmental offices and private business enterprises, as well as librarians and nurses. According to the work by Poggiali mentioned above, of the ten thousand Italian women in Italian East Africa, at least half lived in the colonial capital, Addis Ababa. The capital, Poggiali underlined, was particularly fit for women "linked to the army, the private and public sector, commerce, professionalism, and industry."<sup>18</sup>

Alba Felter Sartori reached the capital in April 1937 and continued her travels through Ethiopia and Somalia for thirty months, the only woman among the soldiers. In 1940 she published her traveling notes under the title *Vagabondaggi, soste, avventure negli albori dell'impero* (VS).<sup>19</sup> The travelogue chronicles the author's travels following the military war and occupation by fascist Italy, at a time when the colonial government rushed to build traveling infrastructures and normalize the civil organization of the unified imperial territories. Alba Sartori's father was Pietro Felter, a pioneering trader who traveled to Eritrea in 1885 and settled in Harar as the representative of an Italian firm involved in coffee production and export. Following her father's pioneering spirit, Felter Sartori went to the newly founded empire on a secret mission. Her task, disclosed only in part in the travelogue, was to gather military intelligence on the Ethiopian army's war weapons and tactics.

Felter Sartori's colonial travelogue marks an important moment in the process of fascistization of Italian colonial discourse in general and of women's discursive practice in particular. Like her turn-of-the-century predecessor in Eritrea, Rosalia Pianavia Vivaldi, Felter Sartori adopts a masculine narrative voice in order to serve an imperialist agenda and complement the work of male officers, soldiers, and settlers.<sup>20</sup> But unlike Pianavia Vivaldi, who also established a female voice through the construction of domesticity and the maternal, Felter Sartori's "nomadic" identity—already claimed in the title of her travelogue—signals the disruption of domesticity in favor of a defeminized heroic stance. Unlike Pianavia Vivaldi, Sartori Felter chooses virility and militarization to signify how the fascist woman is no longer an educator nor a procreator, but a pioneer, an explorer, and a soldier. Like a soldier, Felter Sartori travels with military convoys, sleeps in tents, eats out of cans, and goes animal hunting. Often isolated from the settlers' community, she looks down with amused distance on the arrival of

other middle-class women in the colonies: "This is the arrival of the female bourgeoisie, old and young ladies . . . They arrive with trunks filled with silk dresses and linens, silver manicure tools, but no cot, no wool sweaters" (VS, 51). Whereas Pianavia Vivaldi's philanthropic activities symbolically re-established the Italian woman's maternal authority, a remarkable picture included in Felter Sartori's travelogue eloquently summarizes her position in the colony. Here the Italian fascist traveler is leaning against a wooden barracks, while a sign above her head reads: *Trattoria Impero*. As a fascist colonial pioneer, Felter Sartori conquers the African frontier with guns and black boots, rather than maternalism and welfare rhetoric.

Felter Sartori's Eritrea is a frontier space where military and civil aspects overlap, and so do gender roles. In the town of Harar, among unexploded mines, surviving barricades and machine-guns, the domestic space is provisional and heroically autarkic, put together by soldiers and officials with already-made objects and a frontier spirit. In the African frontier space, traditional female domesticity is disrupted in favor of a domestication of the African frontier through military order and discipline, and male homosocial rituals such as hunting, card playing, and outdoor singing. The adoption of a masculine identity is highlighted when, on one occasion, having lost her baggage on a military convoy, the author must wear an officer's pants and shoes, and a policeman's sweater and shirt. This new colonial space is highly gendered, based on the opposition between urban modernity and rural countryside. Colonial cities are quintessentially female, born in the midst of a masculine military territory. At the fast-paced rhythms of colonial progress, Massawa "perhaps because she is feminine, under the watchful eye of the Gheden mountain (which is male), becomes more and more beautiful" (VS, 56). Interestingly enough, the urban architectural paradigm is not the European city, but rather the American one, where "the housings of the Government personnel are all aligned with their gardens in four rows, and the streets have pompous names such as: Fifth Street, Eighth Street, Fourteenth Street, like in the big metropolis!" (VS, 71). The development of the ideal fascist colonial city is thus imagined in terms of the American frontier dream. The African territory, like native America, is conceived as a no-man's-land, devoid of property rights, local human presence, and spatial boundaries.

The Fascist Party's militarization and nationalization of women was meant to reinforce their subordination to the Italian State, but also to maintain the separation of gender roles. Italian women's presence in the newly found empire, however, allowed them to appropriate masculine behavior and male subject positions that unintentionally worked against the grain of the regime's effort to incorporate them in the colonies as ideal wives and mothers. As an emancipated middle-class woman, Felter Sartori privileges a mobile identity, liberated of the burden of maternity and

domesticity, therefore too overtly masculinized to conform to the ideological dictates of the regime. Significantly, the author carries with her a doll as a souvenir of her children. The doll is only a symbol of maternity, “an artificial thing, a toy, a machine made by whites” (VS, 39). The doll further highlights Felter Sartori’s inadequacy, and perhaps her unwillingness, to be read as a maternal figure. Wandering the empire with a doll, she thus remains “Felter’s daughter” (VS, 20), daughter of a colonialist, never his mother.

### Notes

1. See Chris Bongie, *Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism, and the Fin de Siècle* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991) and Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994). I discuss forms of belated Orientalist exoticism in the Italian context in “Writing the Female Frontier: Italian Women in Colonial Africa, 1890–1940” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1999).
2. On Italian colonial literature see Giovanna Tomasello’s *La letteratura coloniale italiana dalle avanguardie al fascismo* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1984), and Maria Pagliara, *Il romanzo coloniale. Tra imperialismo e rimorso* (Rome: Laterza, 2001). For specific issues on Fascist colonial culture also see: Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare. Storia dell’espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Alberto Burgio, ed., *Nel nome della razza. Il razzismo nella storia d’Italia, 1870–1945* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000); *Images of Africa in Italian Literature and Culture*, special series in *Studi d’Italianistica nell’Africa australe*, 5–6 (1992–1993) (Johannesburg: Association of Professional Italianists); and Marie-Hélène Caspar, ed., *L’Africa e l’Italia contemporanea: miti, propaganda, realtà*, special issue of *Narrativa*, 14 (1998) (Nanterre, France: Université de Paris X, Centre de Recherches Italiennes). For an update of recent scholarship see Patrizia Palumbo, ed., *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). On Italian women in colonial Africa see: Cristina Lombardi-Diop, “Mothering the Nation: An Italian Woman in Colonial Eritrea,” in *ItaliAfrica: Bridging Continents and Cultures*, ed. Sante Matteo, 173–191 (Stony Brook, NY: Forum Italicum Publishing, 2001); Lombardi-Diop, “Writing the Female Frontier”; Carla Ghezzi, “L’altra metà del potere. Donne in Africa,” in *Memorie d’oltremare. Prato-Italia-Africa*, ed. Nicola Labanca and Anna Lisa Marchi, 53–62 (Florence: Giunti, 2000).
3. See, for instance, Julia Clancy-Smith and Francis Gouda, eds., *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998); Inderpal Grewal, *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).
4. See: Anna Marasi, “La donna e l’impero nella rivista *Africa Italiana* (November 1938–luglio 1943),” *Miscellanea di storia delle esplorazioni* 14 (1989): 335–351,

- and Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "Envisioning Modernity: Desire and Discipline in the Italian Fascist Film," *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 1 (1996): 109–144. For colonial sexual politics in the Italian context, see Giulia Barrera in this volume; her "Dangerous Liaisons: Colonial Concubinage in Eritrea, 1890–1941," Program of African Studies Working Papers, no. 1 (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University, 1996); Barbara Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi. Antropologia, discorso giuridico e politiche sessuali interrazziali nella colonia Eritrea (1890–1941)* (Naples: Liguori, 1998).
5. For details, see Victoria De Grazia's seminal work *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
  6. See Piero Meldini's path-breaking study: *Sposa e madre esemplare. Ideologia e politica della donna e della famiglia durante il fascismo* (Rimini and Florence: Guaraldi Editore, 1975).
  7. See, for instance, Elisabetta Mondello, *La nuova italiana. La donna nella stampa e nella cultura del ventennio* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1987); Robin Pickering-Iazzi, ed., *Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Fascism, and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); and Robin Pickering-Iazzi, *Politics of the Visible: Writing Women, Culture, and Fascism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
  8. For further details see De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 224, and Maria Fraddosio, "La donna e la guerra. Aspetti della militanza femminile nel fascismo: dalla mobilitazione civile alle origini dei Saf nella Repubblica Sociale Italiana," *Storia contemporanea* 20, no. 6 (December 1989): 1105–1181.
  9. Anna Messina, *Cronache del Nilo* (Rome: Edizioni Italiane, 1940). Noted as CN hereafter. All translations are mine.
  10. "Preparazione della donna alla vita coloniale," *Almanacco della donna italiana* 20 (1939): 75.
  11. "Figure di pionieri: Maria Fioretti," *Etiopia* 2, nos. 7–8 (1938): 109.
  12. Ciro Poggiali, "La donna italiana in Africa Orientale," *Almanacco della donna italiana* 20 (1939).
  13. Cited in Luigi Goglia and Fabio Grassi, eds., *Il colonialismo italiano da Adua all'impero*, 2nd edn. (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1993), 324–325.
  14. Raffaele Passaretti, "Frequenza dei concepimenti secondo la durata del matrimonio delle migrate in Libia nel 1939–XVIII," *Rassegna sociale dell'Africa Italiana* 1 (1943): 54–55; "Prolificità e produttività delle donne migrate in Libia nel 1939," *Rassegna sociale dell'Africa Italiana* 2 (1943): 127.
  15. Augusta Perricone-Violà, *Donne e non bambole* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1930). Perricone-Violà is also the author of an autobiographical work on her experience in the Italian colony of Somalia, titled *Ricordi somali* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1935). For further details, see Lombardi-Diop, "Writing the Female Frontier."
  16. Cited in Meldini, *Sposa e madre esemplare*, 180–181.
  17. Cited in *ibid.*, 231.
  18. Poggiali, "La donna italiana in Africa Orientale," 62.
  19. Alba Felter Sartori, *Vagabondaggi, soste, avventure negli albori dell'impero* (Brescia: Fratelli Geroldi, 1940).
  20. Rosalia Pianavia Vivaldi Boffiner, *Tre anni in Eritrea* (Milan: Cogliati, 1901).

# Public Space and Public Face: Italian Fascist Urban Planning at Tripoli's Colonial Trade Fair

*Krystyna von Henneberg*

From the first days of Italy's military invasion in the fall of 1911, to the collapse of the Axis in World War II, Italian occupying forces in Libya faced the problem of how to establish control over the region. The sheer presence of Italian soldiers and settlers was not enough to overcome local resistance to the idea of European rule. Violence and expropriation would prove an equally inadequate basis for long-term domination. By the late 1920s and 1930s, spurred by new advances in urban planning, fascist colonial administrators devised new cultural, administrative, and spatial policies to guarantee Italian interests. Much of their energy was devoted to reshaping the coastal city of Tripoli. By the mid-1930s, Tripoli would become the capital of fascist Italy's newly unified, newly annexed, nineteenth province, and a showcase of Italian achievements in Africa.

Italian officials found Tripoli both alluring and alarming. The city's long history as a seat of multiple ethnic and religious groups, including Muslims, Jews, and Christians, as well as Arabs, Berbers, and Europeans, made it picturesque, and a potential tourist attraction. But this diversity also fueled Italian anxieties about how to control the city. The purported domestication of Tripoli ultimately rested on two main strategies. To maintain imperial prestige, Italian officials set out to clarify and sustain the distinction between colonizer and colonized, drawing a line still only incompletely visible to the parties directly involved. On paper at least, social patterns of interaction and habitation were carefully reshaped and

patrolled to minimize unauthorized interactions of either a conflictive, or even a friendly nature. By the late 1920s, Italian planners and administrators were building separate areas for “European” and “Libyan” residential and commercial use. Formal and informal spatial segregation would, planners hoped, guarantee the separation of group from group, conqueror from conquered, and European from African, enforcing in stone what was so hard to define or police in social practice.<sup>1</sup>

A second and complementary method for asserting Italian authority lay in the creation of hybrid, or technocratically created, “organic” (or pseudo-organic) spaces, usually in the form of piazzas, marketplaces, and fairgrounds. This is the focus of my discussion here. Built mostly in the 1930s, these hybrid civic spaces were designed to encourage the confluence of different ethnic groups, not according to existing and locally accepted patterns, but on terms established by and for the colonial regime, and in ways that furthered its interests. The goal was to produce a highly ordered version of public life, one that appeared traditional, even as it was new, and one that appeared open, even as it was highly circumscribed. Built with the ostentation typical of insecure regimes, these urban meeting points were stages on which the authorities could perform legitimating stories about their inclusiveness and durability, stories aimed at Italian and Muslim audiences, both in the colony and abroad.<sup>2</sup>

This image of munificence was, of course, contrived. For the existence of such spaces depended precisely on a parallel strategy of segregation. Indeed, the stricter the regime’s control over the Libyan population, the more flamboyant and apparently inclusive were the public spaces and political rituals it created. For Italian and Libyan colonial subjects had to know their “place” before they could share public spaces with each other. While advertising the regime’s flexibility, hybrid spaces thus did not signal a lapse in governmental control. To Italians, at least, they were a sign that it was secure. Hybrid spaces offered up a kind of toothless mixing that was intended to preserve, and advertise, rather than threaten the new social order. Translated into North American terms, they were the Williamstowns, the plantation museums, the suburban malls of the fascist colonial era: highly planned, modernist centers of controlled mingling and display.

### **The Tripoli Trade Fair: The *Pax Romana* at Work**

One of the most important hybrid spaces built during the period of Italian rule was the Tripoli Trade Fair. Inaugurated in 1927 in the industrial section along Tripoli’s Corso Sicilia, the fairground was part of a larger drive to boost the city’s stagnant economy, and to increase its visibility through international trade and tourism. During the 1930s, it became one of the

regime's most important and loudly touted commercial zones, and the centerpiece of a newly revitalized, "splendid and harmonious" Tripoli.<sup>3</sup> The idea first came to Emilio De Bono (then governor of the region of Tripolitania) in 1926, during Mussolini's first visit to the colony. A "special attraction" was needed that could "oblige a respectable number of visitors to come to Tripolitania," the governor urged. Not only would the fair encourage Italian investment and trade in this most unlikely of Italian commercial outposts, but it would be morally instructive and inclusive as well. The fair, De Bono explained, would "remind the natives to observe the products of Italian work, give them an exact vision of what commerce and industry are, and show our compatriots how much the Colony reaps from land and labor, what [the Colony] is, and what it promises to become."<sup>4</sup>

Having proposed the idea to Mussolini, De Bono promptly offered him the post of "High Patron" of the fair, shrewdly ensuring the Duce's support for the project. The fair was launched in 1927, first as a national, and four years later, as an international fairground for everything from industrial and artisanal products, to shows of government propaganda.<sup>5</sup> At first, authorities had trouble finding exhibitors, a fact blamed on the lack of "colonial consciousness" in Italy, and the understandable reluctance of foreign states to participate. However, with the arrival of Governor-General Italo Balbo, who governed the colony from 1934 to 1940, attendance shot up, with the fair opening promptly every February through to the spring of 1939. The Italian press offered it ardent encomiums. No one, fascist commentator Angelo Piccioli grandly proclaimed, had ever thought of such a thing before: not the "old imperial nations parading as mercantile democracies," not the "overfed, pacifist" countries, rich in industrial and commercial wealth, and in overseas possessions. The fair, he claimed, was purely a fascist invention, a sign of Italy's unique accomplishments in Africa—and in retrospect, an important site for the regime's loud, even frantic insistence on its own originality and claim to colonial power.<sup>6</sup>

In both design and content, the fair projected an image of grandeur and inclusiveness. Here, as in other parts of Tripoli, the modern and the traditional, the Italian and the Libyan were shown to coexist in an organic, productive harmony. Built on a triangular lot measuring approximately five hectares, the fairgrounds included approximately forty newly erected pavilions. These were all built in different styles, and represented various Italian cities, ministries, industries, and colonies, with a select few foreign states (in the 1930s, Germany was given a prominent location). The buildings were lined up along two broad avenues, and were interspersed with palms and parks, giving the area the appearance of a garden city neighborhood.

Entering visitors were met by an overscaled, neoclassical pavilion representing the city of Rome (*Governatorato di Roma*). Designed by the well-known architect Alessandro Limongelli, the structure included a fifty-foot arched entranceway with the word *Roma* emblazoned across the top. Freestanding pillars on either side bore a Roman she-wolf and an imperial eagle, both balanced on orbs representing the earth.<sup>7</sup> Towering above the central structure was a sculpture of Minerva, goddess of wisdom, martial prowess, and the arts, here representing “the mother city” of Rome. The message was clear. Fascist, imperial Italy—the Italy of the pickaxe, grand avenues, and classical forms—was here to stay. Mussolini had built a new Rome, and was building a new Tripoli as well. To strengthen the message, in the late 1930s, the pavilion hosted an exhibit on the new fascist Rome, which, like Tripoli, was being “cleared of all the old accretions [*vecchiume*] that ensnared the great monuments and the imperial zones” of the capital.<sup>8</sup> The dual function of Limongelli’s building, as both entranceway and pavilion, thus ensured visitors an instructive view of architectural models of imperial and fascist Rome. The whole thing amounted to typical fascist visual overkill. Indeed, the building’s towering architectural elements and grossly rhetorical symbolism seemed incongruous in what was otherwise a still sparsely developed industrial zone. The structure looked more like an entrance to a university, or a cemetery. Indeed, like universities and cemeteries, the fairgrounds were a kind of invented, *de novo* city, conspicuously enticing visitors with grand structures and promises.

On the outside, the fairground made Italy look daunting and imperial. Inside, however, Italy appeared tolerant, and even syncretic. Having absorbed the message that Rome was in charge, visitors could now experience the empire in its kinder, gentler incarnation. The harsh image of Limongelli’s Roman pavilion was softened by the more apparently accommodating orientalist design of other official structures. The pavilions of the Government of Cyrenaica and Government of Tripolitania, for example, were built in a pastiche of traditional Islamic designs. The first was adorned with a domed minaret, colored façades and pointed-arch windows and doorways. It could easily have been a *madrasa* or mosque from a *Cinecittà* movie set. The second had elements of the *marabout* and fortress combined. Both buildings were filled with ethnographic displays, including Libyan costumes, amulets, and medicinal plants. Visitors were encouraged to express their amazement for the ingenious methods used by these “strange primitive people” in crafting utensils out of the basest materials.<sup>9</sup> “The level of efficiency that Libyan artisans have achieved is well-known,” one press packet reported, adopting a tone both patronizing and encouraging. Neighboring pavilions included *mashrabiya* (enclosed balconies covered with wooden lattice-work, typical of the region) and

windowless, stuccoed façades with large internal spaces. Pavilions for Italy's other colonies in the Aegean Islands and East Africa were also built to provide "local" flavor, with touches drawn from the architecture of Mediterranean castles and Eritrean fortresses.

Nor were all things colonial confined to syncretic or "traditional" structures. A pavilion for Libyan Arts and Crafts, for example, was paradoxically built in high modernist, functionalist style. Described as *modernissimo*, the building bore no decoration other than a handwritten inscription by Mussolini, scrawled in giant lettering across the façade. The building was photographed in tourist and propaganda reviews to look hauntingly lean and empty. Inside, architects' re-creations of Libyan interiors reflected the spare tenets of 1930s modernist taste, in a style that one reviewer described as a perfect fusion of the colonial, with Italian functionalism and simplicity.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, one of the fair's most traditional displays was thus housed in an abstract, avant-garde museum—a structure far more sleek than those the Italians had built to represent themselves. The colony, imagined and repackaged on the fairgrounds, thus appeared more modern than Italy itself.

This, Italian propaganda claimed, was a sign of Italy's reign of harmonious diversity. Fascism, as the buildings and displays seemed to suggest, was flexible. Its fairgrounds included everyone. Its buildings were designed in all styles. Nothing was too primitive to merit the interest and support of the fascist state. The Italian offices could be housed in "Libyan" structures, and Libyan activities could be housed in "Italian" ones. Modern bureaucracies could inhabit quaint, rustic buildings, while traditional arts and crafts could be displayed in stark, rectilinear ones. Official press packets even touted a new architectural competition for Italian architects to design model houses—one for metropolitan dwellers, and one for "natives"—to be built alongside each other. Thus, the rules that governed architecture in the "real" Tripoli were subverted in its replica. In Tripoli, architects and officials had insisted on separation and distance. Here, they insisted on blending and proximity. Here, in this fantasy world, there was no aesthetic divide between one culture and the other. Italian history and Libyan history could be taken in on the same short stroll, and reconstructed using the same forms, by the same men.

Nor, indeed, was there a spatial divide. All the buildings and peoples shared the same street. The Libyan Arts and Crafts building was just two doors down from Limongelli's monument to Rome. The East African pavilion was next to the one for Milan. While clearly not a statement of democracy, here, at least, was a statement of purported equivalence, and expansiveness. Libya, after all, was in the process of being declared Italy's nineteenth province. Why should she not take her place alongside the

other eighteen? Everyone, the fairgrounds suggested, was welcome under the gaze of Mother Rome. Indeed, the juxtaposition went beyond the bounds of the colonial realm. Germany's lot was across from the pavilions for Naples and Palermo. The airplane exhibit shared a space with the livestock show. An exhibit on the military techniques used against the Libyan resistance went up next to one on colonial teachers and doctors, labeled "the two most important instruments for peaceful penetration."<sup>11</sup> Here, fascist rhetoric underlined, was an amicable regrouping that willfully obliterated all tensions and difference. Under a strong hand, the layout seemed to urge, everything could go together. Here, in this most artificial of settings, was Tripoli's *Pax Romana*.<sup>12</sup>

However original the Italians claimed to be, it is clear that the fairground was not unique. Such recreations of colonial societies were common at international fairs at the time. Chicago in 1893 had its own Cairo Street and Damascus Place; Paris in 1900 had its own little Algiers; and turn-of-the-century U.S. fairs included Filipino tribal villages and "Jap-Alaskan" architecture.<sup>13</sup> The crowning achievement in this era of colonial reproductions was indeed not the Tripoli fair, but the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris, where dozens of different countries and colonies—Italy included—erected extravagantly stylized pavilions at the edge of the Bois de Vincennes, and a short walk from the city's new mosque.<sup>14</sup>

The key difference between these shows and the one in Tripoli, however, lay in the fact that the Italian fair took place on colonial soil. In most colonial fairs in Europe, the function of native villages or pavilions was to recreate something that was far away, and that most people could not afford to go and see for themselves. The fairs recreated the "exotic" at a remove. In Tripoli, instead, the fairgrounds reproduced a city that was already there. Here was an ideal Tripoli, *in* Tripoli itself. Here, the norms of social intercourse that governed life outside were theatrically suspended. Outside the fairground walls, Libyans and Italians were ordered to inhabit different spaces. One culture was deemed superior, the other inferior. The Italians had space and history, while the Libyans were told they did not. Inside the fairgrounds, these barriers were lifted; Italians and Libyans were presented as brothers. Thus, what the Italians thought was contemptible, even punishable, in the real Tripoli became desirable and beautiful in the artificial one. Poverty, or what the Italians called backwardness, was transformed into color and charm. Ignorance became an opportunity to learn. The real became the "authentic." Here was a contrived Tripoli that offered visitors the best of everything, in the right place, and in the right order.

It is tempting to look upon the Tripoli Trade Fair as ironic. It is clear from the sources, however, that no irony was intended. Its function was not to amuse, but to dominate. Indeed, as suggested above, the

function of this and other hybrid spaces like it, was not to fantasize, but to mystify, and ultimately reinforce the separatist relations outside. The creation of a hybrid space within the Trade Fair walls was not just a fiction about Libya, but rather an assertion of Italy's power over and in it. Libyans could walk across the city's western industrial and suburban zones to visit a happy facsimile of the very city in which they had been marginalized. Irony implies distance. In the case of the fair, there was quite literally none at all.

How could such an obvious contrivance be made believable? The key to the success of the fairground lay in its ability to frame interactions between colonizer and colonized as something either symbolic or commercial. These were not spontaneous exchanges. They were clearly and intentionally staged. The arts and crafts shows were part museum, and part business endeavor. One either studied the native exhibitors, or bought something from them. So too, the pavilions representing the different cultures in the fair and even the open-air "native stands," focused on production. Objects, statistics, charts, maps and photographs—the entire paraphernalia of display—suggested a sanitized, even scientific exchange of information and goods, a fetishization of commercial objects with a clear neutralizing intent. Such interactions were not considered threatening to a government that had already claimed to assert its power over Libya's culture and economy. Neither Libyans' art nor their commerce could, in any case, be expected to grant them any independence or autonomy. These were exchanges that were easily controlled. Excluded from the fair were instead more unruly kinds of exchanges (social, religious, domestic, or sexual)—exchanges that eluded such control, or that threatened to breach the barriers of race, space, and status. These, according to officials at least, were to have no place in the fairground.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, what made the diversity of the fairground possible was precisely that it was a commercial space. Despite its many buildings, the fairground (like a modern American mall or theme park) contained no housing. Nobody lived there. The model dwellings for Italians and Libyans were to be walked through and admired, but not inhabited. Libyan, Italian, and other exhibitors went home at night to the "real" Tripoli. The fair was safely removed from Tripoli's residential neighborhoods, both Libyan and Italian. The Libyans who helped stage the fair, and even those who went to see it, were one step removed from their social networks, families, and neighborhoods. These were Libyans in distilled, purified form. They were, or were made into, abstract and hence domesticated representatives of the "old" Libya. They were captive actors, performing for a captive audience. Like Islam under the Italians, they were now meant to represent a static "culture," and a regulated and predictable set of activities. Through a

careful act of disassembly and reconstruction, the Italians had seemingly removed danger from their company.

The same was true of architectural forms. What did it mean for Italian authorities to ensconce their pavilions in what appeared to be Islamic forms? This was not the first time this had been done in Tripoli. Other buildings in the city, including the governor's palace, and numerous hotels and residences, drew liberally on local elements. To some hard-line fascists, such buildings were a capitulation, and an expression of sentimentality and democratic pandering that deserved nothing but scorn—and the bulldozer. In their haste to condemn these buildings, however, hardliners may have interpreted their meaning too narrowly. Italian mimicry of local Muslim and Arab forms was arguably not a sign of weakness, but of strength. In the case of the fairgrounds, the presence of such syncretic structures was intended to signal Italy's firm control over, and domestication of local architectural forms, rather than an abdication to them. Italy now "owned" the Libyan vernacular, which consequently was not understood to pose a threat. Like the Libyans at the native fair, local architectural forms were lifted from their original social context, abstracted and reapplied to suit ends utterly different than those for which they were originally developed. The apparent inappropriateness of these stylistic elements was itself a sign of Italian claims over, and trivialization of, local culture. The pavilions became *aesthetic* displays. In the hands of Italian architects, Libyan architecture had become a "style."<sup>16</sup>

The pavilion of the Government of Tripolitania was a case in point. Built to resemble a fortress, it hardly required such defenses. This was, after all, a fairground. It was obvious that anyone could enter the building at will. Its open door negated the very idea of a lurking enemy. What Libyan would even think of assailing the colonial government, the building seemed to ask. The government clearly had no one to defend itself *against*, or so these structures seemed to claim. Nor could any Libyan still make use of such a defensive structure for purposes of resistance: the historic architecture of North African self-defense had now been rendered in the equivalent of a festive papier-mâché. The same principle applied to the pavilion of the Government of Cyrenaica, which was designed to resemble a mosque, even though it obviously had no religious function. This was not unique. Elsewhere in the city and colony, Italian authorities pursued a similar approach, subverting religious and cultural meanings by turning cemeteries into parks, setting up gambling casinos in buildings designed to resemble mosques, transforming fortresses into residences, and residences into fortresses. Borrowing forms in this way helped attract tourists, but it was also a clear way of trivializing and neutralizing the political authority and valence of vernacular religious design, and of advertising

its subaltern status. The relation between the original and the fake thus rested on violence; aesthetic borrowing signaled suppression, rather than appreciation.

The idea that Libyan architecture could be reduced to an ahistorical, decontextualized “style” to be chosen at whim spoke volumes about Italian attitudes toward Libyan society. Seized for use by ruling colonial authorities, this style became a source of amusement, and show. On Italian stages, where Italians performed their authority, imitation buildings conveyed that sense that the “originals” no longer had their original potency. Here, they had none of their ability to disorient the European, and none of their ability to defend or even speak for the Libyan, or Libyan architectural traditions. Italian tourists would not be lost in the fairground, as they might be in the medina, or old city. Nor would Libyans find refuge or a place for religious devotion in the fair’s pseudo-Libyan neighborhood. These were shells, spectacular scenarios of political transparency and social cooperation built along a straight axis, under Italian supervision. As unsettling as they may have appeared to some colonial authorities in the rest of the colony, hybridity and mixing at the Tripoli fair thus helped support fascist notions of hierarchy and order, proposing through architecture and planning the very divisions that Italian authorities found so crucial and elusive outside the fairground. The question to ask of these colonial mixed spaces and syncretic buildings is, then, not only what they looked like, but who built them, when, and for whose benefit, and under what regime. As in any neighborhood in any city, the aesthetic politics of Tripoli’s colonial fairground can only be understood in the context of power relations and spatial strategies in the colony as a whole.

### Notes

I gratefully acknowledge the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of California, Davis, the Fulbright Commission and the Agnelli Foundation for supporting my research. Special thanks go to the late Richard A. Webster and the late Spiro Kostof, as well as Thomas R. Metcalf, Luis Eduardo Guarnizo, Giulia Barrera, and Mia Fuller for their numerous insights and suggestions. Katharyne Mitchell, Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, and Patricia Morton contributed useful comments and critiques on earlier versions of this argument.

1. See Mia Fuller, “Building Power: Italian Architecture and Urbanism in Libya and Ethiopia,” in *Forms of Dominance. On the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise*, ed. Nezar AlSayyad, 211–239 (Aldershot: Avebury, 1992). For more on the politics of destruction and conservation in Tripoli, see Krystyna von Henneberg, “Piazza Castello and the Making of a Colonial Capital,” in *Streets. Critical Perspectives on Public Space*, ed. Zeynep Çelik, Diane Favro and Richard Ingersoll, 135–150 (Berkeley: University of California Press,

- 1994); and Krystyna von Henneberg, "The Construction of Fascist Libya. Modern Colonial Architecture and Urban Planning in Italian North Africa (1922–1943)" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1996), forthcoming as *Building Fascist Libya. Colonialism and Architecture in Italy's Nineteenth Province*. See also Mia Fuller, "Preservation and Self-Absorption: Italian Colonisation and the Walled City of Tripoli, Libya," *Journal of North African Studies* 5, no. 4 (2000): 121–154, and in this volume. My thinking on this project was shaped by Janet Abu-Lughod, *Rabat. Urban Apartheid in Morocco* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), and François Béguin et al., *Arabisances. Décor architectural et tracé urbain en Afrique du Nord, 1830-1950* (Paris: Dunod, 1983).
2. On the performative nature of official fascist urban culture, see Claudio Fogu, "‘To Make History’: Garibaldianism and the Formation of a Fascist Historic Imaginary," in *Making and Remaking Italy. The Cultivation of National Identity around the Risorgimento*, ed. Albert Russell Ascoli and Krystyna von Henneberg, 203–240 (Oxford and New York: Berg Press, 2001); Marla Susan Stone, *The Patron State. Culture and Politics in Fascist Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle. The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Staging Fascism. 18 BL and the Theater of Masses for Masses* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); Mario Isnenghi, *L'Italia in piazza. I luoghi della vita pubblica dal 1848 ai giorni nostri* (Milan: Mondadori, 1994); and Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio. La sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1993). I also rely on the earlier analysis provided by Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, MI: Black and Red, 1970).
  3. Angelo Vittorio Pellegrineschi, "Il lavoro italiano in Libia," *Africa Italiana* 21, no. 2 (1943): 40.
  4. Cited in Angelo Piccioli, "La Fiera di Tripoli," *Annali dell'Africa Italiana* 1, no. 2 (1938): 499.
  5. Rodolfo Giorgi, "Le Fiere di Tripoli," in *La Libia in venti anni di occupazione*, ed. Tomaso Sillani (Rome: La Rassegna Italiana, 1932), 181–182.
  6. Piccioli, "La Fiera di Tripoli," 497.
  7. Although many historians date such "imperial" style to Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, many examples of "imperial" architecture predate it. See my "Imperial Uncertainties: Architectural Syncretism and Improvisation in Fascist Colonial Libya," *Journal of Contemporary History* 31, no. 2 (1996): 373–395.
  8. Giacomo Carlo Viganò, "La XIII Fiera di Tripoli," *Rassegna economica dell'Africa Italiana* (1939): 265.
  9. Guglielmo Narducci, "I padiglioni del governo della Libia all'XI Fiera di Tripoli," *L'Italia d'oltremare* 2, no. 9 (1937): 22–23.
  10. N.a., "XII Fiera Intercoloniale di Tripoli. L'artigianato libico. Partecipazione del nostro possedimento egeo. Il concorso dell'industria italiana," *L'illustrazione coloniale* 4 (1938): 61–62.

11. Piccioli, "La Fiera di Tripoli," 538.
12. The term was used by Graziani to describe the results of his military conquest in the region. See Rodolfo Graziani, *Pace romana in Libia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1937).
13. Zeynep Çelik, *Displaying the Orient. Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair. Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 115 and 197-199.
14. The imperial uses of hybrid design in the French case are compellingly explored by Patricia Morton, *Hybrid Modernities. Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000). See also *Exposition coloniale internationale. Paris 1931. Colonies et pays d'outremer* (Paris: n. p., 1931) and *Guide officiel de la section italienne de l'exposition coloniale* (Paris: n. p., 1931), Archivio Storico del Ministero dell'Africa italiana, ASMAI III, busta 39, "La nostra architettura coloniale." On the French fair, see Catherine Hodeir and Michel Pierre, 1931. *La mémoire du siècle. L'exposition coloniale* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1991); Herman Lebovics, *True France. The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), especially 51-97.
15. On the dangers of trespassing colonial boundaries, see Ann Laura Stoler, "Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13, no. 1 (1989): 134-161; and Giulia Barrera, "Dangerous Liaisons: Colonial Concubinage in Eritrea, 1890-1941," Program of African Studies Working Papers, no. 1 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1996).
16. The same argument has been made by scholars of other European empires. See Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Zeynep Çelik, *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations. Algiers under French Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), and Thomas R. Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision. Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

# The Architecture of Tourism in Italian Libya: The Creation of a Mediterranean Identity

*Brian L. McLaren*

In a December 1937 article entitled “*Visione Mediterranea della mia architettura*,” architect Florestano Di Fausto speaks of his approach to an architecture for Italy’s Mediterranean colonies—an architecture which he asserts had always been, and should continue to be, based upon a careful reading of the local architecture. In an impassioned discussion of his sizable body of work constructed in the Aegean islands of Rhodes and Kos, as well as Libya, he emphasizes the deliberate process of design by which he developed a reciprocal relationship between these projects and their historical and environmental contexts. Underscoring the organicism of this relationship, Di Fausto asserted that in carrying out these projects: “I did not place one stone without filling myself with the spirit of the place.”<sup>1</sup> However, this contextual approach was not deployed at the expense of the modernity of his buildings, which he argues were informed by “the fundamental character of clarity and structural organicity, of sobriety and simplicity of form, of perfect adherence to function.”<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, Di Fausto asserts that his projects were a dialectical mediation of imitation and innovation, arguing that a contemporary architecture could be grounded in its physical context and related to a set of building traditions without losing its sense of modernity. Although this theoretical approach applied to much of his work in Libya, it was particularly pertinent to his tourist projects, which balanced the need to reflect the local culture with the desire for a metropolitan level of comfort.

Di Fausto's espousal of a Mediterranean identity for a contemporary architecture in Libya was, at least in part, a product of architectural discourse in Italy. It was closely tied to the much earlier interest in local architecture that was cultivated in the pages of *Architettura ed Arti Decorative*, which began publication in September of 1921. This journal asserted the value of the vernacular as the foundation of a modern aesthetic for Italian architecture as well as the key ingredient for a contextualist approach to modernizing historic city centers.<sup>3</sup> Di Fausto's "Mediterranean vision" was also the culmination of a theoretical trajectory that legitimized the appropriation of local architecture by architects working in Italy's North African colony. It had been preceded by the publication of Maurizio Rava's "*Dobbiamo rispettare il carattere dell'edilizia tripolina*" (We must respect the character of Tripoli's architecture) in 1929 and Carlo Enrico Rava's "*Per un'architettura coloniale moderna*" (For a modern colonial architecture) in 1931—articles which argued that a modern colonial architecture should be based on a contemporary interpretation of indigenous sources.<sup>4</sup> The second of these publications was particularly influential, asserting that the Mediterranean qualities of Libya's indigenous architecture derived from a common climatic, geographical, and racial determinacy that linked it with that of Italy's coastal regions.

Di Fausto's theoretical discourse was also profoundly shaped by the cultural politics of Italian colonialism in Libya. This so-called "indigenous politics" was most fully developed during Italo Balbo's Governorship, which began in January of 1934. This set of policies called for Libya's incorporation into metropolitan Italy and for retaining the local populations' customs and practices. One of the most compelling symbols of this first strategy is the so-called *ventimila* or twenty thousand, a mass emigration of agricultural colonists from Italy to Libya in October of 1938.<sup>5</sup> The preservation of Libyan culture included an extensive program for restoring Muslim religious sites and reinforcing the local culture. One such initiative was related to the restructuring of the native artisanal industries, for which the Muslim School of Native Arts and Crafts was established in Tripoli in 1935. The Balbo administration's intervention into Libyan craft production reveals something of the nature of Italian colonial politics. It maintained the cultural practices of the local populations while at the same time redefining them according to the demands of metropolitan society.<sup>6</sup>

The dual strategy of Balbo's "indigenous politics"—which called for modernizing Libya and preserving its culture—was directly connected with its tourist development. The creation of a modern infrastructure of roads and public services was undertaken in conjunction with a substantial program for the construction of tourist facilities, initiated in the first days of Balbo's governorship. This resulted in a coordinated system of

roads and accommodations that stretched the full length of the Mediterranean coast and deep into the Libyan interior. The tourist network in Libya was reinforced by a systematic campaign to restore historical sites and implement civic improvements—a program that included Muslim religious buildings, like the Qaramanli mosque in Tripoli, and the Roman and Greek archeological sites at Leptis Magna, Sabratha, Cyrene, and Apollonia.<sup>7</sup> The Balbo administration's emphasis on developing the tourist system in Libya led to a series of parallel improvements related to transportation to and within this colony.<sup>8</sup> The creation of a tourist network was similarly supported by the organization of related attractions. The most important of these continued to be the Tripoli Trade Fair—an annual event held between 1927 and 1939 that presented metropolitan and colonial goods to an international audience.<sup>9</sup> Balbo also initiated a program to stage indigenous ceremonies for the benefit of a tourist audience. The administration of this program—which was carried out according to a Western interpretation of public morality—reveals the conflicted relationship between tourists' desire to experience the most exotic forms of Libyan culture and the colonial administration's need to control all cultural events.<sup>10</sup>

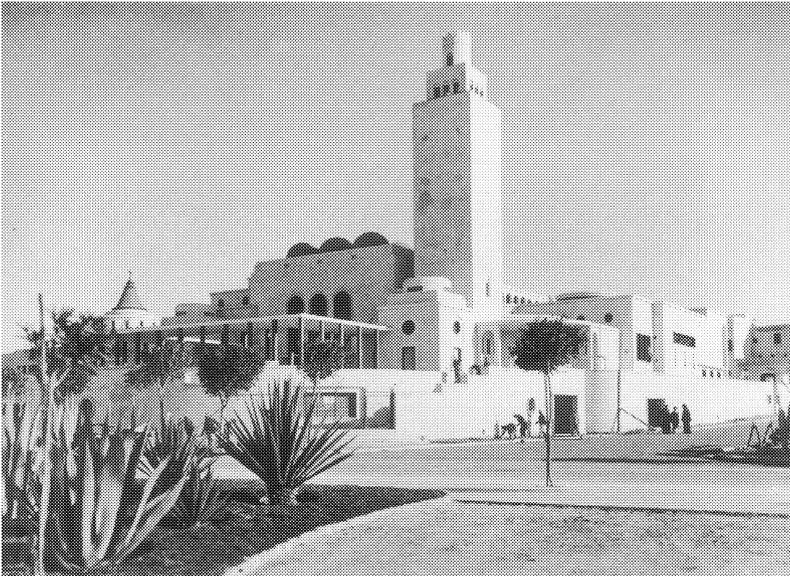
The most important initiative undertaken by the Balbo administration for the realization of an organized tourist system was the foundation of a centralized body, the *Ente Turistico ed Alberghiero della Libia* (Libyan Tourism and Hotel Organization, or ETAL), in May 1935. This organization went beyond the promotional and propaganda activities typically provided by such groups, acting as a tour operator in addition to offering the services of a travel agency.<sup>11</sup> The ETAL also managed a system of eighteen hotels, including the most prominent tourist accommodations in Tripoli, Benghazi, and the Libyan interior. But this network of tourist facilities and activities was not only directly linked to this colony's modernization: it fostered an experience that was fundamentally modern. The function of modernity as an enticement to the colonial traveler was certainly not lost on the ETAL, which stated in a news release: "to find a bathroom for each room and hot and cold running water 750 kilometers from the heart of Africa is undoubtedly a very pleasurable surprise."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, while modern comfort was a crucial part of Libya's tourist network, it was not so much an end in itself as it was a mechanism for encountering the local environment and culture. Throughout the tourist system a conscious effort was made to organize cultural events that would enhance the experience of Libyan culture. One prominent example is the musical and dance performances in the Arab Café at the Suq al-Mushir in Tripoli, which were enacted in a setting intended to suggest the mysteries of the East.<sup>13</sup>

This same intricate relationship between the indigenous and the modern characterized the tourist architecture constructed in Libya during this period. These projects were overseen by a commission formed by Balbo in February 1934 to provide aesthetic control over all significant buildings.<sup>14</sup> Florestano Di Fausto was the key figure in this development, his appointment coinciding with a period of productive building activity that resulted in the substantial remaking of this colony's image. Prior to arriving in Libya, he was well known for the work he realized in Rhodes beginning in the late 1920s. These projects helped him to develop the ability to express a complex set of references in a contemporary architecture—an effort that ran parallel to the Italian government's interest in fostering the peaceful coexistence of the different ethnic groups on this eastern Mediterranean island.<sup>15</sup> Di Fausto's tourist architecture should be seen against the backdrop of his public projects in Rhodes, where the contextualism of the buildings was carefully reconciled with their provision of modern amenities. But Di Fausto's appropriation of local forms in his tourist projects in Libya responded to a more variable context, thereby creating a series of local responses to site, climate, and building tradition that were part of a more general category of Mediterranean architecture. The regionalism of his Libyan projects is evident in the difference between the Uaddan Hotel and Casino in Tripoli—whose variety of forms and white cubic massing suggest the indigenous architecture of the Libyan coast—and the 'Ain al-Fras Hotel in Ghadames—whose system of walls and courtyards was based upon the vernacular constructions of its subSaharan setting.

Contemporary commentators referred to the first of these projects—the Uaddan—as a “jewel of modern African architecture.”<sup>16</sup> Located along Tripoli's eastern seafront, the hotel-casino complex can, at one level, be understood as a direct expression of the contextualism suggested in Di Fausto's “*Visione mediterranea*.” As a complex assembly of different building elements, the Uaddan's design was a response to both its seafront location and Tripoli's diverse architectural heritage. Through the formation of a large terrace on which these elements were grounded, this project offered a monumental balcony linking the hotel to the waterfront, while also acting as a transition from the waterfront into the city. The relationship between the Uaddan and the old city of Tripoli is more by way of analogy than by the direct copying of historical precedent. The composite nature of its forms and stylistic references can be seen as comparable to those of the old city—which was marked by a combination of Roman, Arab, and Ottoman interventions.<sup>17</sup> Yet the Uaddan was more than a contextual gesture or a synthesis of the local architecture. As a rich and luxurious interior world intended to satisfy the desires of the most discriminating

traveler, it was also an expression of the exoticism often associated with colonial literature.<sup>18</sup> This quality was recognized by writers of tourist commentary, one of whom described this hotel as a “fantastical construction of a fabulous Eastern taste” such that “in admiring it . . . one is moved by one’s imagination to attempt to discover the key to it, as in a labyrinth”<sup>19</sup> (figure 14.1).

The Uaddan’s complex assembly of exterior forms and interior spaces was thus simultaneously a contextual response to the city of Tripoli and a reflection of tourist demands to experience the unfamiliar. It was also a product of the program of providing luxury accommodation, which combined the hotel proper with a restaurant, bar, theater, party rooms, tennis courts, Roman and Turkish baths, and a gaming casino. The Uaddan’s composite nature was reinforced through the tactic of expressing each of these elements, like the baths and casino, as a separate volume or space. This gesture is held together through the use of uniform materials on the exterior—something that consciously recalls the Mediterranean intonation of the indigenous architecture of Amalfi or Capri—and through the



**Figure 14.1** Florestano Di Fausto, Uaddan Hotel and Casino, Tripoli, 1935. View from seafront. Reprinted with permission from the Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection—Fondazione Regionale Cristoforo Colombo, Genoa, Italy.

Source: The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection—Fondazione Regionale Cristoforo Colombo, Genoa, Italy, Archivio Fotografico *Azione Coloniale*, Reparto I, Busta 15B, “Tripolitania: Alberghi.”

continuous horizontal reference provided by the terrace, which acts as a base for the hotel wing, theater, restaurant, and casino. The hotel-casino's exterior appearance is ultimately that of an eclectic assembly of independent buildings that, while clearly linked to their immediate site, create their own self-contained context. The analogy between this approach and the region's indigenous architecture is especially strong with regard to its monumental buildings, such as the Mosque of Sidi Darghut, which, like most of Tripoli's religious architecture, was a composite of independent elements bearing traces of successive additions and restorations.<sup>20</sup>

The variable character of the Uaddan's exterior is more clearly expressed on its interior. Designed by Di Fausto in collaboration with Stefano Gatti-Casazza, each major component was given an independent expression. This is apparent in the contrast between the theater's rich polished wood surfaces—which directly follow urban metropolitan precedents—and the luminous “Mediterranean” atmosphere of the casino—which was said to be inspired by the facilities in San Remo.<sup>21</sup> The interior's composite nature is similarly expressed in the atrium of the bath complex, which contained both Roman and Turkish bath facilities. The architects reconciled the two linguistic references by combining Roman mosaic floor patterns with an architectural frame that abstractly reinterprets Ottoman precedents.<sup>22</sup> Although consistent with Di Fausto's writings on the nature of a Mediterranean architecture—which implied a synthetic process of assimilation of references to a particular context—the Uaddan pursued that eclecticism to its breaking point. It created an interior where the tourist could comfortably explore a variety of sensations without ever leaving the hotel. This phenomenon best simulates the space of colonial literature, where—in a search for the experience of the exotic—the reader engages with a constantly changing series of encounters with unfamiliar situations and cultures. But in providing luxury accommodation for a wealthy tourist clientele, and creating appropriate settings for its activities, this hotel had itself become the space of tourism—a self-contained interior world that allowed the traveler to escape the colonies for even more distant times and locations.

A second group of ETAL hotels, which were also designed by Di Fausto, followed a tourist itinerary from Tripoli to Ghadames—a route that had been understood since Giuseppe Volpi's Governorship (1921–1925) as one of the most desirable and characteristic tourist experiences in the Tripolitanian region.<sup>23</sup> This interest was linked to the fact that Ghadames had been a crucial stopping point along the caravan routes that linked the Sudan to Tripoli and the Mediterranean. This fascination was fueled by a combination of literary speculation and popular reportage that reached a mass audience. By the 1930s, the image of Libya's interior had been

constructed as a mysterious and timeless repository of the most primitive origins of the indigenous culture. These literary representations were parallel to and supported by a considerable body of research in anthropology and ethnography.<sup>24</sup> The most significant of these studies was produced by Emilio Scarin, a professor from the University of Florence who published the book *L'insediamento umano nella Libia occidentale* (Human Settlement in Western Libya) in 1940. A culmination of research that he had presented at the first Congress of Colonial Studies of 1931, this publication provides detailed documentation on patterns of dwelling in western Libya.<sup>25</sup> Notably, the objects of interest to researchers like Scarin—such as the Berber castle in Nalut and the indigenous housing of Ghadames—were also important elements of the tourist itinerary of this region. As a consequence, the activities of anthropologists and ethnographers were often directly grafted into tourist related representations—such as the identification, classification, and localization of different racial groups within the local populations. The assumptions underlying these disciplines (the presumed organic relationship between so-called primitive societies and their cultural artifacts) and even their scientific method (that these cultures should be viewed in a manner that is undisturbed by modern influences) also became determining factors for tourist experience.

With Balbo's Governorship and the creation of the ETAL, the route from Tripoli to Ghadames became part of a coordinated tourist system. Under the Municipality of Tripoli's direction, the construction of the hotels in Jefren and Nalut and the substantial renovation of the hotel in Ghadames were undertaken. Not only had these hotels been completed by late 1935, but the ETAL had initiated weekly excursions to Ghadames using Saharan motor coaches—a service prominently featured in their publicity material.<sup>26</sup> Di Fausto's sub-Saharan hotels in Jefren, Nalut, and Ghadames were thus an integral part of a continuous experience. This experience was characterized in the tourist literature as providing an efficient and comfortable means of travel supported by hotels that, in addition to being carefully contextualized with their site and the local architecture, provided "the most comfortable hospitality."<sup>27</sup> The ETAL's publicity material also suggests that this route could furnish insights into the traditional architecture of this region like the troglodyte houses of the Jabal region and the history and customs of its Arab and Berber populations. This itinerary had thus become a curious hybrid of scientific expedition and modern tourist excursion.<sup>28</sup>

The fusion of scientific research and tourist experience was most compellingly conveyed in the final hotel along this route—the 'Ain al-Fras Hotel in Ghadames, built in 1935. Designed by Di Fausto and Gatti-Casazza, this hotel responds quite directly to the city's historic

fabric—a complex labyrinth of narrow passages, covered courtyards, and terraces shaped by dense walled structures. In response to this pattern, the hotel is comprised of a massive exterior wall behind which is located a series of courtyard spaces. Forming one edge of a luxuriant piazza in front of one of the old city's main gates, this project establishes a metonymic relationship to its oasis setting. This quality is particularly well expressed in the central portico where columns shaped like the trunks of palm trees mingle with those of its own verdant landscape. This literal incorporation of an element of landscape into architecture is an indication of the fact that with the 'Ain al-Fras Hotel, the appropriation of local references was quite direct. Indeed, the arcaded wings that flank the building's central body have an unmistakable similarity to the detailed articulation of passageways and open spaces in the old city. This mimetic relationship can also be seen in the hotel's interior spaces, whose timber ceilings, rich wall coverings, and minimal use of furnishings was intended to simulate the Ghadames' houses<sup>29</sup> (figure 14.2).

While Di Fausto's direct appropriation of the town's forms can be understood as a manifestation of his Mediterranean vision—which calls



**Figure 14.2** Florestano Di Fausto, 'Ain al-Fras Hotel, Ghadames, 1935. View of main façade and landscape. Reprinted with permission from the Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection—Fondazione Regionale Cristoforo Colombo, Genoa, Italy.

Source: Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection—Fondazione Regionale Cristoforo Colombo, Genoa, Italy, Archivio Fotografico *Azione Coloniale*, Reparto I, Busta 15B, "Tripolitania: Alberghi."

for a careful and measured process of design in response to local building traditions—this project should also be understood in relation to its function within the tourist panorama. By directly incorporating indigenous forms, Di Fausto created a seamless relationship between this building and the local architecture—something that for the tourist would have blurred the distinction between the hotel and its historical setting. Moreover, due to its siting just outside one of the town's main gates, it acted as an introduction to the experience of Ghadames. The use of local forms in this project was part of a self-conscious staging of the image and patterns of living of Ghadames that a tourist could experience comfortably—something that was enhanced by the fact that the hotel staff were dressed in local costume. In so closely replicating the town's material culture, the 'Ain al-Fras Hotel became its more perfect replacement. Indeed, it may have no longer been necessary to travel to Ghadames, to see the actual town.

Di Fausto's hotel in Ghadames represents a crisis in the status of architecture, and in its relationship to its context. While the intention of his approach was to create a Mediterranean identity for a contemporary colonial architecture, the implications are quite different. The Hotel so closely imitates the identity of the traditional forms of Ghadames that it calls into question the line between restoration and innovation and, in the exactness of their reproduction, challenges the authenticity of these historical forms. However, rather than consider this a fundamentally antimodern approach, when looking at this project it is quite clear that it is the opposite. The 'Ain al-Fras Hotel is the logical outcome of the modern tourist demand for historical authenticity. It is related to (and a product of) contemporary scientific research into the form and the culture of the Berber people of this region—a so-called primitive culture which held a particular fascination for a tourist audience.<sup>30</sup> In so carefully reenacting the forms of Ghadames in a manner that resembles a work of historic preservation, this project was both tourist facility and ethnographic museum, where the Libyans and their culture could be experienced outside of the passage of time.

### Notes

The arguments presented in this essay were developed in my Ph.D. dissertation entitled "Mediterraneità and Modernità. Architecture and Culture during the Period of Italian Colonization of North Africa" (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001). My thanks go to my main advisor Mark Jarzombek and to Sibel Bozdoğan, under whose direction this work was originally presented at the annual conference of the Middle Eastern Studies Association in Chicago in December

1998. This work was then revised for its presentation at the annual conference of the College Art Association in New York in February 2000.

1. Florestano Di Fausto, "Visione mediterranea della mia architettura," *Libia* 1, no. 9 (December 1937): 16.
2. *Ibid.*, 17–18.
3. Richard Etlin, *Modernism in Italian Architecture, 1890–1940* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 134–139.
4. Maurizio Rava, "Dobbiamo rispettare il carattere dell'edilizia tripolina," *L'oltremare* 3, no. 11 (1929): 458–464; and Carlo Enrico Rava, "Di un' architettura coloniale moderna, parte prima e seconda," *Domus* 41, 42 (1931): 39–43, 89; 32–36. The first of these essays was originally submitted by Maurizio Rava, father of Carlo Enrico and General Secretary of Tripolitania, to the Municipality of Tripoli as a report on the future development of this city. For a discussion of the authorship of this first essay, see Maria G. Fuller, "Colonizing Constructions: Italian Architecture, Urban Planning and the Creation of Modern Society in the Colonies, 1869–1943" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1994), 180.
5. Claudio G. Segrè, *Fourth Shore. The Italian Colonization of Libya* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 102–111.
6. Italo Balbo, "La politica sociale fascista verso gli arabi della Libia," in *Convegno di scienze morali e storiche. 4–11 ottobre 1938-XVI. Tema: l'Africa. Vol. 1, 733–749* (Rome: Reale Accademia d'Italia, 1939); Guglielmo Quadrotta, "Sviluppo e realizzazioni dell'artigianato in Libia," *Rassegna economica dell'Africa Italiana* 25, no. 7 (1937): 952–967.
7. A. Giovannangeli, "Cenni sull'attività municipale di Tripoli," in *Viaggio del Duce in Libia per l'inaugurazione della litoranea* (n.p., 1937), 1–13; Giacomo Caputo, "L'archeologia in Libia," in *Viaggio del Duce in Libia per l'inaugurazione della litoranea* (n.p., 1937), 26.
8. These changes included increasing both the number and frequency of maritime connections, improving air travel, and augmenting automobile and bus transportation. Luigi V. Bertarelli, *Guida d'Italia del Touring Club Italiano. Possedimenti e colonie* (Milan: Touring Club Italiano, 1929); and Luigi V. Bertarelli, *Guida d'Italia del Touring Club Italiano. Libia* (Milan: Touring Club Italiano, 1937).
9. Angelo Piccioli, "La Fiera di Tripoli," *Annali dell'Africa Italiana* 1, no. 2 (1938): 497–566. Also see the chapter by Krystyna von Henneberg in this volume.
10. Although the Balbo administration organized these cultural displays to enhance tourism, in 1935 it placed all public religious ceremonies under strict control. See "Decreto che vieta in Libia cerimonie biasimevoli di alcune confraternite religiose musulmane," Benghazi, June 16, 1935. Archivio Storico Diplomatico, Ministero degli Affari Esteri, ASMAI, Fondo Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, vol. 2, *posizione* 150/39, *fascicolo* 174.
11. Eros Vicari, "L'Ente turistico ed alberghiero della Libia (E.T.A.L.)," *Annali dell'Africa Italiana* 5, no. 4 (1942): 955–975.

12. Ente Turistico ed Alberghiero della Libia, "Realizzazioni fasciste. Gli sviluppi del turismo libico," (n.d.), 2. ASMAI, Fondo Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, vol. 5, *pacco 5, fascicolo 18*.
13. Vicari, "L'Ente Turistico ed Alberghiero della Libia," 971. The calculated nature of the performances at the Arab Café is underscored by the fact that the ETAL created a music school to train entertainers for this facility.
14. Giuseppe Bucciante, "Lo sviluppo edilizio della Libia," in *Viaggio del Duce in Libia per l'inaugurazione della litoranea* (n.p., 1937), 4–5.
15. As director of the Technical Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 1922 and 1932, Di Fausto was responsible for the construction or transformation of numerous foreign embassies, government offices and cultural institutes. Giuseppe Miano, "Florestano Di Fausto," in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 40, 1–5 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1991).
16. C. Brunelli, "L'organizzazione turistica della Libia," *Rassegna economica delle colonie* 25, no. 3 (1937): 328.
17. Muhammad Warfelli, "The Old City of Tripoli," in *Art and Archeology Research Papers*, 2–18 (Tripoli: Department of Antiquities, 1976).
18. Giovanna Tomasello, *La letteratura coloniale italiana dalle avanguardie al fascismo* (Palermo: Sellerio Editore, 1984), 70.
19. Vicari, "L'Ente turistico ed alberghiero della Libia," 965.
20. Fabrizio M. Apollonj, "L'architettura araba della Libia," *Rassegna di architettura* 9, no. 12 (1937): 455–462; Warfelli, "The Old City of Tripoli," 8–9.
21. Bucciante, "Lo sviluppo edilizio della Libia," 7.
22. Although several sources refer to the Uaddan as having both Roman and Turkish baths, Krystyna von Henneberg notes that this designation was changed in the latter 1930s for political reasons to simply Roman baths: Krystyna von Henneberg, "The Construction of Fascist Libya: Modern Colonial Architecture and Urban Planning in Italian North Africa (1922–1943)" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1996), 265.
23. The hotels designed by Di Fausto were the Uaddan and Mehari in Tripoli, both from 1935, and the Rumia in Jefren (1934), the Nalut (1935), and the renovated 'Ain al-Fras in Ghadames (1935).
24. Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia. Dal fascismo a Gheddafi* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1991), 271–278.
25. Emilio Scarin, *L'insediamento umano nella Libia occidentale* (Verona: Mondadori, 1940).
26. Ente Turistico ed Alberghiero della Libia, *La Libia* (Milan: F. Milani, 1936), 16–17.
27. Ente Turistico ed Alberghiero della Libia, *Itinerario Tripoli-Gadames* (Milan: Tipo-Litografia Turati Lombardi, 1938), 29.
28. One example is the so-called troglodyte house—a "primitive" form of dwelling that held a particular fascination both for scientific researchers and tourists. See Scarin, *L'insediamento umano nella Libia occidentale*, 144–159; and Ente Turistico ed Alberghiero della Libia, *Itinerario Tripoli-Gadames*, 14.
29. Bucciante suggests that the hotel "offers all of the conveniences of a modern tourist establishment, giving the traveler the sense of finding himself in an

environment of semidarkness, coolness and meditation that is typical of houses in Ghadames”: Bucciante, “Lo sviluppo edilizio della Libia,” 16.

30. The Italians' interest in the Berbers stemmed from the fact that their culture pre-existed the Arab invasion of this region and they were reluctant converts to Islam. The perceived primitivism of their culture was also of considerable interest, both to a tourist audience and for scientific researchers. Ente Turistico ed Alberghiero della Libia, *Itinerario Tripoli-Gadames*, 12–14, 26–28, 36–40, 41–42.

# The Italian Colonial Cinema: Agendas and Audiences

*Ruth Ben-Ghiat*

Since the early 1990s, research on European colonialism has highlighted the ways that states have relied on the exercise of cultural technologies to govern native populations and make imperial territories serve larger projects of modernization and nation-building.<sup>1</sup> The cinema must be counted among these cultural technologies, and both democracies and dictatorships employed it to facilitate imperialist projects of charting and policing territories, races, and national and social identities.<sup>2</sup> The relationship of cinema and colonialism thus encompasses not only the making of films on colonial themes but allows us to explore the importance of the category of the visual within colonial culture, the ways that colonial images legitimized metropolitan discourses about class, nation, and gender, and how cinematic representations helped to shape popular and ethnographic conceptions of the primitive.<sup>3</sup>

Building on recent work in film studies and visual culture that historicizes spectatorship and attends to the corporeal and emotional dimensions of visual experience, this essay approaches Italian colonial cinema as a means of exploring colonialism's social realities as well as its aesthetics and ideology.<sup>4</sup> I argue that by reconstructing the circumstances of film production and consumption, we can gain insight into the kinds of daily engagements experienced by colonizers and the colonized.<sup>5</sup> "Visual representation" is conceived of here as a process that might allow us to better understand the ongoing tensions, miscommunications, and points of encounter that marked Italian and African experiences of colonialism. My focus is accordingly less colonial films themselves than the interactions between Italians and Africans that surrounded their production and consumption. At the

broadest level, such an approach can shed light on how the cinema contributed to colonial cultural projects of control “on the ground,” and suggests how the realm of culture can be brought to bear on the task of understanding what Ann Laura Stoler and Karen Strassler have termed colonialism’s “emotional economy of the everyday.”<sup>6</sup>

From the start of the dictatorship, the Italian fascists accorded great importance to the cinema as an agent of conquest and mass regimentation. One of many technologies of modernity through which the regime meant to intimidate and govern, it was also “the regime’s strongest weapon” for its capacities to entertain and persuade.<sup>7</sup> The invasion of Ethiopia placed new demands on the film industry to be the “eye of the war,” and substantial state funding, as well as Italian film professionals’ enthusiasm for the colonial war, resulted in dozens of feature and documentary movies on the imperial enterprise. Critics and officials identified three distinct audiences for these new films: Italians, Africans, and the international market. First, colonial movies were to inculcate an “imperial and racial consciousness” that would encourage Italians to migrate to Africa and regulate their behavior once they were there.<sup>8</sup> Second, cinema figured heavily in fascist thinking about how to use cultural technologies to dominate and cultivate the indigenous populations. Third, at a time when Italy faced sanctions from the League of Nations, it was hoped that films that showed the beneficial effects of Italian colonization in Africa would improve the regime’s international standing.

The ambitions officials and cineastes harbored for colonial films led to an intensification of ongoing discussions within the fascist press about how to make movies that would both educate and entertain. These debates revealed a heightened consciousness of the potential impact of the visual component of film on a diversified audience and a strong desire to exploit the particular visual properties of the Italian colonies. As one critic wrote in the review *Lo schermo*, “authentic” and “unmediated” coverage of “little known lands, unusual and diverse races [and] undiscovered customs” would attract viewers and help to market the colonies as tourist and resettlement destinations.<sup>9</sup> This showcasing of the exotic extended to Africa’s human as well as natural resources. The filmmaker Romolo Marcellini clearly had competition with Hollywood films in mind when he urged his peers to capitalize on the novelty East Africans would represent for Western viewers who were familiar primarily with Harlem blacks. Citing as an example the photogenic qualities of the Somalis’ “white turbans” and “strong and slender bodies,” Marcellini exulted that “we have a new, exclusive, and unconventional black product to launch on the market.” Many feature films on colonial themes thus featured documentary footage of native rituals or oppositely staged re-creations of local customs.<sup>10</sup>

The interest in the visual as a vehicle for communicating authenticity links colonial films to other aspects of a colonial culture founded on an ethos of possession and display. Ethnographic missions to the colonies, which were sponsored by public and private entities such as the Ministry of Italian Africa and the Italian Geographic Society, produced archives of still and moving images that were diffused to the general public through “ethnographic atlases,” photo essays, and through exhibitions such as the 1940 *Mostra delle terre d’oltremare* (Exhibition of Overseas Territories), which included projections of both documentary and feature films.<sup>11</sup> Yet the cinema’s illusions of proximity and reality gave it an experiential dimension that made films the most prized vehicles of visual documentation and mass persuasion. As one critic suggested in the review *Cinema*, “the screen can expose to the eyes life in those faraway lands as it unfolds freely and integrally with a concreteness that is unattainable by the writer or the ethnographic collector.”<sup>12</sup>

Still, the cinema’s limitations as a carrier of colonial propaganda lay in part in this very recourse to such “reality effects.” As visual anthropologists and film scholars have noted, the “uncontrolled visual field” present in documentary footage and in films shot on location can distract audiences from a movie’s central narrative or lead them to interpret other cultures in ways that conflict with the filmmaker’s designs. In the words of Marc Ferro, this visual “overflow” can cause spectators to relate to “objects and gestures, attitudes and social behaviors, [in ways] that often elude the intention of the director.”<sup>13</sup> The cinema’s capacities to ignite the senses, which were maximized by the exotica and use of panoramic cinematography in colonial films, can also be a liability. According to David MacDougall, this sensory appeal can create “psychological and somatic forms of intersubjectivity between viewer and social actor” that renders films unreliable as instruments of collective propaganda.<sup>14</sup>

The allure of the visual in colonial films might have overwhelmed or undermined their political messages in other ways as well. Movies such as *Sotto la croce del Sud* (Guido Brignone, 1938) inveighed against miscegenation but included suggestive images of African men and women.<sup>15</sup> The glamorous decors and behaviors that were meant to connote metropolitan decadence in many colonial films might have proved more compelling to Hollywood-habituated viewers than the desert, however suggestively the sand might have been shot. Such internal contradictions and tensions within colonial films might have limited or disrupted the processes of identification with the film’s intended master narratives among Italian female spectators in particular. Colonial films’ heavily homosocial and militarized ethos may have lessened their appeal for women viewers; if their charismatic male stars ignited private fantasies,

so too might have the actions and appearances of their emancipated and exotic, if vilified, female leads.<sup>16</sup>

As Salvatore Ambrosino has shown in his pathbreaking article on the subject, films were a boom business in Italian Africa. By March 1939, there were forty cinemas in Ethiopia with a total of thirty thousand seats; by 1940, this number had grown to fifty-five cinemas with sixty thousand posts. The Supercinema Teatro Italia in Addis Ababa held 1,200 people alone (figure 15.1) and by 1940 plans were under way for structures that



**Figure 15.1** Supercinema Teatro Italia, Addis Ababa, late 1930s. Reprinted with permission of the Archivio Fotografico, Istituto LUCE, Rome.

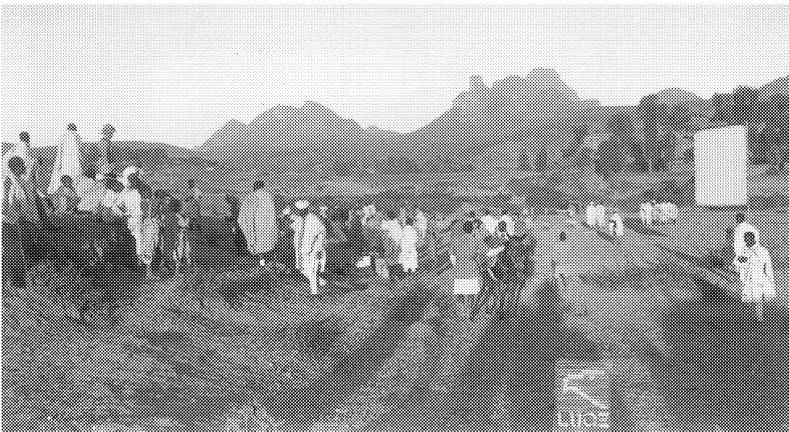
held up to 2,400 people.<sup>17</sup> Racial politics dictated separate seating areas for Italians and Africans, and as the number of theatres grew, colonizers and colonized increasingly saw films in separate venues, although local notables had places reserved for them in Italian cinemas. Elaborate colonial venues such as the Imperial Cinema which opened in 1938 in Aseb boasted twin indigenous and “national” cinemas separated by a corridor of shops and a veranda bar.<sup>18</sup> Those living outside of cities depended on open-air projections provided by state-funded traveling cinema cars. These were introduced into Libya in the late 1920s and became a common sight in the other colonies after 1936.<sup>19</sup>

Despite this outlay of resources, many factors hindered the regime’s attempts to use film as a weapon of fascist propaganda in the colonies. First, like the British in India, the Italians lacked adequate venues for sound film viewing, and spotty film distribution channels meant that demand often exceeded supply. Second, while the popularity and cost-effectiveness of American films presented problems for all colonial administrations, there was no native film industry in East Africa (as there was in India) to offset American influences, and the smaller size of the Italian industry meant that the screen time given to American and other foreign films was much greater than in French and British territories. Indeed, fewer “national” films were seen in the colonies than at home: in 1938, Asmara filmgoers saw sixty-eight American, eleven Italian, eight French, and six German films, whereas Roman spectators saw twenty-eight American, thirteen Italian, two French, and two German films.<sup>20</sup>

Despite high ticket prices and a lack of live interpreters and subtitles, the cinema was also enormously popular among African viewers during the Italian occupation. African-only venues such as the Benadir in Modagishu often sold out up to 1,500 seats, and traveling cinema screenings attracted an audience of thousands that ranged from shepherds, to priests, to local notables.<sup>21</sup> In the absence of studies on the viewing experiences of African filmgoers during the colonial era, we can draw on recent works on spectatorship in colonial and postcolonial India and Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) that argue for investigations that are both synchronic and diachronic in nature. As Ravi Vasudevan has written, the reception of films not only proceeds through “symbolic transactions of offscreen identity and onscreen narrative” but also through the filter of “earlier practices of narration and many points of cultural institution and investment.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, we must consider not only those factors that influence the immediate viewing context (cultural, religious, or political sensibilities, and linguistic abilities), but also the indigenous cultural, visual, and narrative traditions that individuals bring with them to the experience of watching films.

In the Italian territories, as in other colonial contexts, the physical conditions of cinema spectatorship held a special significance. Not only did seating arrangements encode racial hierarchies, but the cinematic and projection apparatus, which was much in evidence in both open-air and indoor screenings, was itself an integral part of a spectacle designed to intimidate native viewers. The power of the movie camera to act as a “battleship on wheels,” creating images that would “trample” and disarm the credulous native spectator, was a recurrent theme in Italian colonial culture. Thus did Italian commentators believe that the “demonstration of white superiority” inherent in the display of cinematic technology would discourage physical rebellion and psychological resistance.<sup>23</sup> In the case of outdoor screenings, the setting up of the projection equipment, which began while it was still light, marked the start of the event, and the sounds of the generator, the size of the screen, and, after dusk, the headlights of the truck all played an integral part in the cinematic experience (figures 15.2 and 15.3). Thus an Italian critic who lauded “cinema’s miraculous power to persuade” after attending an outdoor evening showing in Adwa was referring not just to the Istituto LUCE documentaries on the program but also to the “show” of “the white screen and the luminous machine on the piazza . . . and before them the good submissive Tigrinya.”<sup>24</sup>

The issue of the reception of Italian colonial films among the colonized proved more vexing for fascist critics and functionaries. Both film and colonial journals repeatedly addressed the issue of what Italians should show their colonial subjects and worried about cinema’s potential “boomerang” effects among African viewers.<sup>25</sup> The prestige anxieties that



**Figure 15.2** Set-up of outdoor film screening, Adwa, 1937. Reprinted with permission of the Archivio Fotografico, Istituto LUCE, Rome.



**Figure 15.3** Outdoor film screening, Ethiopia, 1937. Reprinted with permission of the Archivio Fotografico, Istituto LUCE, Rome.

permeate these articles hint at the insecure base of Italian colonial power, especially in the countryside, and found expression in nervousness about control over audience reactions to cinematic representations. Commentators ranging from Maurizio Rava to Vittorio Mussolini counseled against showing gangsters, “loose women,” drunkenness, and other images that would compromise Italian authority by showing whites in a bad light. Others aired fears about the power of images to foster

imitation, as when an Italian colonel based in Adigrat complained to the Army Command that *askari* soldiers and Eritrean civilians had had a lively response to the Risorgimento-themed movie *1860* (Blasetti, 1934) which showed Italians being taken prisoner by foreign troops.<sup>26</sup>

Such concerns reflected in part the results of Italian observations of Africans as they watched Italian films. Both journalists and critics noted that transcultural differences mediated and often obstructed the reception of intended meanings of feature films among African spectators. Writing in tones that ranged from amusement to dismay, they reported that Italian conceptions of the dramatic and the comedic had little validity in Africa; films that featured heroic deaths and love scenes met with open derision, and often the audience rooted for the “wrong” protagonists. Moreover, the entertainment provided by Italian films was often at the Italians’ expense, with sentimental colonial dramas bringing the most laughter and criticism. This situation presented the Italians with a dilemma. With the mechanisms of audience identification jammed or subverted, films would be ineffectual agents of collective change. Yet calls for feature productions made specially for indigenous audiences were dismissed as too expensive, and the Ministry of Italian Africa reached an agreement with the Istituto LUCE to produce documentaries in Africa for Africans only in 1938.<sup>27</sup>

To be sure, some of these “misreadings” were probably the fruit of linguistic problems, since the Italians did not subtitle their films and rarely provided simultaneous oral translations. Charles Ambler has argued in a study of the reception of Hollywood movies among African workers in Northern Rhodesia that the visual aspects of film take on greater importance when spectators cannot understand filmic dialogue. Bodily movements, facial expressions, and action sequences are experienced less according to any narrative logic than as “a disconnected series of exotic, exciting, and frighteningly pleasurable images and special effects.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, an old colonial hand noted in the review *Cinema* that in Somalia and Eritrea, where the local populations had had more exposure to the Italian language and to cinema, public comments attended more to the story line, while in Ethiopia, audiences reacted as much to the technological and visual aspects. Throughout the colonies, though, Africans had a much more vivid emotional and physical relationship than Europeans to the events depicted on screen. While one commentator admired the “authenticity” of such reactions, noting that Africans “give free expression to those ‘base’ sentiments of human nature that we repress,” the spectacle of uncontrolled outbursts by groups of mostly male African spectators made most Italians uncomfortable.<sup>29</sup>

Such audience laughter was apparently never greater than when Africans in the Italian territories saw themselves on screen. This happened frequently,

since most commercial colonial films included parts for indigenous peoples that ranged from fleeting appearances as one of a mass of soldiers to named characters, most often head servants or *askari* troop leaders, who had bilingual speaking parts and diegetic relevance as ideal colonial subjects and translators of colonial authority. Yet African actors had a performative value within fascist colonial culture that transcended the specific roles they played. Their direction by the cinematic apparatus stood in for a larger putative domestication of the indigenous by Mussolini and his technologically advanced regime. "Mussolini wants to know you. This be his faraway eye," is how the director Romolo Marcellini characterized the function of the movie camera to the locals he wished to film.<sup>30</sup> Italians also hoped that African audiences might imitate such on-screen examples of cooperation with colonial authority.<sup>31</sup> Local responses to both the production and screening of films such as Marcellini's *Sentinelle di bronzo*, which featured hundreds of Africans, did not conform to this thinking. Not only did audiences laugh at Italian images of themselves, but, as one director of production noted, the locals who were hired as guides and assistants proved to be "severe critics and controllers with regard to ethnographic fidelity."<sup>32</sup> Such attempts by colonized peoples to manage their representations, which Mary Louise Pratt has termed "autoethnographies," deserve further study, as does the entire culture of film production in the colonies.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, audience laughter at these and other Western representations might easily be seen as a form of resistance. Historians and anthropologists have made us aware of the role that humor and caricature can play in the quotidian work of disarming or simply bearing with an oppressive power.<sup>34</sup> Although no firm conclusions can be drawn on the basis of existing evidence, one can speculate that the laughter of the colonized might have been disruptive at several levels. It upended the meanings of film narratives, neutralizing them as agents of fascist indoctrination, and rebuked attempts to use movies as agents of Italian prestige. It also refuted colonial visions of Africans as overcome by and surrendering to a new cultural technology. Rather, through their shouted responses and laughter to film projections, African spectators became the authors of a sort of parallel soundtrack whose audience was Italians, who in turn experienced the film through the screen of such mockery. I do not want here to sketch an overly schematic picture of colonial relations, one that would see resistance in every audience comment and which would exclude the possibility of any identification with the colonizers' culture.<sup>35</sup> Delight and excitement certainly motivated many audience exclamations, and the socializing between Italians and Africans occasioned by film showings mirrored that of larger colonial society. Yet such reactions can also come under the rubric

of what Manthia Diawara has called “resisting spectatorship,” since they short-circuited the transmission of ideologies and images that reflected the colonizers’ worldview.<sup>36</sup> In this regard, it is telling that one Italian critic writes of attending mixed-race screenings in which Ethiopian notables stifled their laughter with their hands or their robes: such gestures only highlight the subversive significance of laughing at rather than with the colonizer.<sup>37</sup>

In presenting film viewing as a dynamic and embodied activity, this essay builds on newer research on spectatorship and visual experience that has only just begun to extend to the colonial arena. At the broadest level, it engages with the question of how the spaces and practices of culture contributed to the social fabrics and psychological climates of Italian colonial society. Representation, as conceived of in this chapter, is a process that originates and ends with human encounters: taking and posing for photographs, making and viewing films form part of a history of lived moments and meetings between Africans and Italians that merits greater investigation.

### Notes

1. See on this Nicholas B. Dirks, ed., *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
2. See Prem Chowdhry, *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); David Slavin, *Colonial Cinema and Imperial France (1919–39)* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, “Envisioning Modernity: Desire and Discipline in the Italian Fascist Film,” *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 1 (1996): 127–144; Ella Shohat, “Imagining Terra Incognita: The Disciplinary Gaze of Empire,” *Public Culture* 3, no. 2 (1991): 41–70.
3. Studies that touch on these issues include Assenka Oksiloff, *Picturing the Primitive: Visual Culture, Ethnography, and Early German Cinema* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Alison Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference. Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn of the Century Visual Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Christopher Faulkner, “Affective Identities: French National Cinema and the 1930s,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 3, no. 2 (1994): 3–29; Robert Stam and Louise Spencer, “Colonialism, Racism, and Representation: An Introduction,” *Screen* 23 (1983): 4–20; Hamid Naficy and Teshome Gabriel, eds., *Otherness and the Media: The Ethnography of the Imagined and the Imaged* (Langhorne, PA: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1993); Robin Pickering-Iazzi, “Structures of Feminine Fantasy and Italian Empire Building, 1930–1940,” *Italica* 77, no. 3 (2000): 400–417.

4. On the visual culture of Italian colonialism, see the essays in Nicola Labanca, ed., *L'Africa in vetrina. Storie di musei e di esposizioni coloniali in Italia* (Paese, Treviso: Pagus, 1992). On Italian colonial film, see Jean Gili and Gianpiero Brunetta, *L'ora africana nel cinema italiano* (Trent: La Grafica, 1990); James Hay, *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 181–200.
5. See Jessica Dubow, “From a View on the World to a Point of View in It: Rethinking Sight, Space, and the Colonial Subject,” *Interventions* 2, no. 1 (2000): 87–102; Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1992); Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1993). For a collection of newer approaches to spectatorship, see the essays in Linda Williams, ed., *Viewing Positions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995).
6. Ann Laura Stoler and Karen Strassler, “Castings for the Colonial: Memory Work in ‘New Order’ Java,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, no. 1 (2000): 4–48, 6.
7. On the place of cinema within fascist strategies of mass reeducation, see Jacqueline Reich and Piero Garofalo, eds., *Re-Viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922–1943* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Hay, *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy*; and Marcia Landy, *Fascism in Film. The Italian Commercial Cinema, 1930–1943* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).
8. Quotation from Giuseppe Lombrassa, “Il senno dei tigrini,” *Lo schermo* (November 1935); also see “Il cinema dell’Impero,” *Lo schermo* (June 1936).
9. Ferbo, “Il film coloniale,” *Lo schermo* (October 1937).
10. Romolo Marcellini, “I nostri negri,” *Lo schermo* (October 1936).
11. See Barbara Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi. Antropologia, discorso giuridico e politiche sessuali interrazziali nella colonia Eritrea 1890–1941* (Naples: Liguori, 1998); Gianni Dore, *Antropologia e colonialismo italiano* (Bologna: Miscellanea, 1996); Francesco Surdich, *L'esplorazione italiana dell' Africa* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1992); and David Atkinson's chapter in the present volume. On the Exhibition of Overseas Territories, see Gianni Dore, “Ideologia coloniale e senso comune etnografico nella Mostra delle Terre d’Oltremare,” in Labanca, *L'Africa in vetrina*, 47–65.
12. Franco Cappelletti, “Attori primitivi,” *Cinema* (August 25, 1939); also Raffaele Corso, “Conoscenze etnografiche dell'impero,” *Africa Italiana* (May 1939).
13. The phrase “uncontrolled visual field” is from David MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 69; Marc Ferro, “The Fiction Film and Historical Analysis,” in *The Historian and Film*, ed. Paul Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 81. See also Leslie Devereux and Roger Hillman, eds., *Fields of Vision. Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology, and Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Peter Ian Crawford and David Turton, eds., *Film as Ethnography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); and Jay Ruby,

- Picturing Culture. Explorations of Film and Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
14. MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema*, 262.
  15. On this film see Robin Pickering-Iazzi, "Ways of Looking in Black and White: Female Spectatorship and the Miscege-national Body in *Sotto la Croce del Sud*," in *Re-Viewing Fascism*, ed. Reich and Garofalo, 194–222; Ben-Ghiat, "Envisioning Modernity," 135–142; and Marcia Landy, *The Folklore of Consensus. Theatricality in the Italian Cinema, 1930–1943* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 197–200.
  16. For such contradictions within Italian fascist colonial films, see Ben-Ghiat, "Envisioning Modernity"; and the essays by Robin Pickering-Iazzi, Giorgio Bertellini, and Cecilia Boggio in *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*, ed. Patrizia Palumbo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). On film stars and their audiences in fascist Italy, see Stephen Gundle, "Film Stars and Society in Fascist Italy," in *Re-Viewing Fascism*, ed. Reich and Garofalo, 315–339; on female spectatorship more generally see Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1994).
  17. Salvatore Ambrosino, "Cinema e propaganda in Africa Orientale Italiana," *Ventesimo secolo* 1 (1990): 138–139. For programming and audiences at the "Cinque Maggio" theatre in Addis Ababa, see "Il cinema dei soldati in AOI," *Cinema* (June 1940).
  18. Notice of this cinema is given in *L'Azione coloniale* (September 29, 1938).
  19. Modeled on those used by the Soviets, cinema-cars had been used in Italy since 1927.
  20. Figures in Ambrosino, "Cinema e propaganda," 145.
  21. *Ibid.*
  22. Ravi Vasudevan, "Addressing the Spectator of a 'Third World' National Cinema: The Bombay 'Social' Film of the 1940s and 1950s," *Screen* 36, no. 4 (winter 1995): 324; Charles Ambler, "Popular Films and Colonial Audiences: The Movies in Northern Rhodesia," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 1 (February 2001): 89.
  23. Quotations from Vero Roberti, "Le corazzate con le rotelle" *Lo Schermo* (April 1938), and Ettore Mattia, "Pubblico etiopico," *Cinema* (March 25, 1940). Parallel views and practices are related in Ambler, "Popular Film and Colonial Audiences," 100.
  24. Lombrassa, "Il senno dei Tigrini."
  25. Maurizio Rava uses the term "boomerang" in "I popoli africani dinanzi allo schermo," *Cinema* (July 10, 1936).
  26. For these debates, see Rava, "I popoli africani"; Luigi Balestrazzi, "La cinematografia e l'Impero," *Rassegna sociale dell'Africa Italiana* 8 (1939); V. M. [Vittorio Mussolini], "Cinema per gli indigeni," *Cinema* (February 25, 1939); and Ambrosino, "Cinema e propaganda," 137, on complaints from colonial officials about the projection of *1860*.
  27. Ambrosino, "Cinema e propaganda," 136.

28. Ambler and Vasudevan conclude that spectatorship in situations of linguistic blockage resembles the visceral and interactive viewing modes of the silent screen's "cinema of attractions": Ambler, "Popular Films and Colonial Audiences," 89; Vasudevan, "Addressing the Spectator," 319; and, for the concept behind it, Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker (London: BFI Pub., 1990).
29. Mattia, "Pubblico etiopico"; Roberti, "Le corrazzate con le rotelle," from which the quote is taken.
30. Romolo Marcellini, "I nostri negri," *Lo schermo* (October 1936).
31. Mattia, "Pubblico etiopico"; Rava, "I popoli africani dinanzi allo schermo"; Franco Cappelletti, "Attori primitivi," *Cinema* (August 25, 1939).
32. Cappelletti, "Attori primitivi."
33. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 7.
34. See James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 1978); and Luisa Passerini, *Torino operaia e fascista* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982).
35. Ambler reports that audiences in Northern Rhodesia also laughed at "inappropriate" moments, but he contends that such reactions were less oppositional than derisory of the overwrought emotional displays of Hollywood melodramas: "Popular Films and Colonial Audiences," 98.
36. Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," *Screen* 29, no. 4 (Autumn 1988): 66–76, who also notes that the phenomenon of audience identification with negative media portrayals of them has not been fully explored; also John Fiske, "Movements of Television: Neither the Text nor the Audience," in *Remote Control: Television, Audience, and Cultural Power*, ed. Ellen Seiter et al., 56–78 (London: Routledge, 1989). Chowdry's *Empire Cinema* shows how such "resisting spectatorship" can transmute into public and violent opposition to colonialism.
37. Mattia, "Pubblico etiopico." Homi Bhabha's insightful analysis of mimicry as both "resemblance and menace" is relevant here: see his "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 125–133.

Part V

# **Legacies**

# The Obligations of Italy Toward Libya

*Angelo Del Boca*

## The Lack of Debate about Colonialism

The colonial period is perhaps the least known and most mystified part of Italian national history. Even today, more than fifty years after the signing of the Paris Peace Treaty that deprived Italy of her colonies forever, most Italians are not aware of what really happened between 1885 and 1943 in the four African regions that Italy conquered through force and maintained through terror. In Italian culture, there has been and continues to be an almost total repression of colonialism and its crimes, and genocides. Democratic and republican Italy still clings to myths and legends that were invented in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and which continue to be fiercely defended and lovingly cultivated by a vocal minority of nostalgics and revisionists. Almost every week, in the letters columns of the newspapers, someone exalts the civilizing mission of Italy in Africa and attacks serious and scrupulous historians who dare to reveal things at odds with such beliefs.

The survival of these myths and legends, which furnish a highly positive image of the Italian presence in Africa, is possible because in Italy, unlike in other countries with a colonial past (think of France after its “dirty war” in Algeria) there has never been a severe and definitive debate about the colonial phenomenon. Instead, some state institutions have posed obstacles to historical inquiry that have prevented the truth from emerging. The most colossal and wasteful such action in this regard was the fifty-volume work *L'Italia in Africa* (Italy in Africa), published by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>1</sup> Billed as an exhaustive examination and evaluation of Italian colonialism in East and North Africa, it is instead a skewed work that seems to highlight only the merits of Italian colonization and its “exceptionalism” and “difference” in

comparison to contemporary colonialisms. Perhaps this should not come as a surprise: fifteen out of twenty-four members of the Commission that oversaw the work were former colonial governors or high colonial functionaries, and the other nine Commission members were pro-colonial Africanist scholars. As the historian Giorgio Rochat has commented, most of the work is characterized by a superficial and generic reconstruction of events, by an ignorance of non-Italian sources, and by its authors' seeming unwillingness to utilize the archive of the defunct Ministry of Italian Africa, even though the Commission had exclusive access to its files.<sup>2</sup>

I do not wish to deny that the Italian presence in Africa had some positive aspects, nor do I wish to devalue the contributions of single Italians who worked in, and made sacrifices for, the colonies. But it is simply unjust and historically false to speak only of the positive, and to refuse to recognize or obscure the errors and crimes committed during the war, the extremely high prices paid by the colonized populations, the attempts to deprive these populations of their cultural and national identities, and, as happened in the Cyrenaica region of Libya, the campaign to annihilate them physically by deporting them and interning them in concentration camps that proved lethal for more than half of them.<sup>3</sup>

This lack of debate about colonialism, and the failure to condemn its most repugnant and brutal aspects, has impeded a critical revisitation of the colonial phenomenon. Thus over seventy years after the last colonial enterprise, middle-school students have no up-to-date texts on the subject; it is only at the university level that scientifically valid works are available for students whose teachers are willing to assign them. The unwillingness to condemn colonialism has served to absolve the thousands of Italians who committed crimes during the campaigns to conquer Libya (1922–1932), in the operations against the Somali warriors of the Mijjertein (1926–1928), in the war against the Ethiopian Empire (1935–1936), and during the failed attempt to annihilate the partisans of the Ethiopian resistance movement (1936–1941). From Mussolini to Pietro Badoglio, from Rodolfo Graziani to Emilio De Bono, none of those responsible for the African genocides met with punishment. Some have even been honored in postwar Italy, and have factious biographers to thank for their rehabilitation.

### Who's Afraid of 'Umar?

At times the best supporters of those who are advancing a *revanchiste* historiography that facilitates the repression of colonial guilt have been none other than Italian government authorities. The most emblematic case of this was the blocked distribution in Italy of the film *The Lion of the Desert* by the Syrian-American director Moustapha Akkad. The film tells the

story of ‘Umar al-Mukhtar, the head of the resistance in the Cyrenaica region of Libya, who was killed by hanging in the Soluch concentration camp on September 16, 1931 after a show trial. The film is not an artistic masterpiece, but it respects the historical truth and above all, it does justice to al-Mukhtar, who spent his entire life trying to defend his land.

Made in 1979 with Libyan funding, the film was released worldwide the following year—except in Italy, where it was vetoed by the Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs, Raffaele Costa, who judged it a work that “damaged the honor of the Italian army.”<sup>4</sup> After that the film was shown secretly in a few cinema clubs. Only in 1988 was it presented publicly, and then only at the Rimini Cinema Festival, which was devoted to colonial cinema that year.<sup>5</sup> Years later, the veto does not seem to have been removed. *The Lion of the Desert* thus remains banned, without a plausible explanation for this ban ever having been given to the Italian public. Of course, the motives for the veto are not hard to intuit. The government fears public exposure of one of the most shameful episodes of Italian colonialism: the hanging of an authentic patriot who was then seventy-four years old. Even the French, who were certainly not given to using velvet gloves in their colonies, did not put to death resisters like the Moroccan ‘Abd al-Karim and the Algerian ‘Abd al-Qader. Still, the ban on the film is not surprising. It can be inserted into a larger and more underhanded campaign of mystification and disinformation that aims to protect a romantic and mythical vision of our colonial history.<sup>6</sup>

Even though Italians were often ruthless with their subjects of color during the colonial domination, there has been no acknowledgment in the postwar period that they incurred any material or moral debts with the colonized. The silence regarding colonialism and the repression of the wrongs inflicted on the indigenous populations have heavily influenced the policies of the Italian government with regard to its ex-colonies. In general, these policies have been petty, incoherent, and improvised, conceived without a sense of memory or history in mind. Prosperous Italy of the last decades has missed a great opportunity: it could have righted the wrongs it perpetrated in Africa and remade its reputation. Instead, it wasted thousand of billions of Lire in dubious operations for “cooperative development” that have not resulted in the country honoring any of its debts.

### **The Burden of the One Hundred Thousand Dossiers**

Among the best-known unfulfilled obligations of postwar Italy toward its ex-colonies is the failure to return the ancient obelisk of Axum to Ethiopia after it was taken from the country during the colonial occupation. Despite fifty years of polemics and many promises made to Addis Ababa by Italian officials, the obelisk remains in Rome. Ethiopia is not the only country

with which Italy has an open account, however. Libya, too, has been arguing for recognition of some its claims for decades.

Italy certainly has a great material and moral debt toward the Libyan population. On the shelves of the *Casa dei Mutilati* (House of the Mutilated) in Tripoli lie one hundred thousand dossiers, each of which contains a tragic story from the period 1911 to 1943: political assassinations, summary executions, deportations, thefts, mutilations, and other abuses. These stories illustrate the suffering of a people who were attacked, yoked, humiliated, and, in some regions, decimated.

In order to establish the size of the material and moral debt Italy owes to this ex-colony, it is necessary to evaluate the damages and wrongs perpetrated in Libya during thirty-two years of occupation. From the start of the 1911 Italian-Turkish war, in which the Libyans participated as allies of the Ottomans, Italian troops distinguished themselves for their ruthless cruelty. The Italian General Caneva responded to the Arab revolt of Shara Shatt on October 23, 1911 with thousands of summary executions and mass deportations, the latter on the orders of Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti. With the Turks out of the picture after the treaty of Ouchy (1912), the Libyans were left alone to oppose the Italians' penetration into the country's interior. The Arabs' resistance lasted twenty years, and the Italians employed the most modern and lethal means to crush it, such as aerial attacks and bombings, squads of light armored cars, and tanks, as well as illegal chemical weapons (mustard and phosgene gas) and "final solutions" including the deportation of the entire population of the Marmarica region and the Jabal area of the Cyrenaica region.

When on January 24, 1932, Marshal Pietro Badoglio, the Governor General of Libya, announced triumphantly that "the rebellion has been completely and definitively crushed,"<sup>7</sup> at least one hundred thousand Libyans (both civilians and combatants) had lost their lives in a vain but tenacious defense of their country. To these deaths should be added those caused by mines planted in the desert by Italian, German, and English troops during World War II.<sup>8</sup> All told, about one-eighth of the population was exterminated during the colonial period.<sup>9</sup> There is also the question of the Italian confiscation of Libyan assets: the expropriation of the considerable patrimonies of the forty-nine *zawiyas* (lodges) of the Sanusi Confraternity (which included hundreds of homes and seventy thousand hectares of fertile soil); the mad expropriations carried out in the fascist period (another nine hundred hectares); and the forced sales at very low prices of the best Libyan land to Italian farmers. Finally, we must consider the tens of thousands of Libyans who had to abandon all their possessions when they were forced into exile in Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Chad, and Sudan.

In 1951, when they gained independence, the Libyans raised the issue of war damages and coercive expropriations—not surprisingly—and asked

the Italian government for equitable compensation. But how to tally and quantify these damages in monetary terms?

The Libyans refrained from presenting macabre body counts, as the Ethiopian government had done in 1947, but remained firm during the long negotiations. The Italian government, for its part, took the line in the years 1953–1955 that it was not accountable for war damages, because during World War II Libya was in effect part of metropolitan Italy. As far as damages during the colonial occupation were concerned, these were not placed on the table for discussion because no other European ex-colonial power had paid similar reparations. In the end, a very modest sum was agreed upon: 2,750,000,000 Libyan Sterling, or about 4,812,500,000 Italian Lire. Italy demanded that in the text of the October 1956 accord, no mention be made of the damages incurred during the war or during the colonial period. In fact, the money was given under the rubric of “contributions to the economic reconstruction of Libya.” Through this ingenious artifice republican and democratic Italy covered itself with regard to the crimes of liberal and fascist Italy. It was a dishonorable and imprudent move that also left Italy open to future reparations precisely because of lack of specificity.<sup>10</sup>

Libyan requests for reparations became more insistent when the young Colonel Mu‘ammar Qadhafi deposed the old and indecisive King Idris al-Sanusi in 1969. This time, when the Italian government refused further payment and any pronouncement about its colonial past, the Libyan government responded with a surprise move: in 1970 it confiscated the properties of the last twenty thousand Italians living in Libya.<sup>11</sup> Despite this enormous expropriation of assets, Qadhafi was not satisfied; in his view, the confiscated properties were really Libyan assets that were merely being returned to their rightful owners. This might have been true for the agricultural concerns that Italians had bought at unlawfully low prices, and for the large reclamation districts created by the fascist regime, but not for the hundreds of small businesses and properties (houses, stores, artisanal workshops, small industries) that represented the modest fruits of a life of work.

### **The Politics of Self-Absolution**

After the 1970 confiscation of Italian properties, Italian-Libyan discussions about issues relating to the colonial past made no progress for almost thirty years. President Qadhafi periodically asked the Italians to pay reparations, and the Italian government continued to reply that the 1956 accord with King Idris had annulled all outstanding Italian debts to Libya. In strict juridical terms Italy was not obligated to do anything further for Libya; but international accords, even if signed freely by both parties, do not always resolve difficult disputes such as those that divided Italy and Libya. The 1956 accord, as we have seen, was not only willfully ambiguous, but also mean-spirited.

Indeed, in February 1984, in the course of a conversation with Qadhafi, the Christian Democrat Giulio Andreotti, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, offered to make “a concrete gesture towards the Libyan people” from Italy in the form of a new Cardiology Center to be built in Tripoli.<sup>12</sup>

The idea of healing the rift with a highly humanitarian and symbolic gesture seemed to meet with the Libyans’ approval, and they began to hold talks with Giorgio Reitano, Italy’s ambassador to Libya. For this gesture to carry any meaning, though, the gift had to be generous and given swiftly. Instead, three years later the two sides were still mired in discussions about the number of beds the proposed medical center should hold: the Libyans wanted 1,200, but the Italians offered one hundred. Such petty bargaining allowed Qadhafi to declare that Andreotti’s proposal had been made merely for propagandistic effect and was designed to further delay the payment of real reparations. In fact, as is little known, the Italians were actually contractually obligated to give their “symbolic” gift: Appendix C of the 1956 accord stipulated the construction of a new hospital in Tripoli that was never built.

There is another obligation that has been evaded for decades, though: a moral one. This is the obligation to recognize unequivocally that liberal and fascist Italy committed very grave crimes. To clear this moral debt, ten words might have sufficed, but no Italian government has yet found the moral courage to utter them. There is no dearth of examples from other countries: Japan has apologized to China for the crimes it committed in Manchuria; German president Roman Herzog sent an apology to the city of Guernica for the bombings perpetrated by the Condor Legion in the Spanish Civil War; Jacques Chirac asked forgiveness of the Jews for the crimes of Vichy; and Queen Elizabeth, in a visit to India, defined the massacre of Amritsar a “deplorable example.” Italy’s politics of self-absolution cannot continue forever. The debate about Italy’s guilt for the crimes of colonialism cannot be put off indefinitely, especially when other countries have faced their pasts with great gains for the cause of historical truth.<sup>13</sup>

### **A Turn in Italian-Libyan Relations**

In 1999 came the long-awaited turning point in Italian-Libyan relations. In early December, the Democratic Party of the Left Prime Minister Massimo D’Alema made a very successful trip to Libya. Carefully planned by Foreign Minister Lamberto Dini, who had met with Colonel Qadhafi in his tent in Sibha in April, the trip achieved two objectives of capital importance: it resolved the historic dispute, whose roots go back to the colonial past, and it resulted in Qadhafi’s joining the struggle against terrorism. For years, or rather, for decades, the Libyans had waited for the Italian government to offer not only material reparations for the victims of

the Italian occupation, but above all an explicit admission of Italy's guilt for the wrongs of colonialism. As we have seen, no past Italian government had the courage to acknowledge this moral debt, much less act to correct it. This had caused diffidence and resentment among the Libyans and even the proclamation of a national "day of hate."

D'Alema was the first to pronounce a clear condemnation. When he arrived at the military airport of Tripoli, he told the Libyan premier Muhammad Ahmad al-Mangush that "the relationship between our two countries has had different moments in its history, including the negative period of colonialism, but today it is possible to build a relationship on a new basis of friendship, collaboration, and reciprocal respect." Several hours later, paying homage to the martyrs of Shara Shatt and Henni, who were the first victims of Italian repression in 1911, D'Alema delivered a sharper condemnation, noting that "here the national heroes were executed by Italians." These admissions of guilt will have a greater resonance if they are followed up by concrete gestures, such as cleaning up the minefields of Cyrenaica, which every year claim dozens of victims, or building the much-promised hospital in Tripoli. One tangible sign of reconciliation during D'Alema's leadership, however, was the restitution to the Libyans of the Venus of Leptis Magna, which had been smuggled out of Libya by the colonial governor Italo Balbo and given to the Nazi official Hermann Goering.

The second objective reached by D'Alema's trip, that of persuading Qadhafi to underwrite a common statement against terrorism, was of no less importance, if one considers that fifteen years ago Qadhafi was thought, whether rightly or wrongly, to be one of the masterminds of international terrorism. Since 1987, Qadhafi had been following a new course, one whose beneficial consequences are well known. He put an end to Libya's war with Chad, reestablished friendly relations with border nations, and successfully addressed the problem of Islamic fundamentalism, preventing Libya from becoming a second Algeria. Finally, he turned over to the Scottish police the two Libyans who were accused of causing the explosion of an American jetliner over Lockerbie. This action resulted in the end of the United Nations embargo of the country in 1992. D'Alema and Dini's visit seven years later made official the end of Libyan isolation and marked the country's full reinsertion into the international community. The end of Libya's long quarantine means that the country's economy can begin to recover. In this sector Libya's needs are urgent: to refurbish its entire civilian fleet, and to construct three thousand kilometers of rails and a network of highways that will link it to neighboring countries. The above projects were a central part of the five-year plan the government unveiled in 1999, as was the building of a Ghadames-Sabratha-Gela gas pipeline that will bring eight billion cubic meters of methanol gas to Italy. Equally ambitious projects are

planned for the tourist sector, which Libya intends to develop by advertising the treasures of its Roman and Greek cities, the extraordinary scenery of its "Great South," the ruins of the legendary empire of the Garamanti, the oases of Tazebo, Kufra, and Jarabub, and the Tibesti desert.

With the end of the embargo, and with Tripoli just an hour's flight from Rome, one can hope that after the season of economic development will come one of reciprocal understanding and respect. This is an essential condition if the diffidence and resentments that marked the Italian-Libyan relationship in the past are to be avoided in the future. Most probably, Italian tourists will be the ones to establish a new climate of collaboration with the Libyan people, creating the conditions for Libya to act as an ideal bridge between Africa and Europe, as both D'Alema and Qadhafi envisioned.

### Notes

1. The publication of this work was suspended at the end of the 1980s before all the volumes had been published.
2. Giorgio Rochat, "Il colonialismo," in *Storia d'Italia*, ed. Fabio Levi, Umberto Levra, and Nicola Tranfaglia (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1978), 109.
3. On the Italian occupation of Libya, see Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia. Tripoli bel suol d'amore* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1986), and *Gli Italiani in Libia. Dal fascismo a Gheddafi* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1988).
4. Raffaele Costa, quoted in Enrico Magrelli, "C'è uno scheletro nel deserto," *Panorama* (September 18, 1988).
5. See the reactions to these projections in *ibid.* and in Tatti Sanguineti, "Faccette nere," *Europeo* (September 23, 1988); and Paolo D'Agostini, "Noi colonialisti diventati censori," *La Repubblica* (September 20, 1988).
6. On the prohibition of the film in Italy see Angelo Del Boca, "Chi ha paura di Omar?," *Il Messaggero* (March 14, 1983); Enzo Magri, "Il Garibaldi della Libia," *Oggi* (August 10, 1979); Alvaro Romei ed. *Il leone del deserto*, (Rome: Napoleone, 1985); Roberto Silvestri, "Il 'Leone del deserto' come 'La battaglia di Algeri,'" *Quaderni internazionali* 1 (1987): 113–118.
7. See Rodolfo Graziani, *Cirenaica pacificata* (Milan: Mondadori, 1932), 307.
8. See Markaz Buhuth wa-Dirasat al-Jihad al-Libi (Libyan Studies Center), *The White Book: Some Examples of the Damages Caused by the Belligerents of the World War II to the People of the Jamahiriya* (Tripoli: Libyan Studies Center, 1981).
9. See Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia. Dal fascismo a Gheddafi*, 174–232.
10. *Ibid.*, 443–445.
11. *Ibid.*, 468–477.
12. *Ibid.*, 515. In an earlier meeting with Qadhafi, the Foreign Minister Andreotti had hypothesized "the gift of a hospital for the disabled of Cyrenaica," cited in Giulio Andreotti, *Visti da vicino* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1985), 11.
13. Angelo Del Boca, "Il mancato dibattito sul colonialismo," in *L'Africa nella coscienza degli Italiani* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1992), 111–127.

# Damages Caused by the Italian Fascist Colonization of Libya

*Muhammad T. Jerary*

The colonization of Libya by Italy during the years 1911–1940 has left a legacy of continuing resentment between the two peoples. This inherited resentment takes the form among Libyans of a right to revenge and among Italians of feelings of aggression and guilt. Any future relationship between Italy and Libya entails the overcoming of this barrier from the past; it is useless to conceal the consequences of colonization or sidestep them by focusing only on the development of joint economic projects and investments. One must instead study carefully the colonial period from beginning to end, studying and documenting all aspects of the Libyan–Italian experience with the utmost precision and objectivity. Films, historical monuments, books and articles, and museums must all be utilized in this process of coming to terms with this historical period. Only in this manner can we eradicate its long-term effects: an inferiority complex among Libyans and a guilt complex among Italians. The present chapter represents a contribution to this effort.

In 1911 Italy decided to invade the country and people of Libya for political, social, and economic reasons.<sup>1</sup> They uprooted the rule of the Ottoman Turks, who had governed Libya for centuries in ways that had allowed its large and harmonious Muslim and Arabic community to continue in the religious system that dominated every aspect of life. Libyan daily life at the time of the invasion was thus governed by a rich and well-established system of Muslim practice.<sup>2</sup> The Italians, however, wished to replace it with a new civilized system based upon a classical and

Christian background. This was Italy's fatal mistake, because such a European system totally contradicted the Islamic and Arabic background on which Libyan life was based. This identity struggle was the main cause of the quarter-century bloodbath between the Italians and the Libyans.

The Italians lost Libya to the British in 1941, but even after the withdrawal of the Italian aggressor the loss of Libyan lives and resources continued. For example, the mines that were laid throughout the country destroyed the environment and endangered the populace for many years to come. Nonetheless, after World War II, with the help of the United Nations an atmosphere of forgiveness and rationality emerged. The victorious countries forgot all their previous enmity and invested millions of dollars in Italy and other defeated countries, while European and American scientific and cultural institutions tried to associate the bitter experiences of the war with the fascist regime, thus acquitting the people from any guilt.

Although Italy tried to keep Libya during the process of dividing the booty among the victorious countries, Libya did gain what can be described as a partial independence. The United States, Britain, and France maintained a presence in Libya, and the Italian influence remained strong through demographic and economic power. This new postwar ethics made Libyans optimistic as well, since they thought they too would benefit from the programs of reconstruction and compensation. Their hopes soon turned to disappointment and frustration as they realized that the Western powers were only interested in rebuilding the West. They felt thrice betrayed: by Italian colonization, by the devastation of a world war whose mines continue to kill them, and by being denied compensation that had been paid even to the aggressor powers.<sup>3</sup>

Their new awareness of the European double standard changed the feelings of the Libyan people, who began to claim their own basic rights to freedom, justice, and equality—that favorite European slogan since the French Revolution. The creation of the state of Israel at the expense of the Arab peoples with the full backing of Europe and the United States further aggravated the sense of inequity among the Libyan Arabs and their doubts about the credibility of the Western powers. The Libyan revolution of September 1969 was a result of all of these factors. Announced as a continuation of the resistance of 'Umar al-Mukhtar to the Italian colonizers, it was a direct reaction to the negligence, torture, and disdain suffered by the Libyan Arabs during half a century of colonization. Indeed, the revolution since its start has tried to make Europeans aware of the extent of the moral and material damages incurred by the Libyan Arabs during colonial rule.

Among the scientific institutions involved in this scientific and historical assessment of war damages is the Libyan Studies Center, which was

established in 1978 with two goals: to gather sources on this subject which reflect different perspectives, and to create qualified scientific cadres to study the collected material scientifically and objectively.<sup>4</sup> The Center's resources include a large library with Arabic and foreign books and newspapers, a collection of hundreds of thousands of foreign and Arabic documents and historical manuscripts, and a photographic archive with more than seventy-five thousand photos which present all aspects of Libyan life from 1900 to 1950.

Among the most important projects undertaken by the Libyan Studies Center has been the establishment of an oral history section that collects primary material from the elderly who lived during the period under investigation. Libyans themselves rarely recorded their lives during the years 1900–1950; most written materials were the work of Italian, French, German, or English observers. The oral history project will remedy this gap. To minimize the methodological difficulties that pertain to oral history,<sup>5</sup> the assigned teams of researchers took a year-long preparation course under the supervision of internationally recognized researchers. A questionnaire was then prepared that took factors such as old age, family and tribal relations, political conditions, personal feelings, and psychological differences into consideration. Five scientific missions have been conducted in all parts of Libya for a total of more than ten thousand hours of interviews recorded on more than 7,500 audiotapes. These tapes have been summarized and indexed on paper so that Libyan voices on the subject of 'Umar al-Mukhtar, for example, can be compared among themselves and with respect to Italian and other foreign views. Efforts are also underway to place this oral material online.

To enhance the written resources on Libyan modern and contemporary history, another kind of oral history project has also been in progress. Seven questionnaires were prepared and distributed to Libyans about the following subjects: participation in battle, individual heroism, the concentration camps, the leaders, immigration, and general issues. To verify accuracy, the completed questionnaires must be certified by two witnesses and the local chief or mayor. A further questionnaire designed in 1984 received responses from one hundred thousands households which document the material, human, and cultural devastation inflicted on Libyans during the wars and the Italian occupation.<sup>6</sup> Since these responses, although considerable, total just one-sixth of Libyan households, fieldworkers continue to contact families throughout the country, equipped with both general and new specialized questionnaires on economic, political, cultural, and social issues. Some of these respondents are selected for more extensive audio and video interviews. The resulting documentation forms the subject of books, photographs, seminars, and Libyan Studies Center initiatives, as

well as the compilation of a huge encyclopedia of Libyan society between 1550 and 1950 and the publication of over three hundred scholarly monographs.

What do all these endeavors tell us about the damages inflicted on the Libyan people by the Italian fascist regime? The last part of this chapter will try and give an estimate based on the above mentioned questionnaires and hundreds of interviews with elderly Libyans. Clearly, this represents the Libyan point of view, one which has been heavily conditioned by an inferiority complex that is the legacy of colonization. The crimes Libyans accuse Italians of fall into the following categories:

- (1) Genocide, or the premeditated murder of thousands of Libyans through intended medical negligence, killings in battle, on the streets and in homes, and through deaths in concentration camps. All of these murders occurred during the Italian execution of a plan to Italianize Libya racially and culturally.<sup>7</sup>
- (2) Crimes of destruction of a people and their environment. This includes physical, psychological, social, economic damages as a result of the colonization and war, as well as irreparable damage done to the environment as reflected by the destruction and diminishing of its natural resources.
- (3) Forced exile and emigration, or the forced evacuation of the original inhabitants of a country to exhaust its human resources. This proves that the Italians did not only have military goals, but wished to deplete the country entirely. The exile of a huge number of Libyans has had an enormous effect on the development of the country, since Libya has had to import laborers from abroad at great expense to compensate for the lost labor force. In addition to this financial burden this mass exile has created a psychological, social, and cultural crisis that has been very difficult to overcome. Many Libyans still have no news of their exiled relatives.<sup>8</sup>
- (4) Crimes of moral and cultural destruction. Libyans were forced to serve the purpose and interests of the Italian colonizers against their own conviction and will. Libyan society was divided between “betrayers” of the people (those who fought with the Italians) and the so-called “real Libyans” who were loyal to their forefathers. Hence a new conflict arose that alienated Libyans from one another and disrupted the psychological, moral, and cultural foundation of Libyan Arab society.

Although the recognition by Italians of their mistakes in Libya and their apology of 1999 is a vital step, it should be followed by compensation, for the following crimes and categories of people: battle victims; victims of concentration camps; victims of medical negligence; forced participation in wars in Africa and with the Italian Army during World War II; forced labor in Italian projects; attempts to suppress the Libyan Muslim heritage

in favor of an Italian European Christian one; expropriations of public and private Libyan buildings; intentional stultification of the Libyan people, since the shutting down of all public schools after 1911 deprived a whole generation of Libyans of education; illnesses and psychological damages caused to Libyans as a result of the killings and the social, racial, economic, cultural, and political discrimination experienced during and after the war; and the destruction of the Libyan environment as a result of battles on Libyan soil.

I hope to have been successful in fairly reflecting the Libyan perspective on fascist Italian colonization of Libya. Further evaluation remains open pending the completion of our scientific projects. Only then will we have enough evidence as to the size, time, and place of the damages done to Libyans by Italian colonizers. And only then will this issue be handled once and for all.

### Notes

1. Mahmud al-'Arfawi, *Makhad al-imbiryaliyah wa-al-fashiyah al-Italiyatayn: 'usr wiladatiha wa-dafniha fi Libiya, 1882–1912*, trans. 'Umar Al-Tahir (Tripoli: Libyan Studies Center, 1991); Mustafa Hamed, "The Libyan/Turkish War against the Italian Invasion of Libya 1911–1912" (MSC thesis, Libyan Studies Center, 1988); Mustafa Howeidi, "The National Movement in East Libya During the First World War" (MSC thesis, Libyan Studies Center, 1988); Ahmad Imdalel, "The Libyan Resistance to the Italian Invasion and the Effects of the International Situation, August 1914–April 1915" (MSC thesis, Libyan Studies Center, 1989); Al-Mabruk al-Sa'adi, *The Resistance of Libyans to Italian Occupation, 1928–1929* (Tripoli: Libyan Studies Center, 1996).
2. Muhammad T. Jerary, "Education in Libya Before and After 1911," paper delivered at a conference in Siena, Italy, 1999.
3. Jean Pichon, *The Libyan Question in the Settlement of Peace*, trans. 'Ali Dawi (Tripoli: Libyan Studies Center, 1991); Muhammad Abu Shareb et al., *The Deformity and Disability Resulting from Colonization Wars and their Remnants in Tobruk Municipality* (Tripoli: Libyan Studies Center, 1991); Ahmad Bshara, *The Mines of the World War which were Planted in the Libyan Land and Their Human and Economic Effects*, Vol. 1 (Tripoli: Libyan Studies Center, 1995).
4. Muhammad T. Jerary, "Why the Libyan Studies Center Should Exist," *Majallat al-buhuth al-ta'rikhia* (Tripoli: Libyan Studies Center, 1979).
5. See on these David Hinq, *Oral History*, trans. Milad al-Makhri (Tripoli: Libyan Studies Center, 1991).
6. The breakdown of a total of 199,269 cases of damage is: 21,213 martyrs or victims of the 1911–1932 war; 5,867 martyrs imprisoned or executed without official or legal justification; 2,538 Libyans serving in the occupying army; 37,763 Libyans put in concentration camps; 30,091 Libyans driven to forced exile or emigration; 12,058 Libyans killed by explosives, mines, bombings,

battles during World War II; 1,410 Libyans mutilated as a result of explosions, mines, and bombs during and after World War II; 19,871 Libyans who lost properties due to the war and foreign occupation; 30,231 Libyans who lost farms and livestock due to the war and foreign occupation; seventy-four cultural losses (destruction of mosques, monuments, museums, etc.); 463 cases of environmental damage due to poisoned water wells, mined lands, burned forests, etc.; 139 cases of damage to ports, roads, and other public access facilities; and 175 cases of illegal labor of children, women, and the elderly.

7. Francis Macola, *The Italian War in the Desert. Observations of British Military Reporters with the Italians in Tripoli*, trans. Al-Harir (Tripoli: Libyan Studies Center, 1991); Roland De Marco, *The Italianization of African Natives: Government Native Education in the Italian Colonies, 1890–1937*, trans. Abdul Qadir al-Mheishi (Tripoli: Libyan Studies Center, 1988); Ibrahim al-Ghumari al-Maymuni, *Memories of El-Aqeila Detention Camp* (Tripoli: Libyan Studies Center, 1995); Yusuf Salim al-Barghathi, *Al-mu'taqalat al-fashistiyah bi-Libiya: dirasah ta'rikhiyah* (Tripoli: Libyan Studies Center, 1985).
8. Muhammad al-Jefa'iri et al., *The Libyan Deportees in the Prisons of the Italian Islands: Documents, Statistics, Names, Illustrations* (Tripoli: Libyan Studies Center, 1989); Committee for the Studies of Compensations for Damages Caused by Colonialism in the Libyan Territory, *Preliminary Results from a General Survey Effected to Define the Damages Suffered by the Libyan Arab People, as a Result of Colonialism and its Residues, since 1911: First Stage, 100,000 Families* (Tripoli: Libyan Studies Center, 1989); Al-Furgani, Al-Sharif, et al., *The Exiles and Those Deported from Their Homeland as a Result of the Italian Invasion. Preliminary Lists* (Tripoli: Libyan Studies Center, 1987); Ibrahim Abulqasim, *Libyan Emigrants in the Tunisian Province 1861–1881* (Tripoli: Libyan Studies Center, 1996).

# Italian Memories/African Memories of Colonialism

*Irma Taddia*

Francophone and Anglophone Africa have received much attention from Africanists, resulting in a vast literature. This body of work has partly privileged oral literature and the production of memories. Besides collections of Africans' personal memories assembled by historians, anthropologists, and other specialists on colonialism, we also have access to a rich memoiristic literature by Europeans who were bureaucrats, settlers, travelers, and soldiers in the African colonies. But documentation of oral literature concerning Italian East Africa (Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia from 1936 to 1941) is meager. Italians left few first-person accounts of their African experiences, and contemporary scholars of Italian colonialism have not sought to transcribe the memories of its protagonists, whether Italian or African. This is an essential premise of my work on oral histories. I have sought to reconstruct Italian colonialism in East Africa through two types of individual, informal oral testimonies: those of surviving Italian colonizers, whom I interviewed in Italy many years after their experiences, and those of once-colonized Africans.<sup>1</sup> The present essay is a synthesis of my works on these subjects; but it also addresses new reflections, and outlines a first stage of comparison between Italians' and Africans' memories of Italian colonialism—a comparison that provides us with a new interpretative key for many colonial histories.

The interview subjects required for this type of inquiry, the direct protagonists of colonial history—of whom few remain—offer us a very particular historical and human dimension; but once they are gone, their testimonies cannot be replicated. They represent a labile documentation, which must be examined within a specific time frame. The knowledge that

memory has a circumscribed temporal scope reminds us of the uncertainties that surround the construction of the past and raises questions as to the value of oral testimony as historical documentation. Yet oral testimony can also bridge the gaps of history, at least in part.

### Reconstructing Colonial History

By and large, Italian history books pass over the colonial period. As a result, the latest generations of Italians have no knowledge of Italy's colonialist past. Strange as it may seem, few students today even know that Italy ever had an Empire. After the fascist period, Italians repressed awareness of the colonial past, deeming it a historical experience to be erased—especially since the loss of the colonies came in the course of the country's defeat during World War II. One result of this repression was that in Italy, no ideological current emerged in support of African and Asian decolonization, whereas other European nations promoted decolonization and helped shape political movements bringing African nationalist thought and ideology into contact with the ideologies of the West. In contrast to these other nations, Italy submitted to African decolonization, assuming a passive stance rather than taking an active role. The minimization of colonial history within Italian contemporary historiography has been one of the negative consequences of this Italian repression and passivity. Indeed, although it has been asserted repeatedly that Italy lacks any public debate on colonialism,<sup>2</sup> I would argue that what most differentiates Italy's relationship to colonial history from that of its European counterparts is this absence of an ideology of decolonization, along with its resultant failure to develop a critical historiography of its ex-colonies in the postcolonial period.

Another contrast between Italy and the rest of Europe is that while recent European historiographies have already tended toward reconstructing protagonists' subjective histories, studies of Italian Africa have continued to be dominated by questions of policy and diplomacy. It is worth noting that the point of collecting oral histories is not to oppose personal histories to official ones, but to find new approaches to a phenomenon that can be analyzed in more ways than one. From this perspective, the Italian literature on colonialism offers us little on a subject of great importance—the lives of the settlers—as available archival materials shed little light on the everyday aspects of colonial life. Furthermore, biographies and memoirs of former Italian colonists are rare. Thus I have wanted to reconstruct colonial life primarily on the basis of transcribed memories of colonialism's last protagonists: the fascist-era settlers who returned to Italy and are still alive. Specifically, I focused on former settlers from the Emilia Romagna

region, who had been active in different parts of the Italian East African Empire. More importantly, as I describe below, the Emilia Romagna was central to the regime's plans for demographic colonization in East Africa.

Individual memory is a subjective category, however; it involves the single individual who reconstructs his life in the light of his own experience. One can therefore ask: what validity can we attribute to such sources, and how should we integrate them into our research? Moreover, once oral information is transcribed into print, the greatest obstacle to verifying its reliability consists in the time difference between the period to which the testimony refers and today, the moment when that testimony is transcribed. The gap between these two moments filters and modifies the information. In other words, the memory of events translates into an *a posteriori* interpretation of the facts that it describes. More than any other historical sources, autobiographies and memories must be considered as documents that refer to the past, but are also modified by the present.

The reading of memories presents other interpretative problems as well. How can materials gathered from oral research bridge history's gaps? What can we say about their provisional nature, and how can we attribute scientific meanings to these data? First, the researcher usually comes from a cultural context that differs from the interviewee's, and this phenomenon conditions how he or she comprehends the documentation obtained. Second, it is not always possible to verify the contents of memories: they must be accepted in their integrity. In my research, therefore, I have not edited the materials I have collected from oral sources. I want them to be read in their expressive immediacy, for that which they tell us directly.

### Settlers' Memories

The period of Italian colonialism and the emigration of colonists to East Africa can be divided into two phases: under liberalism (1890–1922), and under fascism (1922–41). Most colonists of the liberal period settled in Eritrea, which witnessed higher rates of Italian immigration than other African territories, and took on ever greater importance during fascism as a departure point for the conquest of Ethiopia in 1935–1936. Somalia saw no substantive immigration, especially in the early phases of Italian colonialism. We must also distinguish between descendants of the first migratory wave, who are by now rare in East Africa, and those who arrived with the Empire after 1935; the latter constitute the central nucleus of my work, in that they are the only ones who can still be interviewed. So few protagonists of liberal-era colonization are left—indeed, we have no direct testimonies from this era—that we cannot form a complete picture of the

period. Yet, we can draw some comparisons between the ideologies of these two moments of colonization. The earlier settlers were the products of a colonialism envisioned as an agent of civilization and well-being, while the later ones were shaped by an aggressive imperial ideology founded on the myth of power and on racial prestige.

Research on the settlers of the liberal period is mostly based on written texts and archival documentation. Autobiographical and biographical material is relatively rare. The literature on Somalia and Eritrea contains no real autobiographies of colonial pioneers, but only second-hand accounts. Nor do existing biographical reconstructions satisfy the historian's curiosity, since the few works available to us do not delve into daily life.<sup>3</sup> Among the pioneering colonists of liberalism the themes of separatism and race were also largely absent; these colonists favored an integrated and homogeneous civilization that would be dominated and invigorated by white colonists. Before the advent of fascism, the autonomy of Italian residents with respect to the metropole is another recurrent topic. These colonists considered the colony as their own territory, as a property that carried with it claims and rights, and yet they were relatively integrated with the African population. There was a conscious effort on their part to form a multiracial, interethnic society, in which every social component had its own place and made its own contribution to colonial life.

Unlike the settlers of the liberal period, settlers of the Empire did not put down roots in Africa; instead, they took advantage of particular contingencies to emigrate, and repatriated quickly. Demographic expansion under the Empire was conceived in such a way as to minimize the state's financial role while facilitating the rapid migration of Italian settlers under the umbrella of parastatal agencies. Among the first agencies involved in this effort was the National Veterans' Organization (*Opera Nazionale Combattenti*, or ONC), which took over a vast territory with great agricultural potential near Addis Ababa and undertook agrarian colonization with about two hundred Italian settlers.<sup>4</sup> The 1938 founding of the Romagna Agency of Ethiopia (*Ente Romagna d'Etioopia*) was one result of this attempt to stimulate agrarian colonization and promote the demographic conquest of the Empire through a massive influx of Italian citizens. Although the plan called for colonists and their families to develop fifty thousand hectares of land, far fewer hectares were actually conceded (about 5,600 in all), and the project encountered many difficulties. The *Ente* was only able to establish about sixty families, and numerous other obstacles—including the scarcity of land, the high cost of housing, a very slow-moving bureaucracy, the impossibility of finding appropriate agricultural equipment, and a hostile physical environment—complicated matters further. In the end, the financial costs were too high for the agency

to bear. The war first slowed, and then put an end to, agricultural settlement in the Italian colonies.

Fascism's rural colonization in East Africa also had cultural dimensions. Italian colonialism was to be based on the family rather than the individual. To this familial ideology was conjoined an emphasis on rural lifestyles, which was expected to guarantee the continued population growth necessary for the permanence of the colonial enterprise. These two themes found their concrete application in the formation of inheritable landholdings, which formed the backbone of agrarian and demographic colonization.

Demographic colonization was not limited to the agricultural sphere. Italian migrants were active in the most disparate sectors of the economy, and some found the colonies very profitable. Those Italians whose work was important for the expansion from Eritrea to the new Empire arrived in numbers in Ethiopia: truck drivers, builders, mechanics, traders and shopkeepers, and road, food, and tertiary sector workers. The fascist racialist ideology underlying the goal of populating Africa found ample consensus due to an Italian economic situation marked by high unemployment. Although most of these immigrants were of lower-middle class extraction, fascist ideology placed them in a position of clear superiority and distinction with respect to the colonized populations. According to fascist theories, the Italians were to dominate the economic life of the Empire and maintain the native population in a state of dependence as salaried laborers. Yet new roads and expanding markets and infrastructures also required numerous Italian laborers who were encouraged to emigrate by the government. The occupation of new areas of Ethiopia and the opening up of promising markets favored these sectors of the economy. The regime made big investments in the outward image of colonialism as well; architecture underwent a boom in the brief years of the Empire, and here the government's policies favored precise and rational models of planning and construction.<sup>5</sup>

The settlers I interviewed—pioneers of colonization, rather than civil servants or technocrats—did not engage with the grand themes of colonial history, nor did they presume to narrate long-term developments. The apparent monotony of their brief testimonies,<sup>6</sup> their tendency to make their private sphere the reference point of every external event, and the banality of many situations they relate may at first disappoint the historian. These texts certainly do not provide us with any overall vision of colonialism. Rather, they are fragments for the most part, stories of subjective life with some marked common traits.

What emerged from my interviews with ex-settlers is, first of all, the "poor" side of colonization: the struggle for survival, and the precariousness of many situations. Their accounts of life in East Africa present certain

commonalities, and their biographies are quite homogeneous in many ways. The material incentives to emigrate—the hopes of finding better jobs—were shared by all. The cultural distance between Africa and Rome comes through as a gap between the theoreticians of expansion and the experiences of the real protagonists of African life. Short-term economic incentives, not ideology, were the principal stimulus for migration. The real impetus for migration was Italy's rising unemployment. Settlers' lives were thus marked by much mobility and frequent repatriations, which were motivated by failures and disappointments or, more rarely, caused by questions of public order and official controls over colonists' lives.

Also shared by all was the desire to discover unknown worlds, but this was a secondary motive: the realms of evasion and the exotic had little place in the emigrations of those whose lives were marked before and after by precariousness and poverty. Even among the emigrants of the 1930s, furthermore, fascist ideology and political motivations were also secondary and seem not to have been internalized by Italian residents.

Second, the quotidian dimension that emerges from oral research clarifies the limitations of Italian colonial power. Themes of the regime's lack of organization, the inefficiency of Italian colonialism, and the public and private corruption of colonial society, dominate oral testimonies. There was much waste and inconsistency and little rationality in the exploitation of resources. Moreover, the ex-settlers seemed not to have believed in the regime's propaganda or in fascist ideology; instead, they arrived in the Empire with the aim of earning easy money and mythical riches. National pride is also secondary. With respect to the ideological vision advanced by regime propaganda, then, the settler's accounts provide a banal vision of colonial themes and daily life. Mythologies of the regime in general, and racial prestige in particular, are not prevalent among former settlers, who took on metropolitan ideologies with caution and kept them at a distance. This aspect of the testimonies confirms the gap between theory and praxis that pervades the history of Italian colonialism: fascism never fully succeeded in imposing a politics from above, and the settlers of the Empire acted with relative autonomy. In general, interracial relationships were marked by reciprocal collaboration and cohabitation. Only fascist officials and bureaucrats observed the segregationist norms of colonial life that were dictated from Rome, and separatism was in fact non-existent in many areas of social life. Instead, solidarity between colonized and colonizers seems to have prevailed over ideology. At the same time, the documentation I have gathered gives no evidence of any organized opposition to the regime. The repatriations of those who were expelled for reasons of public order were tied to individual situations rather than to any consistent movement of opinion.

The improvisational nature of Italian colonialism meant that settlers' destinies were extremely diverse, and their recollections register both successes and failures. For some, colonial life was much harder than they had imagined, while for others it brought easy and sudden wealth. It is difficult to quantify such diverse situations, just as it is difficult to assess the messages contained in oral memories. With respect to the liberal model of colonialism, which was characterized by durability rather than dynamism, there are evident structural differences. For liberal-era settlers, personal and familial events were tightly linked to the development and economic growth of Africa. None of this marks the second migratory wave to the Empire, which was motivated by speculation and had no complementarity with the local economy.

In the end, the war and other military vicissitudes caused the ruin of many private and public enterprises in Africa, and hopes for a better economic life soon gave way to disillusionment about the colonies. The bitter disappointments of the colonial experience are a recurring theme in settlers' memories. These sources lay bare the realities of a colonialism demystified.

### **The Silence of the Colonized, and the Task of the Historian**

Most of the existing documentation on colonialism in Africa comes from outside Africa, namely from the West. If one takes the written record as evidence, Africa and Africans are largely absent during the colonial period, which is so full of meaning for the twentieth century. Even literate Africa has left silences on the subject, and so the colonial period comes across as one of rethinking and retreat. It was even more difficult during colonialism to collect the extensive patrimony of codified oral traditions that represents one of Africa's great riches. As a result, there are few sources available with which to investigate colonialism at the local level, and the memories of the colonized. Westerners have therefore imposed the guidelines of twentieth-century African historiography, and Europeans have been the ones to document the changes of this history as protagonists and historiographers. Still, the silence of the colonized is also a form of response, one that needs to be evaluated. It is the most common form of reaction to colonial power, and yet it is a form of self-awareness that slowly gives rise to self-expression.

In such cases, oral testimonies can be extremely useful to the historian researching colonialism. I refer here to the unstructured oral source, subjective memory, and to personal recollection: that entire legacy of consciousness pertaining to the individual rather than to codified oral tradition. Yet very few works attempt to transcribe oral memories and

allow Africans colonized by the Italians to express themselves in the first person. In fact, we have no written production on Somalia,<sup>7</sup> and little on Ethiopia and Eritrea for the period under consideration.

The interviews I conducted in East Africa in the course of a decade contribute to the modification of common perceptions of colonialism by delineating multiple reactions among those who in various ways submitted to—or accepted—colonialism. They highlight how responses to colonialism depended on local contexts, individual conceptions, and political-historical contingencies. For example, oral sources undermine notions of a diffused African opposition to European colonialism. Along with episodes of resistance, colonial domination also brought adaptations and consensus, and the colonized often benefited from the colonial situation, sometimes by siding with the new holders of power. It is, however, difficult to quantify any type of response and reaction, and I did not read my testimonies with this goal in mind.

Several criteria guided my transcriptions of the oral testimonies I conducted. One that merits special consideration is the verifiability of oral documents.<sup>8</sup> In reconstructing their life histories, many interviewees are inclined to idealize the past, to measure it against a present that, in the Horn of Africa, is commonly characterized by extremely difficult life conditions. Second, in transcribing the interviews, I took into account how the particular dynamic that can emerge between interviewer and interviewee alters the recounting of an individual human experience and influences the transmission of information. Third, there are problems inherent in the editing of narrative material. I chose not to organize it around thematics and problems, since in testimonies it is common for subjects of the greatest interest to be raised alongside or in the context of quotidian concerns, and historical events are often related to personal experiences. Life stories acquire a broader significance if they are not edited to fit a unilateral interpretative context (as can happen if they are used as alternatives to written sources), and are considered instead as sources that enrich the already available documentation of colonial life.

### Questions of Postcolonial Historiography

The recent opening up of African history to testimonies, autobiographies, and personal recollections gave Africanist research the impetus to take on a different and original dimension. A new historiographical phase has begun, in which oral history gives voices to the marginalized, the subaltern classes, and to those who are generally deprived of any political influence, including women, who have been the excluded category *par excellence*.

Through the recording of his own life experience and the production of direct testimonies, the African “common man” has become the protagonist of historical narration.<sup>9</sup> Anglo-Saxon social historians have been particularly important in this effort. Emphasizing that oral documents produce different contents than written ones, they elaborated paradigms placing oral and written texts in opposition to each other, viewing the former as alternatives to the latter in reconstructing the past.<sup>10</sup> This radical history of informal, unofficial contents stands in contrast to the elitist history of the dominant classes that results from the written document. Africanist historiography has produced many works operating from this premise, that oral documentation highlights conflicts between colonial power and the colonized, whereas written sources (primarily of European origin), instead, tend to emphasize colonial equilibrium.<sup>11</sup>

But is memory really an instrument for radicalizing history? And if so, how? It is true that oral texts give us an alternative vision with respect to those of regimes of power? The texts I have published do not follow this line of thought. The oral documents I have transcribed in ex-Italian East Africa do not support the argument that personal memories of the “common man” necessarily provide an alternative view to that of official documents. Colonized Africans also offer “positive” recollections of colonialism, and oral memories are not monothematic. Some Africans tell of collaborating with, rather than opposing, the colonial world. The oral documentation I gathered did not communicate a “subaltern” or alternative view of colonialism. Colonialism produced rebellions and oppositions, but it also produced collaborations, adaptations, and consensus, not through politics alone, but also through the creation of a new cultural identity that emerges from the social as well as political conditioning of the colonized. Colonial power profoundly modified the political relationships within colonized society and the diverse reactions to these changes can be more easily registered through oral sources than written ones.

To conclude, I believe that autobiographical materials must be read in light of the contents that they communicate to us themselves, not as seen through a priori schemes. Expecting the oral document to necessarily oppose the written one, as is the habit of the “radical” Anglo-Saxon historians, seems contrived to me. Oral research must remain a specific instrument of inquiry, a source that should not be set in relation to the content it expresses. Attributing a precise significance to oral memories, deciphering them, and inserting them into a historical discourse, are the tasks that scholars must address critically. Testimonies are unique memories, neither alternative nor traditional: they are memories to be interpreted as intact, significant documents for the construction of history.

## Notes

1. Irma Taddia, *La memoria dell'Impero. Autobiografie d'Africa Orientale* (Manduria and Bari: Lacaíta, 1988), and *Autobiografie africane. Il colonialismo nelle memorie orali* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1996).
2. See above all Angelo Del Boca, ed., *Le guerre coloniali del fascismo* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1991), and Angelo Del Boca, *L'Africa nella coscienza degli Italiani* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1992).
3. We have some materials with which to compile settlers' profiles, above all the classic work of Giuseppe Puglisi, *Chi è? dell'Eritrea* (Asmara: Agenzia Regina, 1952). Among the few reconstructions of the lives of the first colonists see: G. De Ponti, *Dall'alba al tramonto. Vita di un pioniere in Africa* (Rome: n.p., 1968), and C. G. Pini, "Ricordi eritrei," *Rivista coloniale* (1910): 165, and 333.
4. See Haile Larebo, *The Building of an Empire. Italian Land Policy and Practice in Ethiopia, 1935–1941* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) and in this volume.
5. See on this Mia Fuller, "Building Power: Italian Architecture and Urbanism in Libya and Ethiopia," in *Forms of Dominance. On the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise*, ed. Nezar AlSayyad, 211–239 (Aldershot: Avebury, 1992); Giuliano Gresleri, Pier Giorgio Massaretti, Stefano Zagnoni, eds, *Architettura italiana d'oltremare 1870–1940* (Venice: Marsilio, 1993).
6. For the published testimonies see: Taddia, *La memoria dell'Impero*, 81–143, which selects gathered and recorded testimonies. The records are conserved in their entirety at the Centro Etnografico in Florence.
7. Oral-historical research in Somalia is limited to the work of Ioan Lewis, who deals primarily with British Somaliland. See also Irma Taddia, "L'Italia, le colonie, l'eredità culturale," *Orientalia Karalitania* 6 (2000): 11–124.
8. For examples of a broader methodological discussion, see A. Jones, "History Seen from Inside? Theory and Practice in the Historiography of Precolonial Sub-Saharan Africa," paper for the Third International Conference on Tradition and Modernization in Africa, Budapest University, 1989; and Carolyn A. Hamilton, "Ideology and Oral Traditions: Listening to the Voices 'From Below,'" *History in Africa* 14 (1987): 67–86.
9. Terence Ranger was the first to emphasize oral history as an instrument of radicalization. See his "Memorie personali e esperienza popolare nell'Africa centro-orientale," *Quaderni storici* 12 (1977): 359–361.
10. See the extensive debate that unfolded in the course of the 1970s in the review *Oral History*.
11. Among scholars of Africa, Ranger has taken this tendency further than most: see Terence Ranger, *The African Voice in Southern Rhodesia 1898–1930* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1970), and his "Towards a Usable Past," in *African Studies since 1945: A Tribute to Basil Davidson*, ed. Christopher Fyfe, 17–30 (London: Longman, 1976); Paul Thompson, primarily a scholar of European history, also entered into the Africanist debate with "Oral Evidence in African History. A Note on Some Common Problems," *Oral History* 2, no. 1 (1974): 65–67. See also Andrew Roberts, "The Use of Oral Sources for African History," *Oral History* 4, no. 1 (1976): 54–70. Critical reflections on this

historiographical tendency can be found in Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "African Historical Studies, Academic Knowledge as 'Usable Past' and Radical Scholarship," *African Studies Review* 32, no. 3 (1989): 1–76; Henri Moniot, "The Uses of Memory in African Studies," *History and Anthropology* 2 (1986): 379–388; Jan Vansina, "Memories and Oral Traditions," in *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History*, ed. Joseph C. Miller, 262–279 (Folkestone: Dawson, 1980); and Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Valentin Y. Mudimbe, "African Memories and the Contemporary History of Africa," *History and Theory* 4 (1993): 1–11.

# Italians as “Good” Colonizers: Speaking Subalterns and the Politics of Memory in the Dodecanese

*Nicholas Doumanis*

Italian colonialism has had an ambivalent place in Dodecanesian collective memory.<sup>1</sup> Almost all local written representations, whether found in history books, commemorative albums, magazines, scholarly journals, newspaper articles or published memoirs, have read the Italian period as a nationalist struggle against unremitting fascist oppression.<sup>2</sup> Many ordinary Dodecanesians recall the Italian period in a manner that accords faithfully with this Greek nationalist line, including self-conscious patriots who were ardently (though not necessarily actively) opposed to the colonizer’s presence. Others that somehow came to harm because of Italian rule, such as fishermen and merchants who were denied operating permits so as not to compete with Italian competitors, or peasants displaced by Italian colonization programs, would also find it meaningful to interpolate their experiences within the nationalist schema. Yet Dodecanesians are also likely to claim that “the Italians were good” (*I Itali ìtan kali*), and that they bequeathed an invaluable legacy to the region. Even those who suffered at Italian hands could nevertheless talk approvingly of colonial administrative practices, development schemes, and about the Italians “as people.” When comparing foreign powers that left their mark on the region, as the islanders often do, the Italians, unlikely as it might seem to outsiders, are deemed to have been “good.”

The following discussion essentially explores the subtexts of this rhetorical claim. Read superficially, Dodecanesian nostalgia appears to

underscore the myth that Italians were uniquely humane imperialists, the implications of which are deeply embarrassing. After all, we do not need the colonized giving credence to the beguiling notion that Italian colonizers were “*brava gente*,” a myth that has so efficiently distracted Italian public attention from the sinister aspects of the nation’s imperial past.

Looked at more closely, however, one finds Dodecanesian nostalgia refers to a dimension of the colonial experience that to European historians is still largely terra incognita: the subaltern experience. To begin with, fear of embarrassment also happened to be a key concern among informants I interviewed for my research on Dodecanesian nostalgia for Italian rule in the early 1990s, which was symptomatic of a broader social ambivalence regarding the Italian legacy in postcolonial Dodecanesian cultural life. Interviewees were normally reticent about enunciating their nostalgia, not because they feared complicity with the myth of *Italiani brava gente* (of which they did not seem aware), but because they did not wish to undermine their own patriotic credibility and that of their locality. Informants covered their backs by initially denouncing Italian rule as having been anti-Greek and unacceptable, which then gave them latitude to lavish praise on its positive aspects. Others would begin with a patriotic line and then slip into nostalgic mode as the interview moved into full flow. In many cases interviewees shuffled between patriotic rectitude and charitable praise for the foreign oppressor, seemingly unable to negotiate the contradictory demands of a national culture they revered and the truths elicited from their collective social experiences. Other interviewees were clearer in identifying the Italian legacy as a cultural site of intra-communal conflict. Thus obdurate nationalists believed only ungenerous appraisals of Italian colonialism were historically and morally conscionable, and that nostalgia could only be found among former collaborators or those beguiled by Italian propaganda because of their lack of education. Conversely, interviewees who consciously presented their reminiscences as a counter-memory defended themselves as coming from an undogmatic position based on lived experience, and occasionally suggested that self-proclaimed “patriots” were posturing for purely political or other self-serving reasons.

The merits of each conflicting representation of the Italian Dodecanese will not be the subject of this chapter, nor will much be said directly about the myth of the *bravo Italiano* or the colonizers’ experiences generally.<sup>3</sup> Rather, this chapter reflects on aspects of the subaltern experience that are implied in the words, subtexts, and silences of oral testimonies, and which reveal much about how Italian colonialism was received.<sup>4</sup> Certainly the mere fact that the colonized responded positively to aspects of Italian rule does indicate that subaltern consciousness was colonized to a palpable

extent. Yet an analytical investigation of individual and social memories reveals a great deal more about the islanders as subjects that negotiated the symbols of colonial power. As elsewhere in the colonial world, the cultures that were colonized by Italy were able to appropriate and reject, assimilate and refashion the symbols employed by a colonizer power seeking to establish its hegemony.<sup>5</sup> Thus what concerns us here is not so much the workings of colonial project but the ways in which subalterns *worked* colonialism.

One good reason for focusing on the Dodecanese when considering "the colonization of minds" is that no Italian colonial territory was renovated so extensively (which also could mean that one cannot automatically assume that Dodecanese experiences were representative of subalterns throughout the empire). More specifically, colonial development in this largely barren archipelago was concentrated on those islands that offered some hope of return on public and private investment, namely Rhodes and Kos. The designated naval base, Leros, also received a great deal of investment. These islands collectively provided a small enough stage on which a relatively indigent colonial power could give an illusory display of largesse to the islanders, foreign visitors, and, not least, to the colonizers themselves. From the mid-1920s through to the mid-1930s, Rhodians, Koans, and Lerians for their part sensed that their whole environment had been transformed, and largely for the better. Among the characteristic features of Italian development was road construction, the establishment of Italian agricultural colonies, reforestation programs, and urban development that included the introduction of modern housing, electricity, and modern sewerage disposal systems. Italian and foreign observers were struck by the extent to which the Dodecanese, this one-time Ottoman backwater, had been ushered into the modern age.

When elaborating on the commonplace claim that "the Italians were good," most male interviewees drew attention to the fact that colonial development projects provided ample, well-paid work to a region where emigration was the only effective escape from chronic underemployment. Colonial development schemes not only stemmed the routine flow of emigration but also made the islands, and especially the main towns, far more inhabitable. Following a devastating earthquake in 1933, Kos Town was virtually rebuilt along an urban grid pattern, with wide, well-lit, tree-lined streets, and with homes containing gardens and single-purpose rooms. Accustomed to one-or two-roomed, poorly ventilated hovels, most of the inhabitants now found themselves in homes containing kitchen and bathroom facilities, separate dormitories and other single-purpose rooms. Urban development was also found on a larger scale in Rhodes Town, where the new Italian section, with its wide boulevards and monumental

buildings, its theaters, grand hotels, and glass-fronted stores, set a sharp contrast against the old, cramped medieval section. Rhodes Town and Kos Town, as well as the new naval port on Leros, Portolago, were meant to symbolize Italy's modernity and rightful place among the imperial powers. While the local inhabitants understood that Italian development was meant to have a legitimating effect, they could hardly deny its practical benefits. Philipos Sofos remembers that by the time the Italians had finished with Rhodes Town, "[it] had everything. Remember what Mandraki (the harbor area) was like before! It was all mud . . . mud!"

Interviewees scoffed at conditions under the Ottomans, including the quality of housing. The typical home for a characteristically large, extended family had one or two multipurpose rooms with poor ventilation, poor lighting, dirt floors and cesspits that together made for congested and uncomfortable living. In the transition from Ottoman to Italian rule, nothing appeared to evoke the dramatic transformation in the quality of life more than the changes in human waste disposal. As a regular visitor from the nearest village, Ioannis Alahiotis was always struck by the stench. He noted that before the earthquake the townspeople could only use cesspits which outsiders such as him found almost unbearable and difficult to forget:

When you walked into a Koan home before the earthquake, it stunk. Because toilets did not exist. . . . Even the "sifoúni" (septic tanks) they did not know about. They just dug a deep hole in which everything was poured in. And the stench came out of the hole and into the street, and from there of course it moved everywhere. We who came down from the village, we couldn't even sleep in a house owned by say a doctor. But that was the technical state of the times. . . . The Italians, they knew about such things, and they were able to introduce them to us.

It was difficult to deny credit to colonizers who, at great expense, had virtually eliminated the effluvia from human waste both within homes and public spaces. The containment of foul odors and the resultant rise in hygiene standards was seen as a most welcome requisite of becoming modern. Kalliope Harapas explained as much in her testimony:

They [the Italians] did many good things. We have gutters and sewerage drains . . . you know what a difference that makes!?!? Today, there are places in [mainland] Greece where the filth is unbelievable. All this city [Kos Town] has an underground sewerage system. Before that we would empty our things in the streets. We had deep holes in our homes and used them as toilets . . . It was a "wee wee" carnival (laughs). After 1933 we had cleanliness.

For village communities whose sense of backwardness was underscored by isolation, Italian benevolence was exemplified by road construction.

Even the smallest inhabited islands were engraved with road networks, as all Dodecanesian villages could now be reached by motor vehicles. As Stamatis Athanasiadis of the Rhodian village of Paradisi recalls, overland distances were long and hazardous in Ottoman times, with each inland settlement accessible only by donkey track. Paradisi was a mere fifteen kilometers from Rhodes Town, but traveling to the main center was an ordeal:

Paradisi to Rhodes on a beast took two hours. Everything went on the back of animals. . . . They brought buses and these covered all the islands. Yes they made things easier. They [the Italians] didn't leave things as they found them. They fixed things, they spent billions of Italian Lire. . . . They fixed things here in Rhodes; the harbors, buildings, they made roads. The roads . . . you could not move on them before . . . there were pot holes, pot holes there, puddles here, puddles there. . . . They put asphalt on all of them. . . . In all they spent billions of Italian francs [Lire] to fix Rhodes.

Of course the military bases, airports, hotels, and the colonial administration buildings, indeed most Italian development projects, were never meant for the benefit of the colonized, but locals could appropriate these projects as their symbolic capital. And what appealed most about Italian structures was that they were modern. Indeed for that very reason the people of Rhodes, Kos, and Leros in particular accorded greater value to Italian structures than any existing features of the local topography. Thus the modern section of Rhodes Town, and especially the more striking landmarks such as the flamboyantly ornate Palazzo del Governo, the grand Albergo delle Rose, and lush gardens of Rodino (now Rodini), became the primary topographical symbols of Rhodian identity. For the people of Kos too, it was modern housing and the town's rational spatial order, rather than the churches, mosques, or antiquities that gave the island its mark of distinction.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, the oral sources confirm that colonial development schemes succeeded in positioning Italy as a harbinger of modernity in local perceptions: "Italian" as a cultural referent was employed as a synonym for "European" and "modern." However, *italianità* was attractive in so far as it represented "Europe" rather than a specific national culture. Interviewees were quite proud of having acquired a fluency in Italian, but they covered themselves against accusations of cultural collaboration by defending Italian as a civilized or European language, in the same way that they saw no benefit, practical or cultural, in learning Turkish.

The oral sources confirmed that the most critical issue facing Dodecanesian communities, both during and since the colonial period, has been their location amid key binary opposites: between a familiar Ottoman "Orient" at one end and a progressive "Europe" at the other. Both

colonizers and colonized agreed that the Dodecanese islands were now closer to Europe, and, given geographical realities, had a habit of likening Rhodes, Kos, and Leros to oases of modernity in a sea of backwardness. Locals such as Antonis Stergalas were particularly pleased that visitors seemed mainly interested in the Italian structures. "Who would have thought," he claimed, "that we would have tourists and so many people here":

All the people here loved to look at these things (buildings). Tourists would come and take pictures, Greeks mainly . . . Every Friday there came a boat passing by filled with tourists . . . they loved our city!

That the islanders could not have done it all themselves seemed immaterial. What really mattered was that Kos Town could no longer serve as an exhibition of orientalism, where curious Europeans were treated to living representations of Europe's past.<sup>7</sup> The fact that Italian benevolence was distributed unequally, however, made other island communities feel as if they had abandoned the past. Thus for the third most populous island, Kalymnos, disquiet over the slow rate of progress has often been attributed to Italian neglect. Kalymnian informants underscored that point to anthropologist David Sutton by noting the colonizers failure to install "European" conveniences such as public toilets in Kalymnos, as they had done in Rhodes Town and Kos Town. In being overlooked by the colonizers, Kalymnians sensed their own progress has been stunted, which Sutton's informants illustrated by lamenting the late adoption of the daily ritual of bathing.<sup>8</sup>

As inter-island rivalries run quite deep in the Dodecanese, communities overlooked by Italian development have sensed their "backwardness" more acutely, yet Kalymnians have shown that the Italian legacy can also be used to shore up their own position on moral and especially patriotic grounds. After all, the beneficiaries of Italian munificence have also been vulnerable to accusations of collusion. Indeed Kalymnians find great virtue in having been *untainted* by Italianization, and as being the only community that openly challenged Italian authority, a claim that has some basis in fact. In 1935 the island community waged the so-called "Rock War," a three-day protest against colonial religious policy that included open violence and one fatality.<sup>9</sup> A more specious Kalymnian assertion has been that the Italians could not implement their development schemes on Kalymnos because the locals would not allow them. The implications of this preposterously inflated claim of agency can be read as lament at being overlooked for Italian development, but it can also mean that Kalymnians, in having denied their space to the Italians, have too much integrity for their own good. In resisting Italian development policies and other programs, Kalymnians could at the very least argue that they were better Greeks than

their neighbors. As Loizos Loizou asserted in his testimony:

Only Kalymnos resisted the Italians! Only Kalymnos defended our faith! Everybody else bowed their heads. Why? Because we are hardy, fearless, decisive and honorable. . . . We are not like the others. . . . they don't care. We cared. . . . We were the only people with integrity and a sense of honor.

On balance, the Italian legacy has been as significant a source of identity construction for Kalymnians as it has been for their inter-island rivals. Kalymnians inevitably refer to the Rock War when boasting about their community's exceptional religiosity, nationalism, and masculinity. That the real Rock War was essentially a women's protest centered on a religious question, however, has meant that males have had to construct a heavily mythicized version of the event.<sup>10</sup>

A less contested feature of the colonial experience in Dodecanesian collective memory has been the subject of Italian character, and it is here that local subjective representations of Italian colonialism appear to correspond most closely to the concept of *Italiani brava gente*. In comparison to the French, British, and Germans, each of whom offered distinctive representations of Europe at certain moments during the early twentieth century, the Italians were deemed more appealing in character. Even Kalymnians have been prepared to concede as much, and almost every interviewee was happy to provide ample illustration to explain why Italians were better people. Thus male interviewees were particularly keen to discuss their friendships, many of which lasted long after colonial rule through correspondence, while women were deeply impressed by the chivalrous behavior of colonial personnel, their fine attire and grooming, and their earnest interest in marrying local girls. For the most part, Italians were deemed "good" because they were least disposed among the imperialists to sustain that role in social contexts, and the least inhibited about fraternizing socially with the colonized. The willingness of many Italians to trade jokes (sometimes anti-fascist ones), share personal matters and interact through other intimate modes meant a great deal to Dodecanesians, for social intimacy ameliorated the kind of humiliation and absence of recognition that came with being a colonial subaltern.

As comforting was the belief that these particular Europeans, these agents of modernity, nevertheless appeared to share similar values regarding marriage, family, and honor, as well as cultural tastes on such things as music, singing and even romantic love. Greeks and Italians often traded the claim that together they were "*una faccia, una razza*" (literally "one face, one race"), which suggested a sense of cultural likeness as much as physical appearance. In some ways the archetypal Italian of the

Dodecanesian imagination was a very appealing paragon of European-ness because he achieved a balance between modernity and tradition. Their modes of sociability in particular had deep local resonance. For the islanders, who regarded the British and Germans as cold and officious, the Italians, although deemed far inferior on other criteria (especially as soldiers), were nevertheless more appealing “as people” (*san ànthropi*).

Dodecanesians are not unique in representing Italians as uniquely warm and humane Europeans. In mainland Greece during World War II, where locals encountered British allied forces and Italian and German occupiers at close hand, stories of comparatively warm and personable Italians abound. As Jonathan Steinberg has done in his comparative work on Italian and German treatment of Jews during World War II, one can forward cultural explanations for why Italians could leave such impressions to so many. And yet as Steinberg also notes, the Italians committed barbarities in so many other contexts that cultural explanations have limited application.<sup>11</sup> The Dodecanese Islanders, who were admittedly spared the violence that characterized Italy’s African territories, will also tell of many Italians that were simply not *brava gente*.

How were these colonizers accounted for in Dodecanesian memory? To retain their symbolically meaningful character taxonomies of “good” Italians, interviewees simply rendered the least appealing colonizers as un-Italian and consigned them to separate categories. These were the “fascists” and the “southerners.” The latter mainly referred to Italian workers and colonists who were mainly of the Mezzogiorno, and as these workers were much better paid and the colonists were the beneficiaries of land expropriations, it appears that locals simply adopted Italian prejudices to express their own resentments. Dodecanesians inverted their Italian stereotype by casting “southerners” as primitive peasants. In his oral testimony, Christoforos Fournaris claimed that the colonial power

brought people here from southern Italy . . . from Bari, Brindisi and Calabria . . . but they appeared to be in a terrible state. I mean in cultural ways, they were very backward. They were Italians from the South; Italians themselves look down on them! . . . They were this (low class) . . . they looked it.

Giorgos Valsamis from Leros argued that these “backward” Italians viewed locals as under-class rivals: “Generally speaking the ‘enemies’ came from the lower orders . . . they were anti-Greek . . . workers brought in from the ports of Italy . . . but they competed amongst each other to show who was more patriotic.”

Locals found their occasional brutal treatment at the hands of the fascists left a much deeper impression. The fascists distinguished themselves

from the "good" Italians by their willingness to humiliate the colonized, their eagerness to project their mastery, and their pretentious displays of power. Fascism evoked the "face-slap" (*hastouki*), a most degrading chastisement that was publicly inflicted on many adult males by black-shirted Italians and locals. Kostas Tourtoulis, who operated a café on Leros before the war, remembered what happened to those targeted by fascists:

If they knew that your café was anti-Italian, they would turn the café into a wreck. From the time we heard news of war in Albania (1941), we never left our homes at night. We hid safely inside. They'd kill you! The fascists especially, who wore the black shirt, with a black hat, they were truly "fascists." If they caught you saying, "Hey Alex," or anything else (in Greek), they would hit you with a rifle butt. They were always armed.

The bombastic Cesare de Vecchi, who was governor from the end of 1936 to 1941, personified fascism in the Dodecanese. It was also during this period that Italian rule lost whatever appeal it might have had for the colonized. Severe financial restraints saw development projects dry up and employment opportunities diminish. Worse still, De Vecchi was resolved to forcibly Italianizing the Dodecanese, for his predecessor's gradual approach to cultural assimilation needed a generation or so to take effect. De Vecchi expected swift results through the use of fascist brute force, but all he managed to do was to alienate the colonized and promote a variety of forms of cultural resistance. As far as the islanders were concerned, everything went wrong "when Fascism came," and De Vecchi's incompetence had ruined what had been a rather impressive colonial order. In oral and local written representations, De Vecchi is therefore cast as both tyrant and buffoon. Among the jokes that circulated at the time was the following: as the *Quadrumviro* was inspecting a Rhodian school, one child was asked to say something of de Vecchi and his place in Italian history. The child replied: "He is one of the *quadrupedi* [four-legged ones] of the Fascist Revolution."<sup>12</sup> Many found his symbolic projections of authority more irritating than impressive, as Stamatis Athanasiadis explained:

I was riding around on my bicycle, on my way to the village. As I heard his car horn being blown from far away, I'd press the brakes hard, get off my bike, and stand still until de Vecchi came up, and do this (the fascist salute), and then I'd get on with it. (Laughter) He was a "crazy-house" . . . do you know how many names he had? Do you know? . . . "Cesare Maria de Vecchi di Val Cismon," "Cesare Maria de Vecchi di Val Cismon" . . . (Laughter) . . . De Vecchi was crazy . . . the people did not like him. He was mean; a bad dog . . . we had to endure bad times with him.

De Vecchi's tenure was a wholly different regime as far the Dodecanesian population was concerned. These were remembered as difficult times, when "things became tight" (*sfixan ta pràmata*). Interviewees had a habit of describing the period as the dictatorship, "when fascism came to the islands" (*òtan írthen o fasismòs*).

That the interviewees claimed fascism was oppressive relates nothing new, but in differentiating fascists from normal Italians, and by insisting that there were two distinct phases of colonial rule, Italian *and* fascist, they remind us of the capacity of colonized peoples for rendering historical narratives that inform local agendas. In focusing on the positive judgments of interviewees—oral sources also had a great deal to say on resistance—interviewees produced representations of Italian colonialism that come uncomfortably close to sustaining the *Italiani brava gente* concept, but which really give insight into obsessions with the backwardness/progress polarity. Italian colonialism was not hegemonic, but its signifiers of dominance, which were read and rearranged by the colonized, assisted in creating particular histories.

### Notes

1. For more detailed information on the issues discussed in this essay, see Nicholas Doumanis, *Myth and Memory in the Mediterranean: Remembering Fascism's Empire* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).
2. The most up-to-date coverage of the Italian Dodecanese that nevertheless persists with the traditional nationalist line, as suggested by its subtitle (Alienation of People and Environment) is Zaharias N. Tsirplanis, *Italokratia sta Dodekànisa, 1912–1943: Allotriiosi tou anthròpou kai tou perivallontos* (Rhodes: Ekdose Grapheion Mesaionikes Poles Rodou, 1998).
3. See David Bidussa, *Il mito del bravo italiano* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1994). A cursory reference of the relevance of my ethnographic history to the *brava gente* myth is Nicholas Doumanis, "The Italian Empire and *brava gente*: Oral History and the Dodecanese Islands," in *Italian Fascism: History, Memory and Representation*, ed. Richard J. B. Bosworth and Patrizia Dogliani, 161–177 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).
4. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
5. For a fine ethnographic and theoretical exposition of that power dialectic, see Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, 1997). See also their *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992) and Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class*, trans. Robert Lumley and Jude Bloomfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

6. The most comprehensive and best illustrated work on Italian development in the Dodecanese is Simona Martinoli and Eliana Perotti, *Architettura coloniale italiana nel Dodecaneso, 1912–1943* (Turin: Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1999).
7. On the Orient as exhibit, see Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
8. David E. Sutton, *Memories Cast in Stone: The Relevance of the Past in Everyday Life* (New York: Berg, 1998), 37. On the contrasting meanings of the putrid, see Alain Corbin's classic, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).
9. On the Rock War, see Doumanis, *Myth and Memory*, 67–80, and David E. Sutton, "Re-Scripting Women's Collective Action: Nationalist Writing and the Politics of Gendered Memory," *Identities* 5, no. 4 (1999): 469–500.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Jonathan Steinberg, *All or Nothing: The Axis and the Holocaust, 1941–1943* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
12. "Che ne sai, bimbo mio, di De Vecchi?," "è un quadrupede [*sic*] della grande Rivoluzione Fascista," quoted in Alexandros Karanastasis, *To ekpedeftikó próvlima tis Dodekanísou* (Athens: n.p., 1945), 14.

## **Madamismo and Beyond: The Construction of Eritrean Women**

*Ruth Iyob*

This chapter will focus on the *madamas*, colonial women who contracted to provide all the “comforts of home” to male Italian settlers in East Africa. I discuss the case of Eritrea, which, being the first settler colony of the new Italian state, occupied a central place in the narratives glorifying Italy’s mandate to “civilize” Africa.<sup>1</sup> Fueled by state promises to transform them from land-hungry peasants into rich *coloniali*, large numbers of Italian settlers occupied Eritrea starting in the 1880s, leaving their wives at home.<sup>2</sup> While the *madamas* represented only a small fraction of colonized women in Eritrea, they emerge as a key feature of the Italo-African encounter and dominate colonial discourses regarding native women.<sup>3</sup>

The *madamas* served as cultural filters for the production of a colonial “ethnography” that transmitted the values and biases of the colonizers. Gender as well as racial attitudes and stereotypes are relevant here. Even early colonial narratives that expressed some empathy for the violated indigenous peoples were unanimous in portraying the *madamas* who consorted with Italian men as sirens, femmes fatales, spies, and manipulators.<sup>4</sup> Judged in colonial texts as being guilty of *imbestiamento*, which can be roughly translated to mean the “turning of men into beasts,”<sup>5</sup> the *madamas* were blamed for Italian military incompetence, from the Adwa defeat to the later unraveling of the Empire during World War II.

In reality, the relationships between *madamas* and their *padroni* were quite complex, and have been too little studied. At a minimum, these native women provided comfort to their colonizers, at times paid for, and

at others, out of genuine affection.<sup>6</sup> Depending on the nature and ego of their *padrone* or partner, they faced indignities or learned novel ways of looking at the world. My aim here is to examine the representation of the Eritrean *madama* in colonial discourse to show how it misrepresents the sociocultural, economic, and political context within which the “comfort wife” operated. My research makes use of photographs of the period, compiled from official and private collections, which offer a glimpse of Eritrean comfort wives. Yet I also want to suggest ways whereby colonial images might have influenced gender politics in contemporary Eritrea. The postcolonial narratives of Eritrea produced female guerillas, heroines of the war for independence, who after their victory march in 1991, receded into the background of patriarchal society.<sup>7</sup> While pre-independence posters of Kalashnikov-toting women combatants became less visible, the ubiquitous colonial postcards of half-naked women continued to be proudly displayed as commercial items in shops. Women combatants, who had entered the public arena as agents of change, were no longer accorded the public space they had carved out through their participation in war.

### Encountering the Past in the Present

Sifting through the photographic archive of the Istituto Italo-Africano in Rome during a brief visit in 1990, I was struck by the importance given to the colonized Eritrean woman. The striking image of a nude Eritrean woman attempting to replicate the pose of Botticelli’s *Venus* provoked questions: Who were these women? What events led to their being stripped of their dignity along with their attire? To a scholar of the Horn, these photographs present yet another disconcerting element. Young women from the different ethnic communities were photographed bedecked with an incomprehensible assortment of jewels, and with their upper torso bared. Traditional hairstyles and ornaments identifying their ethnic origins clashed with the images of nudity prohibited to adolescents and adults. What is jarring is not the exposure in itself (which is common enough in some Eritrean communities) but the fact that there are no indications—anthropological, historical, or even anecdotal—that the women of these societies would appear in public uncovered.

Looking at the mostly young faces, which rarely smiled but gave up their bodies to the gaze of the colonizer, I wondered if any of them were still alive. How was it that, having been born in Eritrea and having lived there until early adulthood, I was unaware of the fame of my *paisane*? With Eritrean independence from Ethiopia in 1991, in which women actively engaged in the liberation army as platoon leaders, tank commanders,

rank-and-file soldiers, intelligence officers, and activists, this question remained of paramount importance to understanding the transformation and continuity of the role of women in postmodern Eritrea. Later, walking through the main streets of Asmara, the most Italianate of African cities, I again encountered the silent face of the colonized woman—this time in the curio shops that sell crafts and postcards. The same disconcerting images of colonized women in stylized alien poses, partial nudes, and downcast faces gazed back at me—this time on independent Eritrean soil. Their images were once again being peddled—only now to a decolonized public willing to spend a few cents to gaze at their exposed flesh.

The commercialization and objectification of women in the colonial and postcolonial eras begs the question of the identity of these women. Until now these images of women have been dismissed as “victims” of Italian colonialism. Yet in 1991, a historic date which marked the liberation of Eritrea from Ethiopian occupation, but also a centenary of the consolidation of Italian colonial rule, one of the most popular posters in Eritrea depicted a bare-breasted adolescent girl adorned in the fashion of the Afar community. Another image accompanying postwar narratives about independent Eritrea was that of the “exotic” women of the Rashaida community. Both posters have been circulated internationally—the first through postcards and the latter as the cover page of a 1997 feature article on modern Eritrea.<sup>8</sup> With the exception of an article in *National Geographic*, the majority of illustrated articles on the New Eritrea have featured Rashaida women dancing or in indolent posture, with faces covered in beaded veils or in poses showing off antique silver jewelry.<sup>9</sup> While official Eritrean “national” narratives extol the *tegalalit* (female combatant) who constituted thirty percent of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) that liberated the country in 1991, images of the defiant heroines marching to a bright future were conspicuously absent.<sup>10</sup> A decade after liberation, the heroines of the *maquis*—especially combatants from rural areas, who only learned the skills of war—were abandoned to the vagaries of a free market society and rejected by traditional, patriarchal society.

The Eritrean Constitution drafted with much fanfare over a period of three years, from 1994 to 1997, remained silent on the rights of women in the new nation.<sup>11</sup> The Preamble expresses gratitude to the sacrifices of its women, but stops short of providing legal guarantees for gender equality. Women constituted half the Constitutional Commission of Eritrea’s members—a feature that “portrayed” their presumed equality as participants in the formulation of their legal status as citizens. Electoral laws that reserve thirty percent of the seats of the National and Regional Assemblies as a mechanism for ensuring female representation thus rang hollow in the absence of clearly articulated constitutional safeguards. Although ratified

in 1997, the Constitution was not enacted into law, thereby depriving women of even the most basic protection by the very state whose sovereignty they had brought about. Prospects for equal citizenship receded even further in 2001, when the few articulate women who expressed their discontent with the reassertion of patriarchal values in postindependence Eritrea were silenced. Despite Eritrean women's participation in the war, their future in independent Eritrea was overshadowed by their continued portrayals as either "masculinized" servants of the nation or token females in the male-dominated postwar regime.<sup>12</sup>

### **Redefining the *Madama***

Contractual marriages, concubinage, or the maintenance of dual households are features of preindustrial societies. Precolonial Eritrea was no exception, and such alternative conjugal arrangements also existed in northern and central Ethiopia.<sup>13</sup> The two parties to this type of arrangement usually consisted of a male partner and a female companion, who, in return for material payments, would serve as a temporary wife providing the comforts of home. The responsibilities were spelled out for both men and women, as were the type and forms of payment.<sup>14</sup> Whether the payment consisted of provision of grains, cattle, or money, such arrangements regarding male–female cohabitation were governed by customary laws. The dissolution of these contracts, in most cases, occurred when one of the two partners resolved to end the arrangement and take his/her leave.

*Madamismo* was a colonial adaptation of these existing customs of concubinage, or contractual conjugal arrangements, which coexisted with formally sanctioned long-term marriages.<sup>15</sup> *Madama* was a term coined to refer to the native woman who cohabited with the colonial male and provided the "comforts of home." Thus, she occupied a higher position and earned more income than the prostitute, who did not enjoy the protection of the *padrone*. Yet even as they adapted such preexisting institutions of contract marriages for their own use, early Italian colonial settlers also superimposed new codes of behavior. The Italian settler was not subject to the same social and economic constraints that governed the native male, and could offer higher compensation. Moreover, the Italian conquest had swelled the numbers of women who, as victims of rape or increasing poverty, were available to serve the colonizers as "comfort wives."<sup>16</sup> A major difference between customary native practices and Italian–Eritrean contractual marriages was the fluidity of the rules of behavior. Terms of reference were set up on an ad hoc basis depending upon the articulated needs of the two parties, rather than with reference to adapted social custom. Exposing one's body to the public gaze was a new phenomenon, as were sexual acts

considered taboo by patriarchal society. The “comfort wife” of an Italian could not leave without the wish of her master. If she failed to meet his demands, the alternative was to join the growing number of bordellos subsidized by the colonial government. While the concubine thus lost the security guaranteed in native patriarchal arrangements, she became indispensable to the colonizer, even if it meant becoming an object of alien construction.

Yet the *madama* can also be seen differently, as a wage earner who developed a new position based on her proximity to those in power. Her role as an interlocutor between the Italian soldier/settler and the traditional power-brokers gave her an entry into the public arena that had traditionally been the realm of men. Like her counterparts in other colonies, the *madama* used her new occupation to secure financial security and social acceptance. The type of services and amenities provided by the *madama* also created a distinction between the highly placed officials of the colonial administration and middle-to-low-level settlers.

The *madama* who accompanied the high colonial officer to soirées, hosted his guests, translated his demands to the indigenous community, and bore his children represented a fusion of the public and private life of the Italian colonial male. The *madama* of the lower official or settler kept house for her *padrone* and completed assigned tasks for the homestead. Both *madamas* enjoyed a lifestyle higher than that of either the prostitute or the indigenous woman who had lost her husband in one of the wars of pacification or to Italian prisons. Despite the engagement of colonial *madamas* in the routine and mundane tasks of housekeeping, child-rearing and home economics, none were photographed while engaged in housework such as cleaning or cooking. Their photographs portrayed them as partially or completely naked, with their ornaments hanging on their bare bodies in a manner not sanctioned by the custom of the communities from which they had come.

The *madamas*, as we know them from the archives, reflect the duality of their existence—socially sanctioned concubines frozen in time, engaged in poses that exposed them to the gaze of many more people than their contractual husbands. Selling images of one’s body was rarely a part of customary contracts. These images capture the essence of the contradictions inherent in the problem—the fusion of the old and the new in a context of subordination to the whims of the colonizing male. These captured images were then made into postcards used to entice new settlers from the metropole to join in the “civilizing” mission.<sup>17</sup>

The late twentieth century, on the other hand, captured the image of the Kalahsnikov-carrying *tegaladit*, which disappeared with the attainment of national sovereignty. The women of the *maquis*, like the *madamas*, had

entered the international public's consciousness through photographs and films during times of conquest, and then disappeared in peacetime. In the twenty-first century, a new generation of Eritrean women—including some of the daughters of the women of the *maquis* and some descendants of the *madamas*—re-emerged as the new “comfort wives” of the top brass of the national army.<sup>18</sup> These new “comfort wives” indicate a continuity with a shadowy past, epitomize the reassertion of embedded social values, and contradict the rhetoric of gender equality of the postcolonial period.

### ***Madamas, Fascism, and Nationalist Awakening***

From 1890 to 1922, colonial subjects were made and remade in the image of the colonizer through conversions to Catholicism, the transformation of free Eritrean women into “comfort wives,” and the institutionalization of concubinage as *madamismo*. As was characteristic of other European colonizers, prostitution was one of the primary markets of exchange between the colonizer and colonized, and it was subsidized and institutionalized to meet the needs of the pioneer settlers in Eritrea.<sup>19</sup> This policy of institutionalizing prostitution was then extended by official decrees to other colonies such as Libya. By the 1930s such practices had become conventional in Eritrea, as well as Libya and Somalia, despite Mussolini's new rhetoric forbidding interracial relations. Graziani, the well-known general who led the 1935 war against Ethiopia, clearly demonstrated the campaign to delegitimize interracial marriages or contractual arrangements in favor of institutionalized prostitution:

From a moral point of view let me remind you of the civil and economic and sometimes sentimental complications that occur when the [African] woman gets pregnant. . . . Headquarters and the Regional Authorities will do everything to meet this necessity [sexual relations] by establishing wherever possible brothels in all localities that are still without them.<sup>20</sup>

Thus the Eritrean woman's position in precolonial society as a subordinate was transformed first by introducing concubinage or *madamismo*, then decreeing such arrangements as illegal, and finally by institutionalizing prostitution. Most *madamas* had been victims of colonial rape and plunder, and as such, stigmatized as “dishonored” by their own communities. They faced the choice of becoming prostitutes or, in some cases worse, ending up as part of the conquests to be cast aside when new campaigns produced fresh victims. But the *madamas* created a new network of patron–client relations based on their relationships of intimacy with the power-holders, using their material gains as a passport to achieving acceptance in

traditional society. The maintenance of this permeable *entrée* into indigenous society was not without peril, however. Depending on the perspective of the narrative, these women led multiple lives as concubines, spies, whores, and heroines.

The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 led to the replication of the Eritrean experience, albeit for a shorter period. Mussolini's rules prohibiting the cohabitation of Italian men with Ethiopian women were not observed, and Ethiopian *madamas* proved quite skillful at using their liaisons to acquire protection for their families and to provide information to the resistance.<sup>21</sup> By 1937 racial mixing was declared a crime. In the colonies, meanwhile, the infamous Italian Madame Mira traveled to Asmara and Addis Ababa with a boatload of racially acceptable women and set up brothels. Despite this venture, which attempted to reconcile the new laws upholding racial purity, the authorities were forced to revert to supplying their soldiers in colonial cities and distant outposts with native prostitutes.<sup>22</sup>

After less than a century of colonial rule, Rome's leadership had eroded what little loyalty it had garnered from those societal elements most closely associated with its authority, including Eritreans educated in Italian schools, those employed by the Italians, and the *madamas*. In 1941, the British-led Allied Forces "liberated" Eritrea from fascist Italian rule without, however, freeing the population from the legal constraints of alien rule and racism.<sup>23</sup> In the ensuing decade, during which the inhabitants of the territory struggled to come to terms with the task of constructing a nation, the anticolonial nationalists failed to craft a viable blueprint for a nation of their own. This failure led to the polarization of views, values, and visions, and culminated in an internationally sponsored compromise in which Eritrea was "federated" with the Ethiopian Empire under the absolute rule of Haile Selassie.<sup>24</sup>

During the 1940s Eritrean women, many of whom were either former *madamas* or related to them, were actively engaged in struggles to eliminate fascist laws and secure social equality for themselves and their children.<sup>25</sup> The pan-African ethos of the first generation of Eritrean nationalists had crafted an image of Ethiopia as the African Zion, which vested its nationals with dignity. In this milieu, there were some rare instances when the mother of an Italo-Eritrean child rejected her daughter's Italian nationality and adopted an Ethiopian identity.<sup>26</sup> In any event, the options that opened up offered alternative roles for *madamas* other than that of a pliant object of the colonizer. Among Eritrean women, the "heroic" resistance fighters and the "stoic" mothers and daughters of patriots became the new images that replaced the old, and in this, *madamas* played an important role.

The first nationalist organization, *Mahber Fikri Hager* (Association of Love of Country), mobilized a large number of former *madamas* who became small entrepreneurs as owners of *enda myess / enda sewa* (taverns), which served as meeting places for the anticolonial nationalists.<sup>27</sup> The movement supporting union with Ethiopia boasted a large number of former *madamas* who owned taverns or other property and used their resources to further the campaign for the unification of Eritrea with Ethiopia and the end of European rule.<sup>28</sup> In this way, the *madamas* not only redefined themselves, but helped to expand the role of women in traditional society to include that of modern patriots.

### Conclusion

What are the legacies of the past century that shape and influence the role of women in the postcolonial era? The promise of the twentieth century was freedom from oppression, equality of rights and opportunities, and justice for the peoples who had suffered under the yoke of colonialism. Yet deeply embedded social mores that interpret active female engagement in the public arena as a threat to the fabric of patriarchal society created the impetus for the exit of the female soldier/warrior who was essentially a postcolonial construct of nationalists. Bereft of both the moral and institutional support that was necessary for the attainment of full citizenship, twentieth-century Eritrean women were caught between the traditional social ethos that decreed their “return” to the patriarchal fold and the formal discourse of citizens’ participation dictated by modern statehood. Like their nineteenth-century predecessors, they receded from public affairs, occasionally resurfacing as mothers or daughters of patriots. They existed in a Janus-faced society, which extols the virtues of the warrior/heroine while stifling the emergence of a female citizen with equal access to public space.<sup>29</sup>

As the twenty-first century dawned, Eritrean women witnessed new wars and experienced “damage” to their person and hopes for the future. Despite the rhetoric of gender equality, the new nation’s commanders replicated their colonial predecessors. Some young female conscripts excelled in the art of war; others were transformed into “comfort wives” of military and political commanders of garrison towns.<sup>30</sup> Traditional leaders of Islamic communities—who since the 1980s had refused to allow their daughters to be conscripted—found their actions vindicated as this new form of concubinage became more visible in the aftermath of the 1998 Ethiopian-Eritrean border conflict. The Roman Catholic Church of Eritrea issued scathing critiques of the post-independence government’s lack of will to address the violation of women’s rights, camouflaged as an exercise of

gender equality.<sup>31</sup> Both religious institutions were targeted by the regime. The post-independence government's renegeing on promises of equality and justice for its citizens—especially women and previously disenfranchised minorities—triggered grassroots hostility for the heroes and liberators of yesteryear. As the regime proceeded in its constitution-making exercise, embittered combatants retreated behind a veil of silence until 2001, when charges were leveled at top military brass by the independent media.<sup>32</sup> The political elite of the ruling group—the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ)—split over questions of accountability and political representation.<sup>33</sup> In the second half of 2001, those who had dared to break the silence and advocate for real, rather than virtual, democracy and justice were arrested.<sup>34</sup> Carefully constructed images of token women ministers and political appointees were given high profile to counter the images of the recent past when sex and violence had fused, creating fictional/mythical identities for women.<sup>35</sup>

Contemporary Eritrean women's discourse on the endurance of concubinage and sexual servitude was muted, while the majority of male nationalists—incumbents of the regime as well as dissenters—directed their (patriarchal) ire at those women who in the twenty-first century emerged as “comfort wives.” The new generation of concubines are blamed for causing a moral degradation of the guerilla/commander—much like their nineteenth-century predecessors were accused of the *imbestiamento* of the Italian soldier.

In addition to the asymmetrical gendered relations that characterize postcolonial Eritrea, prenatal government policies also provide the impetus for the establishment of temporary sexual relations between young women and their political/military superiors. Only pregnant women can be exempted from the national military service that is required of all citizens aged 18–40. Such policies have led *not* to the *mobilization* of women against the inequalities of the post-independence government, but to a *re-socialization* of women into early childbirth, single motherhood, and dependence on “powerful” men. The continuity of constructed gender identities in contemporary Eritrea also reflects the endurance of patriarchal norms and values.

Peeling off the images of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provides us with a more realistic sense of the contemporary era, and enables us to understand and explain the effects of power relations of the past on those of the present. In so doing, the silence of the images of the past may be broken, and the promise of future redress of gendered inequalities and injustices may become possible in the twenty-first century. As Eritrean citizens—women and men—join ranks in bridging the gap between legal rights and social approbation, attention needs to be paid to how the past continues to shape the present, if women are to be freed from new forms of patriarchal bondage in the twenty-first century.

## Notes

1. Paolo de Vecchi, *La missione civilizzatrice dell'Italia in Africa* (Florence: Barberia, 1912).
2. Giulia Barrera, "Dangerous Liaisons: Colonial Concubinage in Eritrea 1890–1941," African Studies Program Working Papers, no. 1 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1996), 9; Barbara Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi: Antropologia, discorso giuridico e politiche sessuali interrazziali nella colonia Eritrea (1890–1941)* (Naples: Liguori, 1998), 29.
3. This phenomenon was also present in French and British colonies. See Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East 1800–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
4. Tertulliano Gandolfi, *I misteri dell'Africa Italiana* (Rome, 1910), excerpted in *Di mal d'Africa si muore: Cronaca inedita dell'Italia unita*, ed. Aldo De Jaco, 244–247 (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1972).
5. *Ibid.*, 249.
6. Barbara Sòrgoni, "Diventare antropologo: Alberto Pollera e l'etnografia coloniale," *Quaderni storici* 37, no. 109 (2002): 55–82.
7. Sondra Hale, "Liberated, but not Free: Women in Post-War Eritrea," in *The Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transformation*, ed. Sheila Meintjies, Anu Pillay, and Meredith Turshen (London and New York: Zed Press, 2002).
8. For details see "Special Report: ERITREA, The Making of a Nation," *Africa Business* (May 1997): 31–41. The journalist, Jennie Street, chose to feature only male ministers and high officials, despite the existence of two female ministers in the post-independence government of Eritrea.
9. Charles Cobb, "Eritrea Wins the Peace," *National Geographic* 189, no. 6 (June 1996): 85–105.
10. For an understanding of how the female combatant was celebrated in nationalist literature of the pre-independence period, see *Dehan kuni wushatae* [Goodbye to Seclusion] in Solomon Tzehaye's collection of poems entitled *Sahel* (Addis Ababa: Neged Matemia Bet, June 1994). For a discussion of the role of women in the first decade of independence, see "Dekenstiyo ertra: Dehri harnet'kae?" [Women of Eritrea After Independence?], *Hedri* (March 1996).
11. Constitutional Commission of Eritrea, 1997. The author was present in 1994–1995, during the first phase of the making of the Constitution.
12. Elise F. Barth, "Peace as Disappointment," *PRIO REPORT* 3/2002 (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, August 2002), 13–15.
13. William A. Shack, *The Central Ethiopians: Amhara, Tigrinya, Northeastern Africa and Related People* (London: International African Institute, 1976), 32–35.
14. These precolonial "comfort wives" should not be confused with the independent courtesans of the Abyssinian highlands known as *Faitot*, whose photographs and social history were never captured. Christine Matzke mentions their existence but they remained elusive in my conversations with Eritreans in 1998

- and 2001. See Christine Matzke, "Of *Suwa* Houses and Singing Contests: Early Urban Women Performers in Asmara, Eritrea," in *African Theatre: Women*, ed. Martin Banham, James Gibbs and Femi Osufisan, 29–46 (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), 31.
15. Laketch Dirasse, *The Commodification of Female Sexuality: Prostitution and Socio-Economic Relations in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia* (n.p., 1976).
  16. On the bitterness engendered in Eritrean males by the Italians' ability to pay more, see Gerald K. N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition 1941–1952* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 50.
  17. For comparative perspectives on the sexualized and/or racialized image of disenfranchised women, see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (London: Routledge, 1995), 122–126; and Malika Mehdi, "A Western Invention of Arab Womanhood: The 'Oriental' Female," in *Women in the Middle East: Perceptions, Realities and Struggles for Liberation*, ed. Haleh Afshar, 18–58 (London: Macmillan Press, 1993).
  18. For an apt summary of the tragedy of Eritrean women during the pre-independence and post-independence periods, see Fethawi Andezion, "Shabai," *Keste Debena* [Rainbow], no. 32 (May 30, 2001).
  19. Dirasse, *The Commodification*, 28.
  20. Cited in Araia Tsegai, *Eritrean Women and Italian Soldiers: Status of Eritrean Women Under Colonial Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 8.
  21. Alberto Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini: Fascism and the Colonial Experience* (London: Zed Books, 1985).
  22. *Ibid.*, 171–172.
  23. Trevaskis, *Eritrea*, 50; Richard Pankhurst, "The Legal Question of Racism in Eritrea during the British Military Administration: A Study of Colonial Attitudes and Responses, 1941–1945," *Northeast African Studies* 2, no. 2 (1995): 30–48.
  24. On the origins of Eritrean nationalism see Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism, 1941–1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
  25. Although Eritrean *madamas* reintegrated themselves by taking on a new occupation, usually as a small business owner, or in some cases by remarriage, Italo-Eritrean children rarely enjoyed acceptance by both Eritrean and Italian communities. An Italo-Eritrean with whom I spoke in Rome in 1990 expressed the pain and anger of many members of this generation of "forgotten children," recalling the bawdy insults he suffered growing up in Eritrea when he said "we did not ask to be born of two cultures . . . and to be despised by both." For more information on Italo-Eritreans see Giulia Barrera's essay in this volume and her longer study, "Patrilinearity, razza e identità: l'educazione degli Italo-Eritrei durante il colonialismo italiano (1885–1934)," *Quaderni storici* 37, no. 109 (2002): 21–53.
  26. Author's conversations with Eritrean women, 1994.
  27. The British-led Allied forces captured Asmara in April 1941, and issued a declaration that designated the former Italian colony as an "occupied enemy territory," a status that deprived the Eritreans from mobilizing openly. For details see Alemseged Tesfai, *Aynfalaa'lae* (Asmara: Hindri Publishers, 2001), 31.

28. Author's 1998 conversations with Eritrean man and with Eritrean women including *Woizero Desta*, *Woizero Tzhaitu Zenaar*, *Bashai Catarina*, who publicly campaigned for an end to Italian rule. Although these women were well-known entrepreneurs, there were many more former *madamas* who shaped political affairs in less visible ways than their vociferous peers.
29. Christine Matzke, "Engendering Theatre in Eritrea: The Roles and Representations of Women in the Performing Arts," in *Hot Spot Horn of Africa: Between Integration and Disintegration*, ed. Eva-Marie Bruchhaus, 156–164 (Münster: Lit Verlag Afrikanische Studien BD. 19, 2003).
30. Marina Rini, "Eritrea: Recruited Young Girls sent to a 'rape-camp'," posted on Asmarino Website, [http://news.asmarino.com/Information/2002/10/CCEDI\\_3.asp](http://news.asmarino.com/Information/2002/10/CCEDI_3.asp).
31. Roman Catholic Church of Eritrea, *Eghziabher neza Hagher Yef'khra Iyu* [God Loves This Country] (Asmara: n.p., May 2001).
32. Andezion, "Shabai"
33. Hartmut Quehl, "Oral History in War: *Tagadelti* in and after Eritrea's War of Independence," in Bruchhaus, *Hot Spot Horn of Africa*, 141–145.
34. Amnesty International report (September 2001).
35. Quehl, "Oral History," 141–145.

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