



# Aethiopica 21 (2018)

International Journal of Ethiopian and  
Eritrean Studies

---

NICOLA CAMILLERI, Università di Pavia

## Dissertation Abstract

*Koloniale Untertanen. Die Politik der Staatsangehörigkeit im italienischen  
Eritrea und Deutsch-Ostafrika (1882–1919)*

Aethiopica 21 (2018), 290–293

ISSN: 1430-1938

---

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

by Alessandro Bausi

in cooperation with

Bairu Tafla, Ulrich Braukämper †, Ludwig Gerhardt,  
Hilke Meyer-Bahlburg, and Siegbert Uhlig

## Dissertation Abstract

NICOLA CAMILLERI, *Koloniale Untertanen. Die Politik der Staatsangehörigkeit im italienischen Eritrea und Deutsch-Ostafrika (1882–1919)*, PhD Dissertation in Modern History, Department of History and Cultural Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin, defended on 20 October 2017.

This dissertation centres on the question of how the colonial powers Germany and Italy regulated the legal status and thus the citizenship of the inhabitants of their colonies. The case studies of the investigation are the Italian colony Eritrea and German East Africa, which were established in 1890 and 1891 respectively.

Around the turn of the century, the question of citizenship engaged public opinion in both the Kingdom of Italy and the German Empire. The question of who might be considered an Italian or German citizen was central to these debates, as were the circumstances under which it was possible to acquire or lose the formal legal status of belonging to the nation-state. The conquest of the colonial territories enlarged the geographical scope of this discourse. However, colonial citizenship reflected a specific body of thought. From the beginning, plans of conquering colonial territories in non-European regions, above all in Africa, relied on the very popular and almost uncontested conception of the superiority of European civilization vis-à-vis other regions of the world. This conception determined the ways in which colonial powers dealt with the population of the colonies. The local populations of Italian Eritrea and German East Africa were basically considered uncivilized, barbaric, and racially inferior. The same applied to other populations of the African continent. In this allegedly barbaric and backward feature of the continent, the European powers found the moral justification for their colonial plans, which were mainly driven by political and economic arguments. The concept of the ‘civilizing mission’—originally a French term—performed a key function, eventually becoming characteristic of European colonialism. This colonial ideology held that the members of the supposedly higher European civilization had a duty to elevate other populations of the world, for example by substituting the lifestyle of the colonized peoples by that of the allegedly superior and more civilized Europeans.

Notions of racial difference dominated Italian and German societies at the turn of the twentieth century. They attracted much attention in academ-

ic publications and debates, and legitimated a view of the world according to which 'better' populations were predestined to dominate and rule. This gave a scientific basis to colonial expansion and influenced the relations with the local population of the colonies. Italian Eritrea and German East Africa were considered spaces in which racialized concepts of biological difference were to be implemented in citizenship policy. Both colonial powers struggled to classify and differentiate the local populations of their colony on the basis of race in order to consolidate their colonial rule. They created a plurality of legal statuses which allegedly defined the various ethnic, cultural, and social populations. One consequence was the segregation of colonizers and the local populations, which explicitly excluded the latter from citizenship status. Unlike in the metropolitan context, where a homogenization of society in national terms was pursued, citizenship in the colonial context aimed at a heightening of difference, thus strengthening colonial rule. The dissertation investigates the political and scientific debates on colonial citizenship, the norms regulating the legal status of colonial inhabitants, as well as the practices of granting citizenship. Furthermore the dissertation looks into both the legislative and administrative practices of colonial citizenship.

Italy and Germany represent an interesting case for a comparison because they are considered, in the European context, to be 'late' colonial powers and 'newcomers' to colonialism. They became national states in 1861 and 1871 respectively. After unification, both countries began their quest for colonial territories outside Europe, coinciding with the so-called 'scramble for Africa' during high imperialism. Thus, the process of constructing a nation-state took place in a period of colonial projects and debates about colonization. Being a nation-state involved the creation of a national profile in two respects: on the one hand, by generating institutional and legal structures which were culturally and socially homogeneous; on the other hand, by striving for international acknowledgment, and establishing a recognized economic and political role for the country in the world. In this perspective, the prestige of the nation also grew in the context of colonialism. The colonies Italian Eritrea and German East Africa appear particularly suitable for a comparative investigation in the field of citizenship policy. The local societies show similar structures regarding, for instance, the presence of an Arabic population in the coastal regions. In the dissertation, Italian Eritrea and German East Africa are considered to be legal and socio-political spaces related to the metropolitan context in a shared arena of interaction between colony and metropolis.

The dissertation is divided into three main parts based on a chronological and thematic division of five chapters. The first part is dedicated to the over-

lapping themes of colonial expansion in the two East-African regions and the first legal definitions of citizenship for the colonies. After reconstructing the political settings and events that led to the establishment of Eritrea and German East Africa, Chapters 1 and 2 follow the academic discussions regarding the legal status of the two colonies and their inhabitants. Colonial law struggled to fit the colonial conquest into a juridical frame with scientific fundamentals. As a matter of fact, the legitimation of colonial conquest was, in both the Kingdom of Italy and the German Empire, predominantly part of a political agenda that aimed to rank the two countries among the colonial powers. The ideological basis of this programme was the civilizing mission. During the first period of colonial rule, marked by military presence and confrontation, the legal status of the colonial population was not precisely defined. Initially, Italy and Germany excluded the local population from the metropolitan juridical sphere. A proper designation of the legal status of any part of the colonial societies came only after the establishment of colonial rule and thus after the turn of the century. This is the focus of the second part of the dissertation (Chapter 3). Citizenship policy is properly considered here as an instrument of (colonial) rule. Chapter 3 analyses the legal status of the colonial population both on the basis of the normative corpus and in the political and scientific debates. The natives in Italian Eritrea counted as ‘colonial subjects’ (*sudditi coloniali*); next to them was the so-called ‘assimilated population’ (*assimilati*), people hailing from countries considered to be of a ‘higher’ civilization than the natives. Both these categories were below the status of metropolitan citizenship. The local population in German East Africa was excluded from metropolitan citizenship in a similar manner. Here the natives were considered just ‘natives’ (*Eingeborene*) and ‘non-citizens’ (*Nicht-Reichsangehörige*). For political and socio-economic reasons, the German colonial administration created the so-called ‘citizenship of German East Africa’ (*deutsch-ostafrikanische Landesangehörigkeit*), a specific legal status conceived for a colonial middle class, mostly of Indian and Swahili origin. Given the similar separation between colonizers and local population, the specific legal construct of ‘colonial subjecthood’ (*sudditanza coloniale*) has no parallel in German East Africa.

The third part of the dissertation examines the possibility of changing one’s legal status within these colonial contexts. As a matter of fact, changing one’s legal status was theoretically possible in both colonies. The dissertation shows however that the colonial powers made this change of legal status almost impossible. Based on the analysis of naturalization processes (Chapter 4) and of family relations (Chapter 5), the dissertation focuses on the areas of citizenship, from which the natives were excluded. Nevertheless

the marriage ban issued in 1906 in German East Africa marks a difference between the two colonial powers, since a similar regulatory intervention came in the Italian colony only in the late 1930s. This is an example of the racist comportment of the German colonial administration in comparison to the Italian one. During World War I the Kingdom of Italy even opened metropolitan citizenship to all 'mixed race children' of the colony, who could be drafted into the army in the ongoing war. The comparison shows that a consistent line of national exclusion dominated the citizenship policy of German East Africa, while, in Italian Eritrea, citizenship policy seemed to fluctuate between racial segregation and utilitarian targets.