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Indigenous Views on the Italian Occupation in Southern Ethiopia: A Post-Colonial Approach*

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Introductory remarks

Since the 1990s cultural and social anthropology in Africa have increasingly dealt with themes and theoretical issues which focus on the legacy of the colonial past for present day societies. For this current debate scholars commonly employ the label “postcolonialism” or “postcolonial studies”. Generally, three different approaches are subsumed under this label: first, a description of institutional conditions in formerly colonial societies, second, an abstract, critical view of the global condition after the end of the colonial period, and third, an analysis of discourses informed by the epistemological and psychological orientations which are products of those conditions¹. It is obvious that in this particular context emphasis is to be laid on the last mentioned approach.

With regard to Ethiopia one has to state first of all that the country was subjected by a European colonial power, Italy, for less than six years between 1935 und 1941. This occupation was therefore marginal and consequently does not play an important part in the mainstream discussion on post-colonial issues. Interest in Italian colonialism has concentrated on selective topics: the endeavour of revenging the blemish of the defeat at Adwa (1896), international diplomacy, ideological positions, political and military dimensions of the war and the cruelties of Fascist rule, particularly those committed in the heartlands of Christian Ethiopia. The time of the Italian occupation was characterized by incessant warfare which was hardly documented apart from the “official” fronts of the Ethiopian and Italian armies, however. Ethnographers of the 1950s in southern Ethiopia, such as Adolf Jensen, Eike Haberland and Helmut Straube, came to know many details of events during the Italian rule and they openly spoke of them in private discussion. But because of their focus on culture history, they rarely considered data on the recent past as worth publishing. It was not before the 1980s that researchers, for example Hermann Amborn, Dirk Bustorf and myself, became increasingly involved in documenting the oral history

* This article is based on a paper presented at the 17th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Abäba on November 3, 2009.

¹ Cf. VIVESVAN 1996: 988.

of southern Ethiopia in which “war and remembrance” is a theme of particular interest in the context of Italian colonial warfare.²

Despite its brief duration, the Italian occupation nevertheless affected the socio-economic patterns and practices of people in many parts of Ethiopia. As the historian Bahru Zewde has convincingly stated, a proper assessment of the historical significance of the time between 1935 and 1941 is still pending: “... it is quite evident that the Italian legacy cannot be merely subsumed, as has been the custom, under road-building and prostitution”.³ So far neither the oral traditions nor the archival records seem to have been exhaustively examined and evaluated.

The centre of my own interest is central-southern Ethiopia, where I collected oral data from the early 1970s onwards particularly among Hadiyya, Kambaata, Gurage, Allaaba, Sidaama and Arsi-Oromo and interpreted them in the context of information provided by written sources. Historical facts from other areas such as Käfa, Gamo Gofa and Ogaden are desirable in order to complete the state of knowledge on Italian colonialism from the emic perspective of Ethiopian people. The data presented here reveal collaboration with as well as resistance against the foreign rulers. But although these revelations prove to be a highly sensitive issue, provoking controversial views and emotions even several decades after the events, it seems to be due time now to discuss the details in a decidedly unbiased scholarly approach.

The periodization of Italian colonialism can roughly be subdivided into three phases: first, the period of military conquest (1935–37), second, the time of more or less consolidated rule (1937–41), and third, the collapse and the retreat of the foreign occupants (1941). In the following, I will give a brief outline of all three phases.

The period of military occupation (1935–37)

Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia started on October 3, 1935, and according to an official declaration the occupation was accomplished on May 9, 1936, after the Italian armies of the Eritrean and the Somali front had met at Dərre Dawa.⁴ However, by this time hardly more than one third of Ethiopia’s

² Relevant data regarding this type of “history from below” were composed, for example, by AMBORN 1988: 751–61; AMBORN 2009: 28, 34, 286; BRAUKÄMPER 1980, chapters 3.8.1, 3.8.2; BRAUKÄMPER 1983, chapter 2.9; BUSTORF 2009, chapter 7.3; BUSTORF 2010. For the methodology cf. WINTER – SIVAN 1999.

³ BAHRU ZEWEDE 1988: 277.

⁴ For the chronology of the war cf. DEL BOCA 1969; SBACCHI 1985; OFCANSKY 2007. A new state of research on Italian atrocities in Ethiopia was presented by ASFA-WOSSEN ASSERATE – MATTIOLI (eds.) 2006.

territory had really been conquered. The fierce fighting in the central-southern parts of the country did not end before the surrender and execution of *ras* Dästa Dämṭaw at Butaḡira, Gurage Province, on February 24, 1937.⁵

In the areas south of Šäwa, occupied by emperor Möniläk II during the last quarter of the 19th century, Ḥabäša conquerors, i.e. Christian Amhara and to a lesser extent Təgray and Tuulama-Oromo,⁶ had established a harsh type of rule which degraded the bulk of the local inhabitants to the status of so-called *gäbbar*, serfs of the state. The *gäbbar*-system varied in certain details from province to province. Usually, a number of local families were attached to *näftännä* (gun-men), soldiers mostly of Amharic origin, whom they had to supply with food and socage services. Only the traditional chiefs of the native peoples kept their positions as independent land-owners (*balabbat*). In order to maintain their privileges in this “quasi-feudalistic” structure they were expected to act as agents for the new political authority and were often alienated from their own groups.⁷ The Orthodox Church also benefited from grants it received for the purpose of usufruct (*g^walt* rights, called *sämon* in this special case) and was furthermore exempted from taxes.

Although the annexation of the south was often glorified as an act of unification for modern Ethiopia, from the point of view of the subjected peoples it was conceived and experienced as a type of colonialist expansion. It was frequently stated that the degree of oppression even exceeded Fascist imperialism in north-eastern Africa. Hatred against “Amhara” rule was therefore widespread and deep-rooted in the so-called *dar agär*, the conquered land.

The areas in the south except the borderland with Somalia were not directly affected by the Italian invasion before January 1936, when the Ethiopian armies commanded by *ras* Dästa Damṭaw in Sidamo-Borana and *däggazmač* Bäyyänä Märäd in Bale retreated northwards after disastrous defeats. They resisted in the highlands of the Gänale and Wabi Šäbäle headwaters until the beginning of 1937 and then moved to the lowlands of the Rift Valley.

However, the situation had started to become precarious for the imperial government immediately after the mobilization of the garrisons from the

⁵ Precise data are presented by *Guida dell’Africa Orientale Italiana* 1938: 548.

⁶ The oral traditions of the southern peoples mostly used “Amhara” as a collective label, but the term “Ḥabäša” seems to be more adequate to summarize all settlers from the Christian empire of Ethiopia.

⁷ For details regarding the Hadiyya and neighbouring peoples of central-southern Ethiopia cf. BRAUKÄMPER 1980, chapters 3.7.1 and 3.7.2.

southern provinces to positions in Təgray and Ogaden. For example, the forces of Kāmbata province numbering 30,000 soldiers, were brought into action on the northern front by governor Māšāša Wāldā and put under the command of *ras* Getaččāw Abatā.⁸ The local *balabbat* had to join the armed forces as fighters, and additionally, many natives were recruited as porters and servants. People remembered the misery and the casualties of this auxiliary personnel to have been extremely high, because it received less care and lower provisions than the combat troops.

Following the considerable reduction of political control and military presence in their areas, the latent bitterness of the southerners quickly escalated into a desire for rebellion and resistance. More or less spontaneous uprisings against the Ethiopian authorities started among the indigenous populations in the provinces of Gurage, Kāmbata, Arussi, Sidamo and Bale. Rebels of these peoples rose against those *nāftāñña* reserves who kept the Ethiopian position mainly in the *kātāma*, the towns and headquarters of the provinces. The *nāftāñña* were technically superior due to their being equipped with rifles, but hopelessly outnumbered by the autochthonous peoples. However, because of hereditary animosities and divergent interests, interethnic wars broke out between the rebellious groups, who were thus unable to establish a united front of resistance. Consequently, it was easy for the *nāftāñña* to win allies and to defend their position until the final occupation of the Rift Valley by Italian troops terminated the warlike clashes in April 1937.

The market for weaponry was considerable and according to informants in southern Ethiopia old rifles of the *Fusil gras* type could already be purchased in exchange of four sheep; modern Snyders and Remingtons were more expensive. However, firearms were in most cases accessible only to northern colonists and the *balabbat*, whereas the military equipment of local warriors was usually restricted to lances, spears, swords and shields.

The voluminous literature on the “Italo-Abyssinian” war has commonly focused on the dramatic military actions involving the armies of the two nations. It has so far neglected the fact that simultaneously a civil war broke out in many parts of Ethiopia which considerably weakened the resistance of the defenders, and, at the same time, favoured the advance of the foreign aggressors. The confrontation between pro-Italian and anti-Italian factions caused a serious dividing line in the population of the country which continued to have a negative impact on political, social, economic and cultural co-existence for several decades after the liberation from colonial rule. It

⁸ ULLENDORFF, *The Autobiography of Emperor Haile Sellasie I* (1976: 278f.). This was confirmed by my own oral records (BRAUKÄMPER 1980: 354).

was honourable for Ethiopians to report actions of resistance against the foreign invaders as fighters in the war or as “patriots” (*arbännña*) during the time of occupation. Collaborators with the Fascist European colonialists, presumably the majority of the inhabitants in the southern provinces, however, tended to be reluctant to talk about their experiences and deeds, because they considered themselves as historical losers and were also afraid of being exposed to sanctions.⁹ That is why information about pro-Italian attitudes and actions has scarcely been documented in collections of oral traditions by foreign researchers as well as in literary contributions by Ethiopian authors.¹⁰

In 1916, the imperial government had once been confronted with serious uprisings in the southern provinces when most of the military garrisons had marched to Šäwa in order to fight the supporters of *Ləḡ* Iyasu Mika³el at Sägäle.¹¹ It was therefore well aware of the danger of rebellion in this part of the country and took precautions to minimize the threat by reorganizing administrative units and territorial defence, by recruiting local militias and by fortifying the important *kätäma* such as Hossana, Soddo/Wälaytta, Yerga °Aläm, Ṭičo and Gobba. When reports of the Ethiopian disaster in the battle of May Čaw in Təgray (March 31 to April 3, 1936) reached the southern provinces, violent opposition against Ḥabäša authority exploded and a year of incessant internal fighting started. For a short period in May, a political entity labelled “Western Galla Confederation” was founded among the western Oromo which unsuccessfully requested support from the British.¹² A large part of the population in central-southern Ethiopia openly sympathised with the collapse of Ethiopian rule and looked forward to welcoming the foreign invaders as liberators. The situation of the rebels continued to be precarious, however, as long as remnants of the imperial army under *ras* Dästa Damtäw operated in the Lake Region of the Rift Valley. These regular troops were able to integrate the Ḥabäša soldiers and the *balabbat* who fled back to their home areas after the collapse of the northern front. Their final destruction by Italian forces in eastern Gurage province in February and the occupation of Soddo/Wälaytta in April 1937 terminated the period

⁹This war confirmed by my own research experiences and also stated by HABERLAND 1993: 215f.

¹⁰Reports by Ethiopian authors in this respect tend to be biased and one-sided, as for example, the prominent one of Haylä Sellase I (ULLENDORFF 1976, chapters 34–47). An important work in this field of studies has been contributed by KÄBBÄDÄ TÄSÄMMA (1969/70: 394–425) who, for example, extensively deals with the imperial decrees and the Ethio–Italian negotiations. I am indebted to Bairu Tafla for this information.

¹¹For details cf. BRAUKÄMPER 1980: 326–32 and map 26.

¹²Cf. EZEKIEL GEBISSA 2007.

of intensive fighting between regular troops, although the *Pax Romana* could never fully be established in this part of the country.

The Hadiyya and the Arsi-Oromo were among the fiercest opponents to Ethiopian rule.¹³ Already during the Italian advance in the provinces of Bale and Sidamo, Arsi fighters had joined the invaders and subsequently supported them by guerrilla operations as well as in various battles, e.g. at Magalo, Sabirro, Gololča, Lago, Arbegona, Sade, Goği and Yørga °Aläm. Three Arsi leaders, Saymo Kimmo, Noho Daadi and Wäldä Mika’el Bui, were particularly mentioned in the oral traditions as allies of the Italians.¹⁴ The ongoing decline of Ethiopian power incited the rebels to attack the *näftännä* and their allies, at first in their scattered homesteads and then in their villages and towns. Brutality escalated to an extent that the rebels killed even the women and children of their adversaries, thus provoking counter-actions of a similar type. One of the few eyewitnesses who openly spoke of the battles and massacres of that time was my main Hadiyya informant Nammana Dilliso who stated: “We finished all the *näftännä* without any pity, and I am not afraid to confess this deed”.

Generally, in reminiscences and oral reports the “time of chaos” during the Italian occupation has therefore remained ambivalent in many respects. Protagonists involved in warlike actions mostly remembered it as a turbulent, heroic time when the martial virtues and the “killing system”, i.e. a detailed scale of honorary rewards for the killing of human adversaries and dangerous animals, were revitalised. But people also recalled the time as a dark period of extraordinary cruelties and considered it inconvenient and possibly disadvantageous to speak of it.

From May 1936 onwards, Ethiopian rule gradually collapsed also in those parts of the country which were not yet efficiently controlled by the Italian invaders. As already indicated, the situation was obviously worst in those regions of the Rift Valley between Gurageland and northern Sidamo Province, where remnants of Ethiopian troops resisted until spring 1937. One of the latest positions to be occupied by the Italians was Soddo/Wälaytta in April of the same year.

¹³ The following data are mainly based on oral reports documented by local informants, particularly from the Hadiyya elder Nammana Dilliso (BRAUKÄMPER 1980: 349–57). Cf. BUSTORF 2009: 306–09. According to a personal information which I received by PAUL BAXTER in 1979, his informants confessed that the Arsi-Oromo were “pro-Italian to a man”.

¹⁴ BRAUKÄMPER 1980: 349. Cf. GRAZIANI 1940: 232, 266, 306, 308; ZOLI 1937: 365–67, maps XXII, XXIII.

The military actions during the second half of 1936 in the area inhabited by Arsi-Oromo can roughly be sketched as follows.¹⁵ The *näftännä* were reinforced by imperial Ethiopian combatants under *grazmač* Ḥaylä Bəru who were retreating from the Čärčär mountains in a south-western direction. They beat a contingent of Arsi fighters led by *fitawrari* Mälässa near Gobesa and drove them from the regions of Širka and Gädäb towards the Wabi Šäbälle headwaters. *Näftännä* and loyal *balabbat* from the lowlands of the Rift Valley as well as the Gullallee, Christian Šäwa Oromo settlers in the Munesa region, partly took refuge in Mälässa's stronghold. At the same time violent conflicts started between Arsi and Sidaama, longtime arch-enemies, and occasionally also between Arsi clans, such as the Weege and Aboosa near the Mäqi river. The small ethnic group of the Zay took refuge from the turmoils on the islands of Lake Z^way. The final occupation of the Arsi highlands by the Italians took place during the second half of 1936 from the region of Nazret (Adaama). On their way to Asälla they met fierce resistance from remnants of Ethiopian forces near Huruta and therefore continued their southward advance east of the Čälalo massif. Ṭičo, the capital of Arsi province, was taken after heavy attacks by the Italian air force which employed poison gas. The remaining pockets of *arbännä* fighters under *fitawrari* Dibaba and *fitawrari* Wabičet surrendered in July in Arba-Gugu.

In the western parts of the Rift Valley warlike activity continued. In August 1936, *däğğazmač* Balča Šafo (Abba Näfso) advanced from Äğämğa in northern Gurage province towards Addis Abäba, but he was defeated and killed by the Italians at Bächčo.¹⁶ After their retreat from the highlands of Sidamo province, the remnants of *ras* Dästa Dämṭaw's troops had taken their last position on the eastern escarpment of the Gurage highlands. The local population of this area, the Islamic Səlṭe groups, formerly labelled East Gurage, were reputed to be particularly loyal to the emperor because of marriage links established with King Šahlä Šällase of Šäwa (ruled 1813–47). For a period of more than half a year, Səlṭeland continued to be a stronghold for the defence of the imperial Ethiopian position. The Səlṭe groups founded a "*Gogot*", a political alliance consisting of Azärnät-Bärbäre, Aliččo-Wuriro, Səlṭi and Wəlbaräg-Mälga, which was also joined by the Allaaba, Mäsqañ and Wäläne-Gädäbano and parts of the Säbat bet (seven

¹⁵ The following data are based on oral records which I collected between 1970 and 1974 (BRAUKÄMPER 1980: 351–57).

¹⁶ BAIRU TAFLA 2003: 457. This event was still vividly remembered in the oral traditions of the Qabeena region in 1973.

houses) Gurage.¹⁷ Warriors of this federation, supported by *naftäñña* forces, started invading the land of their hereditary enemies, the Libido-Hadiyya west of Lake Zway in May 1936. On their southern flank they were assisted by Gurage fighters commanded by *imam* Sugato Zäyñi as well as by parts of the Allaaba. The Libido and Arsi, who could muster about 1500 warriors equipped with rifles and another 3000 fighters carrying spears, were forced to retreat to the region between the rivers Mäqi and Awaš with their families and herds. Although they received reinforcements from the eastern highlands of Arsi, they could not return to their areas before the final Italian establishment of military and political control in May 1937. In February they had sent a delegation headed by *qäññazmač* Wooshebbe to the Italians in order to welcome them as liberators and to complain about their miserable situation as refugees.

Apart from the Libido and the Arsi in the lowlands of the Rift Valley, the *Gogot* federation faced the Hadiyya subgroups Leemo, Shaashoogo, Sooro and Baadawwaachcho. The Shaashoogo were able to stop the advance of the Allaaba in the region of Ače, and the Ĕndägañ-Gurage paid a considerable amount of tribute to *imam* Sugato in order to prevent him from plundering their area.¹⁸

In Hossana, the capital of Kambata province, the deputy governor *fitawrari* Tamrat Wälda Sämayat had organized an efficient resistance against the Hadiyya rebels. He fortified the town, which had to shelter numerous *naftäñña* refugees who had escaped the massacres escalating from May 1936 onwards. He sent special messengers to *dägğazmač* Mäk^wännən Wossäne, the Ethiopian commander in Soddo/Wälaytta, and to the *Gogot* federation headed by *imam* Sugato in order to coordinate the Ḥabäša defence. The forces of the Sälte, however, were engaged in fighting the Arsi and Libido, and the positions of *naftäñña* and their native allies in Wälaytta were threatened by attacks of the Baadawwaachcho-Hadiyya and Sidaama. The Leemo-Hadiyya supported by Kambaata warriors overran most of Hossana, but they were unable to take the strongly fortified *gäbbi*, the administrative headquarters. However, the defenders were superior in their equipment of rifles and even possessed some machine guns. Following the first shock of their retreat, they counterattacked, drove the rebels southwards to the area of the Sooro-Hadiyya and took revenge by merciless raiding and plundering. At the same time, in May 1936, the Baadawwaachcho

¹⁷The oral records collected by BUSTORF (2009: 289–93) have considerably enlarged the knowledge about the time of Italian rule among the Sälte and completed my own data (BRAUKÄMPER 1980: 353f.).

¹⁸Oral information recorded by BUSTORF (2009: 291).

had invaded Wälaytta and forced their adversaries to take refuge behind the palisades of Soddo *kätäma*. After the Wälaytta, arch-enemies of the Hadiyya, had hastily mobilized their warriors and joined the *naftäñña* forces, Mäk^wännən led a counteroffensive in June. He took up position in the southern foothills of Ambariččo massif, whereas *fitawrari* Tamrat approached from the north. The two commanders obviously planned to destroy the rebels in a concerted pincer movement, but this action was not efficiently coordinated. The Hadiyya concentrated their attack on Tamrat's troops and pushed them back before Mäk^wännən was able to join the battle. Most of the *naftäñña* forces retreated to Hossana. The Hadiyya warriors abstained from pursuing them in order to stop the advance of the *Gogot* federation in the northeast of their territory.¹⁹

Despite their occasional military successes, it was unquestionable for the rebellious Hadiyya and Kambaata that their situation should become increasingly hopeless during the second half of 1936. They were therefore anxiously looking forward to the advance of the Italian troops in the Rift Valley. In October, remnants of *naftäñña* from Sidamo province reinforced the imperial combatants in Wälaytta²⁰, and the *Gogot* federation of the Sölte and the Gurage invaded the northern parts of Kāmbata province. Many semi-nomadic Hadiyya managed to preserve their existence by moving to remote and malaria-stricken lowland regions with their herds. The Kambaata peasants were less mobile, and therefore more vulnerable and exposed to the plundering of their means of existence. According to eyewitnesses and orally recorded memories, excessive killing of people, quite often including women and children, burning of houses as well as destruction and theft of property occurred. It was obviously the most chaotic and cruel time the inhabitants of these areas had ever experienced. In this hopeless situation the Baadaawaachcho sent delegates to *däggazmač* Mäk^wännən to declare their surrender and were then forced to support his campaign against other Hadiyya subgroups and pockets of resistance among the Kambaata. They are said to have silently agreed that women and children of their own tribesmen should never be harmed during these military operations.

After the *naftäñña* and their allies had gained control in most of Kāmbata province, they moved eastwards in order to fight the anti-imperial forces in western Arsiland and to support the remnants of Dästa Damṭäw's army which were retreating northwards from the Sidaama highlands. In this

¹⁹ Numerous names of commanders and successful warriors as well as details of warlike actions were remembered by the informants (cf. BRAUKÄMPER 1980: 354–57; BUSTORF 2009: 290f.). To mention all of them is beyond the scope of this article.

²⁰ DAVIS 1972: 96; GIACCARDI 1937: 1555.

situation of temporary superiority, they decided to destroy once and for all the obstinate Hadiyya groups, particularly the Baadawwaachcho, who, in turn, prepared themselves for a last desperate fight. But they were saved, because in January 1937, the first columns of Italian soldiers arrived in the region of the upper Bilate from the north as well as from the south. Supported by bombardment by their air force, they overcame the fierce resistance of the imperial troops and pursued their scattered remnants. Hosana surrendered on February 11, and Soddo/Wälaytta on April 4.²¹ *Fitawrari* Tamrat fell in action, but his brother kept up resistance in the gorge of the upper Gibe (Omo) for some time. According to oral sources, a small group of Amhara patriots under the leadership of Asfäha resisted the new colonial rulers in that remote area until the return of Ḥaylä Šöllase in 1941. The situation of the *arbännä*, who had to adapt themselves to guerrilla tactics, was particularly dangerous in southern Ethiopia, where the Italian colonialists enjoyed a notable amount of sympathy and active collaboration from a large part of the population.

Principles, practices and effects of Italian colonial rule

Through the occupation of Ethiopia Italy had realized her dream of an East African colonial empire. Resistance against the new rulers, however, remained omnipresent, and was most efficiently counteracted by a policy of “divide et impera”. Fascist ideology favoured brutal suppression of colonial subjects, which was practiced particularly during the administration of viceroy Rodolfo Graziani (1936–37). Italian rule was also characterized by an outstanding amount of bureaucracy and corruption.²²

According to the new administrative division of *Africa Orientale Italiana*, the peoples of central-southern Ethiopia, with the exception of the Somali, were placed under the governorates, large multi-ethnic territorial clusters, of *Galla e Sidama* (with the capital Ġimma) and *Harar*. The eastern Oromo and most of the Arsi were ascribed to *Harar* obviously because of their Islamic orientation. This was one of the reasons why the administrative system was affected by serious problems in the two neighbouring governorates concerning regional boundaries. The Arsi on their western borderland, for example, initially refused to cooperate with the government and pay taxes, before an agreement was reached in 1939.²³ At a lower level, the Italians hardly changed the territorial divisions and structures and mostly adopted the existing places

²¹ Cf. *Guida dell’Africa Italiana* 1938: 548.

²² SBACCHI 1985: 80, 85ff.; PERHAM 1969: 372.

²³ Cf. SBACCHI 1985: 92f.

of residence such as Ticho, Gobba, Hossana and Soddo/Wälaitta.²⁴ However, they almost completely removed the administrative personnel of the imperial regime, a measure highly welcomed by the majority of the inhabitants in southern Ethiopia. The new masters benefited from the deep-rooted hatred against the Habäša governors and landlords and enjoyed much loyalty from the newly established chiefs. Local dignitaries, who eagerly collaborated, were granted privileges and titles. Sugato Zäyni, for example, the leader of the Sälte *Gogot*, was appointed *capo dei Guraghe Orientali* and received special authority and military equipment including modern machine guns in order to fight rebellious “šəfta”.²⁵ The *balabbat* and descendent of the royal dynasty in Kambaata, Barganno Mooliso, managed to become an esteemed counsellor of the Italian resident and exploited this position for the benefit of his own family and his group.²⁶ With regard to honorary titles, the Italians maintained the existing Amharic versions, but occasionally they also awarded titles of a local cultural or Muslim background. Usually, they also paid salaries to the collaborating members of the traditional nobility according to their respective ranks.²⁷ Although the principles of indirect rule contradicted the racist and totalitarian ideology of Fascist colonialism, they were nevertheless employed for pragmatic reasons to a noteworthy extent.

The most important change brought about by the foreign occupants in southern Ethiopia was the abolition of the *gäbbar* system, which was declared to be totally inconsistent with occidental civilization. The peasants were not only exempted from the hitherto heavy tribute and socage services to their landlords, but received possessory titles to the land which they had tilled. However, the Italian administration abstained from the difficult task of surveying, reorganizing and redistributing landownership. Apart from the expulsion of *näftäñña*, it hardly interfered in the *status quo* of the actually existing settlement patterns of ethnic groups. Peasants from Kambaata, Sälte and Gurage, for example, who had looked for a living in *näftäñña* fiefs in the thinly populated grazing areas of semi-nomadic Hadiyya and Arsi were permitted to stay there. Likewise, Sidaama and Gede’o settlers were able to remain on their agricultural plots in Guğgiland, where they were, however, permanently exposed to the danger of attacks from the bellicose Guğgi nomads. As a rule, colonial governments considered sedentary peasants as more controllable and more productive than mobile herdsmen. The

²⁴The *Guida dell’Africa Orientale Italiana* (1938: 461,464, 548f., 555, 557) presents demographic data for most of these places.

²⁵BUSTORF 2009: 311.

²⁶BRAUKÄMPER 1983: 109; BRAUKÄMPER 1980: 361.

²⁷Cf. SBACCHI 1985: 136f., 150, 152f.

fixation of the Italian tax rate to the paying of tithe and an annual *per capita* tax of one Maria Theresa *thaler* for cattle was gratefully welcomed by the rural population as a considerable reduction of their fiscal burden.²⁸

The persistence of slavery in Ethiopia – despite various attempts by Mənilək and Ḥaylā Səllase to ban it – had provided a basic justification for the Italians to occupy the country in order to bring about global standards of a humanitarian civilization. The rigorous abolition of the slave trade and all forms of slavery therefore possessed such a high priority that Graziani already proclaimed a general liberation of slaves on February 27, 1936, i.e. long before the end of the military operations.²⁹ Hadiyya informants reported that the colonial administration succeeded in abolishing slavery quickly because of efficient means of control and draconian punishments. A considerable number of people who had been kidnapped and deported to other areas were enabled to return to their places of origin.³⁰ However, during their short period of occupation, the Italians were unable to achieve complete emancipation of the former slaves which would have included assignment of land to them. In some areas of southern Ethiopia the percentage of slaves was so high, in Wälaytta, for example, it amounted to approximately one fourth of the population, that insuperable logistical problems arose. The majority of freeborn people were not too eager to give up their socio-economic privileges and share their resources. Therefore, their willingness to cooperate in order to grant benefits to the former slaves was limited. Some of the freed individuals found an economic niche working as blacksmiths, a profession which was not prestigious, but which did not put them on the same level as the culturally marginalized castes of the potters, woodworkers and tanners. According to my own observations, slave origin was still clearly remembered among many groups of southern Ethiopia in the 1970s, and the most blatant disparities regarding access to means of production by ex-slaves and marginalized craftworkers were obviously not overcome before the land reform of 1975.

The Italian colonialists considered it as one of their highest priorities to construct a road system of a projected length of more than 6000 miles in order to foster economic development. Roads were desperately needed to facilitate transport of goods to towns and market places as well as efficient military control. The local governors and chiefs had to provide manpower,

²⁸ BRAUKÄMPER 1980: 358. For information regarding the system of taxation cf. also MAHTEME SELASSIE WOLDE MASKAL 1957.

²⁹ GRAZIANI 1940: 307; PERHAM 1969: 232.

³⁰ Concrete cases were recorded, for example, from the Dizi by HABERLAND (1993: 213–15). Cf. also AMBORN 2006: 1–28.

and the necessity of mustering workers became a steady source of conflict. Obviously, forced labour for projects of infrastructure painfully reminded people in southern Ethiopia of the sorage services and of their former status as *gäbbar*. Regarding the lack of enthusiasm the Arsi-Oromo demonstrated for the task of road construction, the Italian officer Giorgio Cannonieri angrily complained as follows: “But the Arussi consider themselves as big masters, a race superior to the petty farmers, as great cattle keepers, as hunters of big game who oppose accepting lower works” (my translation).³¹

Oral traditions refer to a number of agricultural innovations which spread during the Italian occupation. The cultivation of red pepper and cotton expanded in the lowlands of the Rift Valley, bananas were introduced from Ğimma to regions west of the Omo and the production of coffee was sponsored to become the major cash crop of many highland areas. The Hadiyya remember the introduction of a special type of maize which became known as “talianš bokollo”. The European colonialists showed less interest, however, in the improvement of animal husbandry.³²

People in southern Ethiopia were not confronted with a noteworthy influx of colonizing settlers from Italy as occurred in Eritrea. In the rural areas of the governorates *Galla e Sidama* and *Harar* obviously not more than some hundred Europeans were active as traders or farmers, for example in the fertile coffee producing areas of Arba Gugu, where they benefited from the programmes of the *Société des Plantations d’Abyssinie*. Colonizing schemes, including financial compensation to the local landowners, were planned, but not realized, in the region of Asälla in western Arsiland.³³ Contacts of whatever kind between the indigenous inhabitants and European settler colonists are hardly recorded or remembered in the oral traditions. A prominent exception was Hermann Götz, a German farmer in Adami Tullu on the southern shore of Lake Zway, whom I personally met on March 30, 1970, five months before his death. He had experienced legendary conflicts with the local Arsi as well as precarious relations with the Italians and with the imperial Ethiopian government between 1937 and 1943.

The Fascist education system for Italian East Africa (defined in July 1936) provided two types of schools: one according to the metropolitan model and another one for the “colonial subjects”, where teaching in some local languages such as “Gallinya” (Oromo) was introduced in order to

³¹ CANNONIERI 1937: 14.

³² For further details cf. BRAUKÄMPER 1980: 361.

³³ SBACCHI 1985: 104f.; BRAUKÄMPER 1980: 363f. As a general overview see also PODESTÀ 2007: 59–84.

reduce the importance of Amharic.³⁴ In rural areas, even the latter was accessible only for an imperceptible minority of people. Educational facilities established by European missionaries from the late 1920s onwards were critically supervised by the Italian authorities. Last but not least because of Mussolini's Lateran Treaty of 1929 with the Vatican the activities of Roman Catholic missionaries were not only tolerated but to some extent sponsored. Many of their Protestant colleagues, however, saw themselves exposed to various measures of oppression. In Wälaitta, Kambata and parts of Wällägga they were often suspected of sympathizing with the imperial government and occasionally expelled.³⁵

Officially, respect and freedom for all religions was guaranteed according to the Italian constitution. From the very beginning of their rule, however, the Italian authorities showed greater support for Islam than for the Christian religion. This fact which mainly became relevant for south-eastern Ethiopia, where Islam dominated, can be explained by Italy's opportunistic policy of "divide and rule". The Christian Ḥabäša suffered most from the new regime, particularly because they lost their leading position in the southern provinces and therefore acted as the most stubborn defenders of the preceding governmental system. The Orthodox Church was suspected of being at the heart of patriotic spirit and nationalist opposition against the foreign invaders and was consequently subjected to extremely harsh measures of suppression. Atrocities ordered by viceroy Graziani culminated in the murdering of approximately 1500 priests and monks between March and July 1937.³⁶

Present-day Ethiopian Muslims are reluctant to acknowledge the massive support Islam enjoyed at the time of the Italian occupation and the collaboration of their ancestors with the Fascist colonialists. This view became obvious, as I myself observed, during the discussions at the conference "Cross and Crescent – Christian–Muslim Relations in Ethiopia" which took place at the German Cultural Institute in Addis Abäba in September 2002. In any case, the scholarly interpretation has to be confronted with the evidence of historical facts.

It was by no means because of a special appreciation of Islam but for pragmatic reasons that Italy pursued a pro-Muslim policy in her colonies. In a well-known speech which Benito Mussolini delivered in the Libyan capital Tripoli in 1937, he addressed his colonial subjects as follows: "Fascist Italy intends to guarantee to the Muslim peoples of Libya and Ethiopia

³⁴ MINISTERIO DELLE COLONIE (ITALIA) 1936: 608, cf. 315.

³⁵ DAVIS 1972: 122ff.; BRAUKÄMPER 1980: 363; Cf. PANKHURST 1972: 363f., 374.

³⁶ SBACCHI 1985: 194.

peace, justice, prosperity, respect for the laws of the Prophet, and wishes moreover to manifest its sympathy with Islam and the Muslims of the entire world”.³⁷ Some years before, the Italians had fought Muslim freedom fighters in their Libyan colony with utmost brutality, even employing poison gas to a large extent.

Italy’s pro-Islamic propaganda and policy was obviously successful. Many Muslims seem to have welcomed the Italo–Ethiopian war as a God-sent opportunity to declare a *ğihad*, a holy war, against the Ḥabäša, who had marginalized and suppressed them. In Gurageland, Muslims are believed to have exalted the Italian victory as a military triumph of Islam.³⁸

The Italians massively supported the construction of stone-built mosques which had hardly existed before, and sponsored “higher schools” of Islamic instruction, including a centre for Muslim theology and jurisprudence at Ğimma. Qoranic teachers and *qadis* were appointed in administrative headquarters such as Tıčo, Robe, Adoola and Gobba, from where the Muslim religion started expanding among the western Arsi.³⁹ In Burği, Islam gained a notable foothold during the late 1930s.⁴⁰ The Italians also favoured Islam as a kind of “civilizing factor”, because the Muslims rejected “pagan” rules and value concepts which disturbed the public order, such as the killing obligations prescribed by the widely distributed age-class system generally labelled *gadaa*. The colonial masters recruited their *askaris*, native soldiers, and irregulars, so-called *banda irregolare*, mainly from Muslim groups, assuming their particular loyalty because of their often deep-rooted antipathy towards Ḥabäša Christians. However, not all Muslims were by far decidedly pro-Italian. Detailed cases of war crimes carried out by the Fascist colonialists against Muslims and of courageous resistance against them were recorded, for example, by Bustorf in Sälte.⁴¹

The collapse of Italian rule and Ethiopian restoration

Colonial rule in Ethiopia rapidly collapsed after Italy had entered World War II on June 10, 1940. Troops of the British Commonwealth, supported by Ethiopian *arbännä*, invaded Italian East Africa from Kenya and the Anglo–Egyptian Sudan and entered Addis Abäba on April 6, 1941. Within the

³⁷ BERTOLA (1939: 162) quoted in TRIMINGHAM (1965: 137).

³⁸ This was stated by SBACCHI (1985: 162) in a rather general context. Precise data would be desirable.

³⁹ TRIMINGHAM 1965: 137, 184f., 204; BRAUKÄMPER 2004: 159f.; PERHAM 1969: 123, 249; BUSTORF 2009: 253f., 320; ØSTEBØ 2008: 128f.

⁴⁰ AMBORN 2009: 34, 289f.; Personal communication by Helmut Straube in 1973.

⁴¹ BUSTORF 2009: 312f.

next two months, the allied forces occupied most of the provinces of *Harar* and *Galla e Sidama*, and on November 27 the Italian vice-roy Amadeo di Savoia-Aosta surrendered in his last stronghold at Gondär.⁴² Because of the rapid advance of the British troops and the lack of resolute Italian resistance, the consequences for the civilian population in terms of casualties and destruction of property were obviously less dramatic than during the military actions of 1935–37. The oral traditions of people in central-southern Ethiopia, which I recorded, nevertheless remember the period of “re-conquest” as a time of extreme hardship, violence and economic misery which continued until 1943.⁴³

The situation in many parts of southern Ethiopia was to some extent similar to the period of Italian conquest, i.e. it was characterized by a breakdown of public order, political anarchy and the turbulence of interethnic warfare. It was tragic for the local ethnic groups that they were involved as auxiliaries on both sides, however, with very different options and aspirations. Collaborators of the Italians wanted to escape from negative sanctions by retreating with them. Supporters of the British, believing them to be the stronger party, on the other hand looked forward to profiting from a successful conquest. On their retreat towards Ğimma the Italians confiscated much livestock and thus provoked hatred among the affected people, particularly Hadiyya, Kambaata, Gurage and western Oromo. The British military commanders did their best to exploit the growing opposition against the Italians and appealed to the leaders of indigenous groups to join the forces of re-conquest. My informants reported that a direct involvement of local people in battles of this “war of the Färäng”, the Europeans, was limited, but interethnic conflicts in many areas again reached a state of extraordinary intensity. Some examples may be mentioned: Contingents of “*bandas*” equipped with rifles terrorized and looted regions in Wälaytta, Hadiyya and Allaaba. Mäsqa fighters attacked the Libido and western Arsi. The territory of the Qabeena was invaded by warriors from Čäboo and Muḥər. “Hereditary” enemies such as Hadiyya and Wälaytta clashed once again. Booranalanda was raided by the Guğgi and Somali. The Sidaama and Burği stubbornly resisted the restitution of Ḥabäša authority and the situation in Ogaden got completely out of control.⁴⁴ Settlements of liberated and partly repatriated slaves, in particular, seem to have been exposed to excessive plundering. Margery Perham (1969: 362) stated: “In 1942–3 the situation there became very out of hand. The British had been

⁴² DEL BOCA 1969, chapter 20; ABYSSINIAN CAMPAIGNS 1942: 124, 126, 128, 134, 136ff.

⁴³ BRAUKÄMPER 1980: 364–68; Cf. BUSTORF 2009, chapter 7.3.

⁴⁴ BRAUKÄMPER 1980: 365–68; HABERLAND 1963: 29, 279; JENSEN 1959: 26; PERHAM 1969: 362; AMBORN 2009: 28.

holding this region as far north as Negelli, and upon their withdrawing the Ethiopian Government sent in a very ill-chosen governor with some irregular levies who badly misbehaved themselves... The still untamed Arusi Galla took to raiding and some detribalized Somali enjoyed themselves in their own way”.

By 1944, the worst period of chaos was overcome and replaced by a new era of *Pax Aethiopica*. Measures of revenge by the imperial government after Ḥaylā Śəllase’s return from exile were remarkably modest. The punishment of ethnic groups such as the Hadiyya, Sidaama and Arsi-Oromo, who had intensively supported the Italians and were responsible for much bloodshed among the *näftännä*, was usually restricted to confiscation of livestock. The bulk of the *balabbat* were not replaced and even prominent representatives of the old elite, who had collaborated with the Italians, such as for example *ras* Getaččaw Abatä or sultan Abbaa Ğoobir of Ğimma, received mild sanctions. Despite the bitter memories regarding the atrocities during the war of conquest and the period of Rodolfo Graziani’s rule, the Italian prisoners of war and colonial settlers were mostly treated fairly. Obviously, the Emperor pursued a pragmatic policy aiming at two major goals: first, to avoid widespread reprisals accompanied by highly disagreeable demands for exposures and sanctions, and second, to achieve a far-reaching amnesty as well as an institutional restoration including as much continuity of administrative staff as possible. In fact, these strategies seem to have been the most promising means of pacifying the country after the brief but highly turbulent intermezzo of colonial occupation.

In the socio-economic sector the Ethiopian government was mainly confronted with the necessity to find an adequate response to the abolition of slavery and the *gäbbar* system by the Italians. The existence of these institutions had indeed fuelled the Fascist propaganda, portraying Ethiopia as a barbaric state and as an anachronism in the modern world. In one of his first administrative acts in 1941, Ḥaylā Śəllase therefore issued a statement declaring the abolishment of slavery and the *gäbbar* system. Respective laws were approved, but at the same time a new problem entailing serious consequences arose. The government now started allocating large plots of land in the southern provinces to persons who had loyally defended the emperor’s position. Rights of usufruct were thus abolished and replaced by a new legal status of landowners who could derive high profits from their tenants. It can hardly be doubted that this new type of socio-economic inequality became a primary reason for the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974.⁴⁵ Ḥaylā Śəllase failed in another important challenge to realize basic reforms in his

⁴⁵ For this assumption cf. PERHAM 1969: 355, 387; BRAUKÄMPER 1980: 371ff.

country. Efforts to improve the socio-political, economic and cultural emancipation of Muslims almost remained inexistent; a modest promotion of the condition of Islam was not achieved before the *Därg* regime.⁴⁶

Conclusions

Any assessment of Italian colonialism in Ethiopia will be biased to some extent, depending on whether it is done by citizens of the north or the south of the country, by Christians or by Muslims, by Ethiopians or by foreigners. There is no doubt whatsoever that any type of colonialism is to be ethically and morally rejected as a system based on principles of socio-economic inequality and more or less deep-rooted racist and cultural prejudices. The heroic resistance of their poorly equipped army against the by far technically superior European invaders is a fact any Ethiopian can be proud of. Another reason for pride is the struggle of the *arbännä*, who prevented the Italians from gaining control over vast parts of the country including a number of mountainous pockets in the south.⁴⁷ Many Ethiopians are therefore convinced that their country has never really been forced under a colonial yoke and that the survival of its independence was principally uninterrupted. The five years of Italian occupation are thus assumed to have been a marginal episode which can hardly reduce Ethiopia's reputation as a potent bulwark of anti-colonial resistance in Africa.

Views of this kind are obviously essential for the dominant discourse on modern Ethiopian history. Yet, there has always been another type of discourse which reflects the particular situation of the inhabitants in southern Ethiopia. As already pointed out, Ḥabäša rule was regarded in the *dar agär* as a particularly harsh type of heteronomy which may also be labelled "endo-colonialism". Paradoxical as it may seem, foreign Fascist occupants were welcomed as liberators by a large part of the population. This view was quite often confessed to me in bitter remarks by informants in the Hadiyya-Sidaama, Arsi and Čärčär regions, who often labelled their former Ethiopian masters as "bloodsuckers". Repeatedly, I even came across the curious statement that "during the Italian time there was always enough rain and no drought". However, as already indicated before, in mainstream historiography this fact has so far not been sufficiently analysed from the emic perspective of Ethiopian scholars. Likewise, their foreign counterparts are reluctant to tackle this sensitive issue from the etic point of view. First-hand information has usually only been gathered by cultural anthropologists

⁴⁶ HUSSEIN AHMAD 1994: 778–91; BRAUKÄMPER 2004: 5.

⁴⁷ A scholarly revision of *arbännä* activities was recently presented by AREGAWI BERHE 2003: 87–113.

working in their field research at the grassroots level of ethnic groups in the south. Among the Sə̀lṭe, for example, and this fact can most probably be assumed for the majority of groups (or “nationalities”) in the south, the modern political discourse is dominated by topics such as the search for a newly defined identity and territorial shape in the context of “ethnic federalism” followed by the present government.⁴⁸ For this purpose, arguments derived from all kinds of historical and ethnographic facts are eagerly exploited.

Primary source materials on the events and effects of Italian colonialism can still be documented from oral traditions of the present generation, although this possibility is dramatically dwindling. Intensified investigations of archival materials, particularly in Italy, seem to be promising as well.

The postcolonialist approach as an attempt to achieve a globalization of cultural discourses that work to abolish distinctions between centre and periphery refers to Ethiopia in a twofold manner. First, it has to deal with the particular situation, probably unique in Africa, of an “endo-colonialist” antagonism between the north and the south of the country which persisted almost up to the end of the 20th century. Secondly, it has to analyse the structures and consequences caused by Italian colonial rule. These were not negligible, but due to the brief period of foreign occupation not very far-reaching. No significant changes in the composition of the political elites occurred, for example. Processes such as the formation of new ethnic unities and the (re)invention of traditions, which became important fields of studies in many parts of postcolonial Africa, have not been distinctively recorded. In all these respects, Ethiopia before the revolution of 1974 seems to have been characterized by a high amount of stability and continuity.

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⁴⁸ For this discussion see BUSTORF 2009: 339ff.

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Summary

The present focus on "postcolonial studies" in cultural anthropology is attributing a growing interest to the Italian occupation in Ethiopia (1935–1941). Whereas a considerable amount of "mainstream" information has been collected about the war of conquest and colonial rule by Fascist Italy, the indigenous views and attitudes at the grassroots of the Ethiopian people have largely remained outside consideration. Because of the harsh exploitation by the ruling elites of the empire, large parts of the inhabitants in the south readily collaborated with the foreign occupants. Resistance against the Italians could most efficiently be counteracted by a policy of "divide and rule". Although the effects of Italian occupation are a sensitive issue of research involving highly controversial views and emotions, it seems to be due time now to approach it in an unbiased scholarly discourse.