



Aethiopia 23 (2020)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

ALEXANDER MECKELBURG, Universität Hamburg

Miscellaneous

Ethiopian Refugees in Kenya c.1937–1941:

A Note on the Photo Collection at the Kenyan National Archive

Aethiopia 23 (2020), 213–220

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, Ludwig Gerhardt, Susanne Hummel,
Alexander Meckelburg, and Siegbert Uhlig

Editorial Team

Susanne Hummel, Francesca Panini

Ethiopian Refugees in Kenya c.1937–1941: A Note on the Photo Collection at the Kenyan National Archive*

ALEXANDER MECKELBURG, Universität Hamburg

The Italian occupation of 1935 and the consecutive war with Ethiopia have received wide scholarly attention over the decades. Nonetheless, a quite little-known aspect of this conflict concerns the history of refugees that sought shelter in Kenya. By 1937, both splinter groups of deserting Eritrean colonial soldiers, and Ethiopian nobles and their soldiers had attempted to seek refuge across the border in the colonial Kenyan territory. They were finally allowed to cross the border into the Northern Frontier District (NFD), after initial reluctance by the British authorities to engage with the influx, in order not to upset relations with the Italian government. It was only in the wake of the Graziani massacre that policies changed, and the refugees were given sanctuary.¹ However, the war at the southern front had also taken its toll on local pastoralist societies. In the event of the war between Italy and Ethiopia, British authorities were therefore challenged by the emergence of three types of ‘refugees’, for which they found three different responses. Pastoralists were turned away, Eritreans were interned as prisoners of war, and the Amhara-led groups of refugees were hosted in a ‘well-supplied but closely supervised camp, under special civilian officers’.² The ‘refugees’, then, consisted of a handful of nobles with their families, soldiers, and their entourage of slaves, porters, and servants. Some of these nobles and leaders included *Fitawrari* Tadämma, *Däggazmač* Wäldä Maryam, *Fitawrari* Zäwde, *Grazmač* Däbälä, and *Qänñazmač* Zälläqä. Altogether, with their families and entourages, the refugees may have not exceeded six thousand individuals. The Eritrean deserters numbered approximately six hundred individuals. Shelter was provided first at Isiolo both for Eritreans and Ethiopians (although separately); by 1939, for logistical rea-

* I would like to thank the Kenya National Archives for permission to use the photos selected here, as well as the staff, especially Mr Raphael Mwangi, for all the support I received.

¹ Shadle 2019.

² Wilkin 1980, 510.

sons, both groups were transferred to new camps near Coast Province. The Eritreans were sent to Kilifi District at Gotani and the Ethiopians to Taveta camp, along the Tsavo River.

This short exposition cannot hope to provide full coverage of the little-studied history of Ethiopian refugees in Kenya during the Italian war (outlined in only a few pieces of research, referenced below). Instead it provides information about a set of photographs available in the Kenya National Archives (KNA) in Nairobi. The collection consists of more than 150 images, taken between 1937 and 1941. The photographs were taken by various individuals, including administrators, journalists, and missionaries, and focus only on the Ethiopian refugees.³ At the KNA the images are stored in a photo album, with handwritten captions, presumably put together after World War II in an attempt to preserve the collection. They were also recently digitized by a team at the KNA, but without a caption system.

Additionally, the KNA holds a considerable corpus of archival documents, including administrative documents, reports, and notes, both with reference to the Eritrean internment camps and the Ethiopian refugee camps.⁴ They shed a light on the cross-border situation on the Ethiopian front: on the logistics of the refugee operations, transfer from Isiolo to Taveta camps, the provision of aid, technical, medical, and educational facilities, and so on. These documents, together with archival materials from the Foreign Office, newspapers, and the British parliament, have been used to provide a first overall treatment of this history.⁵ The history told thus far has focused on the British perspective, and there is not, to my knowledge, any extant account of the period told from an Ethiopian perspective. This means there exist multiple stories that have, as yet, not been told, and therefore still plenty of space for a re-evaluation of life in these camps.

³ These photos are found under the call number 325.21.Sec (Secretariat). There are a few other images under call number 825.21 Sec.

⁴ These are the border district commissioner reports (e.g. Isiolo, Marsabit, Turkana, etc.), and memorandums written between 1935 and 1941, but also specialized reports on the refugee camps, e.g. PC/Coast/2/26/30, *Ethiopian Refugee Camp Taveta, 1941–43*, and PC/Coast/2/26/2, *Eritrean Deserters, 1939*. The KNA reference system has been computerized, and access is simple.

⁵ Kagwanja 2003; Shadle 2019; Wilkin 1980.

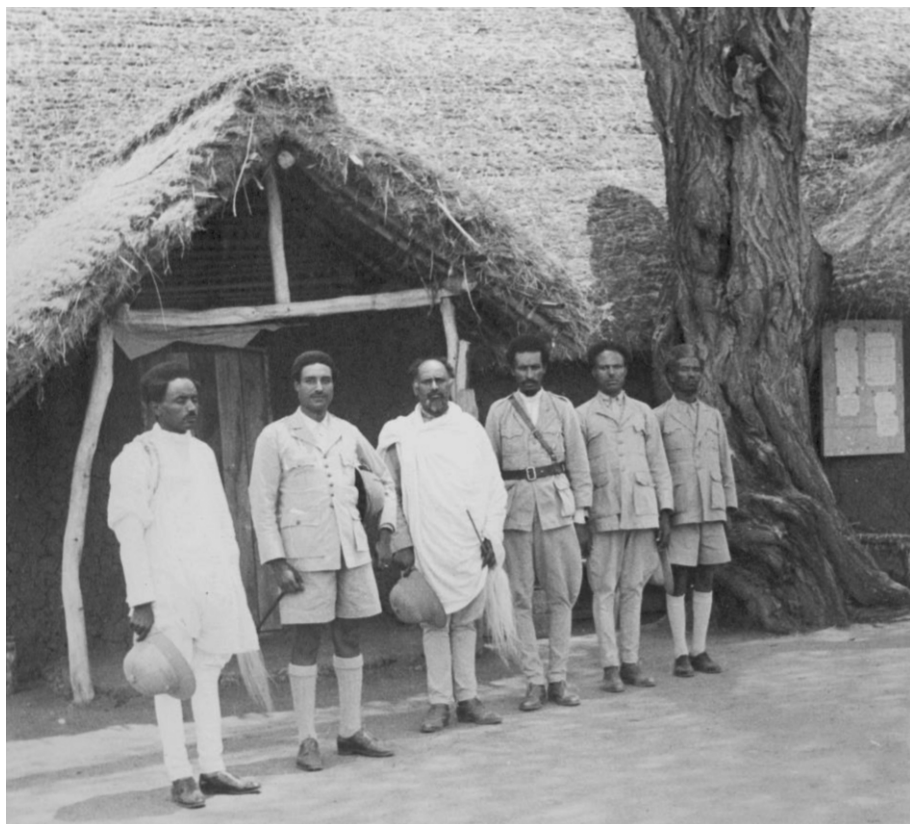


Fig. 1 Original caption: 'Fitaurari Zaudi, Negadras Kiffle, Azai Zaudi, Grazmatch Asfau, Grazmatch Dabella, Kenyazmatch Zalaka', 1937, Isiolo camp.

The photographs held in the collection of the KNA could potentially help with such a reassessment. While most images clearly showcase British humanitarianism (feeding of children, treatment of the sick, hospital wards, smallpox vaccination, etc.), they also provide invaluable additional information on camp-life, social relations, ethnic composition, relations between refugees and administration, and so on.

Figs. 2 and 3 are pictures taken during the transfer between Karsa (on Lake Turkana) and the first camp at Isiolo. Several pages of similar pictures are captioned as 'Journey of Abyssinian Refugees between Karsa and Isiolo camp'.



Fig. 2 Original caption: 'Journey of Abyssinian Refugees between Karsa and Isiolo camp'.

The boy of noble upbringing with his mule contrasts with the group that seems to be led by a soldier, the gun carrier to the right, together with maybe another soldier to the left, and with an entourage of porters and servants (possibly slaves) that followed the families of the Ethiopian nobles and soldiers.



Fig. 3 Original caption: 'Journey of Abyssinian Refugees between Karsa and Isiolo camp'.

James Sequeira, a British journalist who visited Isiolo camp in 1937, noted phenotypical differences: "The visitor could not fail to be struck by the racial differences in the refugees. It was said that some thirty tribes were represented, for 1572 of the immigrants into Kenya were slaves. A few of the high caste, pure-bred Amhara were fairer than many Southern Europeans".⁶ A considerable number of photos express the contemporary interest in phenotypical 'types' and 'races'. This is manifest in the multiple portraits of different ethnic communities among the Ethiopian refugees.

Another set of images indicates the development from emergency aid provisions (e.g. smallpox vaccination and health checks under trees), to the building of the first makeshift camp, to showcasing the health facilities at Isiolo camp, to the well-built and equipped Taveta camp.

⁶ Sequeira 1939, 331.



Fig. 4 Original caption: 'Medical examination and check at North Horr'.



Fig. 5 Original caption: 'The camp hospital'.

Both photos were taken in 1937 in Isiolo. The medical staff consisted of European and Indian doctors and African laboratory assistants; Ethiopians were also trained and employed.⁷

The photo collection further presents the feeding of school children and their education, mostly portraying a drill-type situation in school compounds.



Fig. 6 School children; no original caption available.

In a seminal study that sheds light on the importance of this history for understanding the transformation of British humanitarianism from anti-slavery to refugee aid, Bronwen Everill reminds us that the new refugee system took its form from previously existing camps for freed slaves, such as Frere town near Mombasa.⁸ The author concludes that ‘modern theories of migration, asylum, refugee and resettlement law owe more to this colonial anti-slavery legacy than is credited, and the structures of governance, language of “development”, and psychological and social issues identified as problems arising from contemporary refugee camps might be better understood in this context’.⁹ The photo collection itself gives additional evidence for the humanitari-

⁷ Ibid., 330.

⁸ Everill 2014.

⁹ Ibid., 351.

an ideology of the time, and the history of humanitarian object-framing for wider political ends.

In this very short note, the hope is to make this remarkably rich collection of valuable materials known to a wider public. The plight of refugees, but also the wider context of the history of refugees and humanitarianism in this part of the world, is a field deserving of far wider recognition. For an Ethiopianist audience, it is of particular historical interest as this part of the story of the Italo-Ethiopian war has not been well explored. The next steps should involve a more comprehensive analysis of the photographs, as well as their critical juxtaposition with available data from the British and Kenyan archives. Furthermore, these images could serve as a base to collect oral memories of refugees and their descendants, and further excavate the legacies of refugee life. One can be certain that various fascinating biographies lay hidden beneath the administrative notes and photos. The sheer amount of the images makes them a valuable resource for the rethinking of life histories, camp-life, social relations, and host-refugee relations, and those between Ethiopians and the administration, rather than the present situation in which history is told solely through the views of the administrators and missionaries.

References

- Everill, B. 2014. 'The Italo-Abyssinian Crisis and the Shift from Slave to Refugee', *Slavery & Abolition*, 35/2 (2014), 349–365.
- Kagwanja, P. M. 2003. *Unwanted in the 'White Highlands': The Politics of Civil Society and the Making of a Refugee in Kenya, 1902–2002*, PhD Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (2003).
- Sequeira, J. H. 1939. 'The Ethiopian Refugees in Kenya', *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 38/152 (1939), 329–333.
- Shadle, B. L. 2019. 'Reluctant Humanitarians: British Policy Toward Refugees in Kenya During the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1940', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 47/1 (2019), 167–186.
- Wilkin, D. 1980. 'Refugees and British Administrative Policy in Northern Kenya, 1936–1938', *African Affairs*, 79/317 (1980), 510–530.

Summary

The Kenya National Archives in Nairobi hosts a large collection of photos of British refugee camps taken during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. This brief overview of the collection does not endeavour to analyse this little-known aspect of Ethiopian history but to introduce the photo collection as a possible tool to assess the history of migration and refuge in this part of the world.