



Aethiopia 19 (2016)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

IRMA TADDIA, Università di Bologna

Personalia

In memoriam Fratel Ezio Tonini (1939–2016)

Aethiopia 19 (2016), 239–244

ISSN: 2194–4024

Edited in the Asien-Afrika-Institut
Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik
der Universität Hamburg
Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

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Editorial

The present issue of AETHIOPICA, like the preceding one, is partly monographic, with a section containing the proceedings of the Panel on Islamic Literature in Ethiopia: New Perspectives of Research, from the '19th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies', held in Warsaw, Poland, on 24–28 August 2015.

Starting from this issue, the annual bibliography on Ethiopian Semitic and Cushitic linguistics held from its inception in 1998 for eighteen years by Rainer Voigt is handed over, on Voigt's own will, to a pool of younger scholars, with the substantial support of the AETHIOPICA editorial team. I would like on this occasion to express the deep gratitude of the editorial board of AETHIOPICA and of all scholars in Ethiopian Semitic and Cushitic linguistics to Rainer Voigt for his fundamental and valuable contribution.

Bibliographical abbreviations used in this volume

- AE* *Annales d'Éthiopie*, Paris 1955ff.
ÄthFor Äthiopistische Forschungen, 1–35, ed. by E. HAMMERSCHMIDT, 36–40, ed. by S. UHLIG (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner (1–34), 1977–1992; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz (35–40), 1994–1995).
AethFor Aethiopistische Forschungen, 41–73, ed. by S. UHLIG (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998–2011); 74–75, ed. by A. BAUSI and S. UHLIG (*ibid.*, 2011f.); 76ff. ed. by A. BAUSI (*ibid.*, 2012ff.).
AION *Annali dell'Università degli studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale'*, Napoli: Università di Napoli 'L'Orientale' (former Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli), 1929ff.
CSCO Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1903ff.
EAE S. UHLIG, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, I: A–C; II: D–Ha; III: He–N; in cooperation with A. BAUSI, eds, IV: O–X (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010); A. BAUSI in cooperation with S. UHLIG, eds, V: Y–Z, *Supplementa, Addenda et Corrigenda, Maps, Index* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2014).
EI² *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, I–XII (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960–2005).
EMML Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa.
JES *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Addis Ababa 1963ff.
JSS *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Manchester 1956ff.
NEASt *Northeast African Studies*, East Lansing, MI 1979ff.
OrChr *Oriens Christianus*, Leipzig–Roma–Wiesbaden 1901ff.
PICES 9 A.A. GROMYKO, ed., 1988, *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Ethiopian Studies, Moscow, 26–29 August 1986*, I–VI (Moscow: Nauka Publishers, Central Department of Oriental Literature, 1988).
RSE *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, Roma, 1941–1981, Roma–Napoli 1983ff.
ZDMG *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Leipzig–Wiesbaden–Stuttgart 1847ff.

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In memoriam Fratel Ezio Tonini (1939–2016)*

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It is difficult to accept the news arriving from Asmāra: Fratel Ezio Tonini passed away on January 15, 2016. It is particularly difficult for me, because of my frequent research visits in Eritrea since 1984 and my persistent visit to the Fratel Ezio library in Asmāra, at the Pavoni Social Centre. The library is a solid

* I am deeply grateful to Gian Carlo Stella for his highly valued help in finding items and memories concerning Fratel Ezio and the Pavoni Centre.

institution, for many years the only one available in town, and a useful instrument of research for a great number of scholars. Fratel Ezio himself was a much appreciated figure, helping generations of scholars and giving assistance to anyone who came to visit him, offering very generous support. This activity was only a part of his work in Asmāra, where he dedicated himself to organizing social events for students and supporting (with large donations) a large number of families during the crucial years 1970s–1990s of the prolonged guerrilla war in the country. Famine and distress, not only war, affected Eritrea for decades and the Pavoni Centre was a valuable institution on many occasions.

Fratel Ezio was born in Terlago, Trento, Italy, in 1939. He became a member of the Comunità Pavoniana in 1956 and lived in Italy until 1969, arriving in Asmāra in September 1970 and working within the Comunità Pavoniana and at the Asmāra University, founded by the Comboni Missionary Sisters (*Piae Matres Nigritiae*) in 1958, helping to reorganize the library and the archives.

He spent more than 45 years—most of his life—in the country, and was very active during this long period in many positions as librarian, administrator, educator, being at the same time a constant religious support for the Italian and Eritrean communities. On the occasion of the anniversary of the Italian Republic on June 2, 2010, he received the title of ‘Cavaliere della Repubblica’ for the outstanding role he played in the country.

I would like to focus my attention here, firstly on his important work as a librarian at Asmāra University and later as director of the Pavoni Centre and the archive. When the university was closed during the so-called *Därg* period, he started organizing a number of facilities for students as well as a social centre also intended for foreign visitors. He became part of Asmāra’s life and a protagonist of cultural events and activities, and he remained so for the rest of his life. The passion he constantly put into his work as collector of historical sources, manuscripts and rare books is inestimable. The archives contain family memories, religious documentation dealing with Orthodox Christianity, Islam and Catholic missions, as well as of various religious orders active in the country in recent times. The files can be considered unique not only for Eritrean history, but also for the ancient and modern history of the entire Horn of Africa. He was very scrupulous in collecting material dealing with the civilization of this region, fully aware that it was impossible to separate Eritrean and Ethiopian history. The common civilization, the historical background of the area must be treated as one complex civilization; he recognized this characteristic for decades, even in difficult periods in Eritrea and its extremely difficult relations with Ethiopia.

A great part of his work was dedicated to collecting rare manuscripts in Təgrəñña and other Eritrean languages, with the aim of recording the his-

torical past. He was also active in publishing books meant for students and young Eritreans working as staff in the library.

He was very proud of the journal *Quaderni di Studi Etiopici* (የኢትዮጵያ ጥንቶች መጽሐፍት) which he founded in Asmāra, and which was published by the 'Centro di Studi Etiopici' ('Ethiopian Studies Centre', መካኒ ምርምራ ስለ ፍልጠት ኢትዮጵያ), based at his library; he would have preferred not to change the title even following Eritrean independence in 1991. His main concern was to encourage scholars to work on the history of a large regional area, with the aim of supporting research into a common civilization with many shared themes. Unfortunately, the journal was definitively closed in an extremely difficult political period, at the beginning of the 1990s. For a number of reasons Fratel Ezio was not able to continue this interesting experience in a country whose historical sources, school reference books and scientific journals were still very limited. This intellectual figure was an example to all scholars, and his strenuous efforts to integrate scholarly knowledge, share contributions and record historical events without any political prejudice were very much appreciated. His was a real heroic work in troubled times, and, for this, he should be remembered and honoured.

I visited Asmāra and Fratel Ezio many times, but the periods I remember most clearly are the mid-1980s, when famine, drought and starvation affected the country, and particularly Asmāra. The centre of the town was full of immigrants in desperate conditions, the guerrilla war was continuing, the offensive of the *Därg* ever more repressive. I clearly remember that the churches in town were completely open to refugees and starving people, day and night, and members of the Pavoni Centre were very active in this emergency. During the night Asmāra was a ghost town, abandoned by people; the central streets were full of animals which had died of starvation, remaining there for days on end before being removed. A real shocking scene, unforgettable, the worst years for a country undergoing many hardships. The memory of Fratel Ezio's complete devotion to Eritreans is still alive in my mind and I shared those terrible years with him. His presence in town, along with other members of different religious orders, contributed to alleviating the tribulations of the Eritrean people on many occasions.

A different epoch followed the emergence of the new government and Eritrean independence in 1991. A period characterized by great optimism, intense intellectual energy in many fields and an interesting scholarly milieu. Many scholars, Eritrean and foreign, visited Asmāra in order to improve Academia, to rebuild the university, and to increase the number of Eritrean professors. A new staff was established and many new positions were created, the most notable being the first Eritrean University President. In the 1990s the Pavoni Centre also embarked on a new policy, more open to academic researchers,

influenced by the emerging wave of Eritrean academic authorities. The energy came particularly from the younger generation of students, at any level, who were the first to use the facilities of the Pavoni library and the archive and who were seriously engaged in writing and researching on the recent history of the country. I spent six months in Asmāra, during my leave in 1995–1996, in the period in which a national historiography emerged, aimed at rewriting modern Eritrean history. I was engaged in very complex work in which many controversial issues needed to be solved, while writing a critical history of the modern period. It was during this period in Asmāra that I made very intensive use of the Fratel Ezio library, and of the increasing number of sources he had collected and catalogued without any help, succeeded in a very impressive task. Innumerable researchers from different countries regularly visited the library, contributing to an intense intellectual atmosphere in a new nation-state which was facing great difficulties in its efforts to emerge and build its future.

The 1990s–2000s were the most interesting years for scholars: new researches, new topics, historical research developed, and Fratel Ezio's hospitality and help provided a most attractive opportunity for studying and working in the town. A national historiography was built in the country, a characteristic of all African nation-states following colonialism. Eritrea made this effort only in the 1990s–2000s and history became a fundamental subject for the new generation of intellectuals. A delicate phase of the newly independent country had the aim of reworking the past. The Pavoni Centre did not interfere with this process and remained an independent institution outside the scope of political events.

What is Fratel Ezio's legacy? The Pavoni fathers have to consider this issue and dedicate all energies to preserving and improving the centre and at the same time, remember Fratel Ezio's role and his critical sense of history—a clear example of intellectual integrity. His work deserves continuing appreciation for it will help future generations in a country whose political conditions remain unstable. A difficult legacy, a challenging mission. History without politics, research combined with social commitment and responsibility for the destiny of young students, intellectuals and civil servants: these seem to me to be ideals which should be consolidated and passed on.

I planned to visit Asmāra this year, following my last visit five years ago, and this long absence is very unusual for me. Recently, it has been more difficult to get into Eritrea, a country affected by many contradictions. Certainly, on this occasion, I will miss his hospitality and the time spent in prolonged discussions with him on many issues regarding Eritrean history and society. I will also miss the help and support he gave me in a number of difficult situations during my fieldwork.

I conclude this note by listing some of Fratel Ezio's activities promoted during the period he spent in Asmāra and offering references to the obituaries written about him in the months since his passing; others will certainly follow. His memory will continue to stimulate us all.

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