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Madamato and Colonial Concubinage in Ethiopia: A Comparative Perspective

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Introduction*

On colonial concubinage in Ethiopia there is no other extensive research available.¹ Due to the lack of previous research on this topic, this article cannot provide an exhaustive portrayal of colonial concubinage in Ethiopia; however it highlights the great need for the study and reconsideration of colonial life in Northeast Africa from a local point of view.

To explore the peculiarities of colonial concubinage in Ethiopia, its banning during Fascism in 1937, and its development despite racist legislation, we should start by comparing the Ethiopian case to the Eritrean one, because – as we shall see – on colonial concubinage in Eritrea there is a small amount of good literature already available. To fill in this gap today, the role of second and third generation Ethiopian-Italians and Eritrean-Italians can be of great historical and anthropological relevance.² Italian colonial literature and cinema can also provide useful information on the topic and suggest additional considerations. As far as colonial concubinage in the Horn of Africa in general is concerned, local agency and impact are still largely unexplored or underestimated. Thanks to a visit I paid to a former colonial concubine in Nazret (Ethiopia) in 2009, thanks to the interviews I conducted with her daughters and with other Ethiopian-Italians and Eritrean-Italians in Italy and Ethiopia, and thanks to additional research and interviews I intend to con-

* This article partly reproduces my presentation at the XVIIth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, organized in Ethiopia in November 2009 by the University of Addis Abāba. This work is based both on written sources and on field research and interviews I conducted both in Italy and Ethiopia between 2006 and 2009. In this article dates are given in the European calendar.

¹ Some preliminary indications on this topic can be found in my article “Lomi and Totò: An Ethiopian-Italian Colonial or Postcolonial ‘Love Story’?” (TRENTO 2007).

² I would like to thank my interlocutors and the people I interviewed; in most cases I will not reveal their names, mentioning their initial followed by ***. I am very grateful to scholars Alessandro Bausi, Shiferaw Bekele and Richard Pankhurst for their fruitful suggestions. I also thank my interpreters Hailemariam Ayalew and Terefe Worku.

duct in Ethiopia in 2011, my on-going research aims at providing a relevant contribution to the study of colonial life in Ethiopia.³

The issues this article deals with implicitly raise questions related to the contemporary debate on African historiography and to both the Ethiopians' and the Italians' self-representations through colonialism, nationalism and "intercultural" encounters. The shape taken by colonial concubinage in the Horn of Africa and, most of all, in Ethiopia is due both to the Ethiopian agency and to the "burden" of the dualistic theorization of the *Questione meridionale* ("Southern Question") borne by the Italians. Moreover, the Italian "colonial imaginary world" remains largely unexplored; thus the question of how the "Italian widespread colonial culture" did (or did not) impact on the self-representation of "colonial subjects" still remains unsolved.

Self-Representations through Colonialism

Italian colonialism in North and Northeast Africa began in the early 1880s and formally came to an end in 1947. In 1890, Italy established as a colony the whole of what was then called Eritrea. It started occupying Somalia in 1889, Libya in 1911, and finally occupied Ethiopia from 1935-36 until 1941.⁴ In 1936, Mussolini – who was in power from 1922 to 1943 – proclaimed the empire and created *Africa Orientale Italiana* (Italian Northeast Africa) in the Horn of Africa. Italians lost control of Ethiopia in 1941.⁵

Even if in Italian former colonies the memory of colonialism has remained vivid, on the contrary, Italian historiography after World War II tended for decades to exclude colonialism from national history: in schools and universities, as much as in everyday life, the whole country largely forgot its colonialist past. This happened for several complex and still unclear reasons. One of them

³ In 2010–2011 I have had the opportunity to keep working on this and related topics thanks to the *Programme on the Study of the Humanities in Africa*, Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape, South Africa, and also thanks to a grant offered to me by the Centre Français des Études Éthiopiennes in Addis Abāba. Moreover, I have been invited to present the paper "Ethiopian Madamas: Cohabiting with the Fascist Subalterns" at the international conference *Femmes et genre en contexte colonial*, held in January 2012 at Sciences Po, Paris, France.

⁴ The Italo–Ethiopian war was particularly violent, but atrocities were committed also elsewhere by the Italian army (in Libya in particular); see among others: AHMIDA 2006; SBACCHI 2005: 47–56.

⁵ During World War II, the country became a base and a theatre of military operations. Italian Northeast Africa was surrounded by British territories and the Empire soon collapsed. Ḥaylā Šəllase I returned to Ethiopia in 1941, after Italy's defeat by the United Kingdom. The peace treaty was finalized in 1947, even if later on Ethiopian rights to restitutions and reparations were not always respected by Italian governments.

is definitely the sudden end of Italian colonial power as a consequence of the outcome of World War II; therefore there was no decolonization process and no public discussion on this topic, which might have made people more conscious about what was going on. Moreover, after World War II those who in the colonies had committed crimes were not brought to trial, not only because some Italian postwar governments were trying to make silent international efforts to regain the ex-colonies,⁶ but also because Washington and London were pursuing anticommunist strategies, to the point that some former colonial fascist criminals – such as Badoglio – benefited from some international “protection” thanks to their extremely anticommunist positions.⁷ Another reason may be the poor and shabby definition of Italian colonialism and imperialism (*imperialismo straccione*), coined by Lenin and retained by many Italians,⁸ or the sense of shame that some Italians felt at the end of the 1940s for having lost both the War and the colonies. Moreover, these aspects go along with a certain degree of “fluidity” in the Italian establishment and among intellectuals between fascist and post-fascist Italy.

Finally, the lack of public judgment of racist and colonialist crimes made it difficult for Italians to “digest” the past (especially the fascist past), so much so that in 20th century Italy colonialism remained for decades a sort of “taboo”.⁹ Starting about forty years ago – at the time when this “taboo” was infringed by the pioneering research of Angelo Del Boca – historiography has slowly begun to reactivate itself. In the last ten years, there has been some interest around the history of Italian colonialism, also in the international field and in postcolonial studies. However, many of its aspects remain unexplored.¹⁰

But “Italian Africa” did not only represent the “elsewhere”, since it was also instrumental to the self-representation of Italy, which was that of a country

⁶ Cfr. LABANCA 2002: : 428–429. Through these diplomatic efforts Italy obtained from the United Nations the fiduciary administration of Somalia between 1950 and 1960.

⁷ Cfr. DEL BOCA 2002: : 116–125.

⁸ “Imperialismo straccione”; cfr. Lenin, *L'imperialismo fase suprema del capitalismo*, 1916, quoted by LABANCA 2002: : 24.

⁹ Between 1887 and 1941 many Italo-Ethiopian wars and acts of slaughter took place in Abyssinia. Some Ethiopian sources suggest that in this period 730,000 people (both soldiers and civilians) were killed by the Italians; however, according to historian Angelo Del Boca, Italians killed in Abyssinia approximately 400,000 people; cfr. DEL BOCA 2002: : 111–116.

¹⁰ I ask myself if we would ever manage to overcome the “lack of memory” that, unfortunately, took place in Italy after WW II, without “re-discovering the oblivion” and understanding its profound motivations. As one of the questions that guides my work is: how, why, and in which “mysterious” ways has the ideological and imaginary background of the “Italian colonial adventure” been, without warning, and perhaps only apparently, swept away?

that perceived itself divided into two. The *Oltremare* (meaning the colonies) was politically, diplomatically, economically and even culturally one of the great “pulling myths” of Italy, ever since its Unity in 1870 and both before and during Fascism.¹¹ This happened in a country where the sense of belonging to a unified nation was based (as it is still) on a vision clearly divided between the North and the South of Italy. Even if the concept of *Questione meridionale* (the “Southern Question” theorized by Salvemini, Gramsci and others) arose between 1860 and 1870 from the need to build up a “comprehensible” representation of the South in a country that was finally unified, this concept actually stressed the gap between North and South Italy. After the union of the country, the image of Southern Italy became quite homogeneous and the South was finally perceived as “other”. The dualistic theorization of the “Southern Question” was crystallized at last in the image of the “other inside the country” (the southern peasant without land), who became the fulcrum of an immense literature and iconography that emerges everywhere throughout the 20th century.¹² The idea that the Southern Italian subject (the icon of the southern peasant without land from Sicily, Calabria or Apulia) was, at the same time, the carrying element of the national identity and the “other inside the country” became one of the essential images in the self-representation of Italy from 1870 on.

The basic duplicity of Italian self-representation was a meaningful symbol only inside the national borders, while in the colonies an ambiguous solution of the dualistic theorization of the “Southern Question” was attempted. Already at the end of the 19th century, Italian prime minister Vincenzo Crispi aimed at combining African expansionist politics with the increasing phenomenon of mass emigration, wishing that Africa – the Abyssinian plateau in particular – would provide land to the farmers (above all southern Italians) that did not have any. The Horn of Africa thus became the extreme Southern Italy of and for “a greater Italy”, where the peasants without land could finally find their piece of land and would become less subaltern.

Although several researchers have questioned whether either the differences or the continuities prevailed throughout the many historical and political phases of Italian colonialism, I believe that both the colonialism of the pre-fascist age and the one of the fascist era shared some basic characteristics, namely: the real and symbolic centrality of the relationship “white man”/

¹¹ Cfr. LABANCA 2002: 25.

¹² Including the ways in which writer and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini constructed his own representations of Africa, as I highlighted in my recent book *Pasolini e l’Africa, l’Africa di Pasolini: Panmeridionalismo e rappresentazioni dell’Africa postcoloniale*, pref. by HERVÉ JOUBERT-LAURENCIN, Milano: Mimesis, 2010.

“black woman”; the imaginary transposition of the Italian “other inside the country” (the southern peasant without land) from the Italian countryside to colonial Africa; the search for a national identity that could manifest itself truly – in a paradoxical way – only outside the national borders.

The scarce coherence with which colonialist Italy perceived its national identity and its sense of alterity “overseas” is evident in Italian colonial cinema and literature, but results most evidentially from the ambivalence through which colonial concubinage was managed in the colonies, both by the metropolitan citizens and the Italian legislator. Around 1937, the year in which the Italian government classified concubinage between Italian men and African women (the so-called *madamato*) a crime, the confusion increased. In spite of the impositions coming from Rome, the widespread concubinage in Northeast Africa did not end;¹³ such prohibition opened the road to the wider racist legislation imposed on the metropolitan territory beginning in 1938 against Jews, Africans, homosexuals and other minorities.¹⁴

Against the background of these complex scenarios, I would place the theories of internationally known anthropologist Giuseppe Sergi (1841–1936). Since the last years of the 1800s, Sergi, by theorizing the “Euro-African species” and *Homo euraffricanus*, intended to find genetic continuity between the northern and southern populations of the Mediterranean coasts and those of the Horn of Africa. The consanguinity between Italians, North- and East-Africans theorized by Sergi, besides “elevating” the populations of Northeast Africa in contrast to those “prognathous” of Sub-Saharan western Africa, did implicitly sanction the legitimacy of Italian colonialism in Libya and in the Horn of Africa¹⁵. Moreover, the theory formulated by Sergi constructed the inhabitants of western Sub-Saharan Africa as the “absolute other”, while the “insider” of “Italian Northeast Africa” became the “internal other” within a larger Empire, thus projecting on the colonial and imperial scale what had

¹³ Segregation on the basis of race was not peculiar to Italian fascist rule. For instance in three German colonies “mixed” marriage was banned as early as the beginning of the Twentieth Century through administrative decrees that inserted “race” as a category into citizenship. These bans were issued by the colonial and not by the metropolitan power and infringed on German men’s right to pass on citizenship to their wives and children; for these and other reasons many jurists considered the bans illegal (both Germany and Italy had at that time a *jus sanguinis* attitude toward citizenship). On the contrary in the post-1935 Italian case the central power and Mussolini himself played a substantial role in the regulation on race basis of relations between colonizers and colonized.

¹⁴ Many groups were discriminated on a biological and racist basis; see: BURGIO 1999; BURGIO –CASALI 1996; CENTRO FURIO JESI 1994.

¹⁵ Cfr. PONZANESI 2005: 172.

already happened on the national scale.¹⁶ However during the 1930s Sergi's theories – even if they remained influential for a large part of the 1900s – were officially substituted by those formulated by other fascist scientists, such as Lidio Cipriani.¹⁷

Madamato, Metissage, Misgenation, and Racist Legislation

Between “liberal” pre-fascist colonialism and fascist colonialism there were both differences and similarities that still need to be outlined and discussed. However, the erotic element has always been very important for Italian colonialism, both from a real and a symbolic point of view.¹⁸ Relations between Italian men and African women played a central role in colonialist practices, in the promulgation of racist legislation by Fascism, and in shaping the colonial imaginary. In Italy in colonial periods there was a widespread secret circulation of “pornographic” postcards portraying naked black beauties, which had a considerable impact within Italy itself. Fascist propaganda in particular tried to portray Northeast Africa as a land full of possibilities, and also full of beautiful women. Right before and during the Italo-Ethiopian war, such imagery was part of the baggage that motivated many Italian men to fight a war in a distant land. Even if we still do not know exactly how conscious the role played by the regime in terms of portraying African women as erotic/exotic beauties was¹⁹, we definitely know

¹⁶ The fragile equilibrium and the relational ambiguity between “himself” and the “other-from-himself”, the “Italian” and the “southerner”, the “metropolitan citizen” and the “colonial subject” are fully expressed by the images of concubines and askaris, who in the first half of the 1900s appeared in Italian colonial cinema and literature. Particularly exemplary in such sense is the film *Sentinelle di bronzo* (1937, 83') shot in Somalia by Romolo Marcellini. At the dawn of the racist legislation, the charming and sexy African young woman is as ever present, even if she appears under the clothes of the Italian actress Doris Duranti “in blackface”.

¹⁷ In 1938, point 8 of the *Manifesto della razza* (the fascist racist manifesto) explicitly stated that: “It is necessary to make a clean distinction between the mediterraneans of (Western) Europe on one side and the Orientals and the Africans on the other. Therefore, the theories that support the African origin of some European peoples – and include in a common Mediterranean race also the Semitic and Hamitic populations – must be considered dangerous, because they establish inadmissible affinities and ideological sympathies”. Another aspect of Italian colonialism is still largely unknown, that is: to what extent and in which way did both the “Aryan Idea” and the “Mediterranean Idea” have an impact on the colonial legislation, the life practices in the colonies and the colonial imaginary?

¹⁸ Additional “mythical” images of “intercultural” men-women relationships in Ethiopia can be found in the story of Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, as it is told in Ethiopia.

¹⁹ On this point see: STURANI 1995.

that all Italian colonialism involved the dream of finding in Africa sexually available women.²⁰

The Italian population in the colonies was at first rather low and women were always in a minority. The number of Italians in the Horn of Africa, mostly men, grew during Fascism, especially during the 1930s. At the time of the Italo–Ethiopian war, more than 50,000 unemployed men went to Eritrea to work on road construction and in other public works.²¹ Moreover in 1935 hundreds of thousands of soldiers moved to Eritrea to take part in the Italo–Ethiopian war. According to historian Nicola Labanca, in May 1936 in the area there were 330,000 Italian soldiers, 100,000 civilians working for the army, and 87,000 askaris.²² After the occupation of Ethiopia and the creation of the Empire in 1936, together with the launching of a vociferous campaign against “mixed-race” unions and miscegenation, Fascism wanted to increase the Italian female population in Africa. Courses in “preparation for the Empire” for women were established (as clearly reported in the 1937 issues of the review “L’Azione coloniale”). The regime also wanted to send several Italian professional prostitutes to the colonies (and partly did so). However, these projects mostly failed and Italian women in Northeast Africa towards the end of the 1930s were, at the most, 10,000.²³

Colonial sources (such as Ferdinando Martini, Alberto Pollera, etc.) reveal that from the beginning of Italian colonialism concubinage between Italian men and African women was quite common in the colonies in the Horn of Africa. Such a colonial concubinage was usually called in Italian *madamato* or *madamismo*, meaning by these expressions “something” that was neither marriage nor prostitution. African prostitutes were usually called by Italians *sciarmutte* (recycling an Arab expression), while concubines were called *madame*, providing an ironic distortion of the French world *Madame*. Italians used the terms *madamato* only to refer to the Horn of Africa, while the term *mabruchismo* was applied to the much rarer concubinage in colonial Libya. On colonial concubinage in Italian colonies in North Africa there is no re-

²⁰ This was also due to the fact that until the 1960s certain morals and behaviour in Italy were quite strict; the bride’s virginity was generally considered important, often required before getting married.

²¹ GIULIA BARRERA (1996: 5) has related that in 1905, after more than 15 years of colonization in Eritrea, only 2,333 Italians lived there. As RICHARD PANKHURST (1969: 271) reported, “white” women in Eritrea at that time were less than 550. A census in 1931 indicated the presence of 4,188 Italians, 2,471 men and 1,717 women; almost half of those men were young or unmarried men. In Eritrea from 1935 on, the Italian population skyrocketed, peaking at 75,000 in 1940 (59,000 men and 16,000 women).

²² Cfr. LABANCA 2002: 189.

²³ Cfr. CAMPASSI 1987: 239.

search available yet. However, colonial fictional literature can provide some information about this phenomenon and its representations, such as the novel set in Libya *Piccolo amore beduino*, written by Mario Dei Gaslini in 1926.²⁴ Moreover, in 1932 General R. Graziani, then vice-governor of Cyrenaica (Libya), sent officers a circular letter expressing his intention to eradicate the “plague” of *mabruchismo*.²⁵ In Somalia the practice of *madamato* – as suggested by Barrera – is mentioned in *Ricordi somali* by Perricone Violà. Traces of *madamato* in Somalia were still evident in 1961 in the novel by Enrico Emanuelli *Settimana nera* (*Black dove*), set in Somalia in the late 1950s during the Italian fiduciary administration.

The relationships between Italians and Africans in the colonies were mostly marked by colonialist patterns. Italians often, but not always, abandoned their children and (above all) their mothers in Africa.²⁶ Marriages in front of an Italian authority were extremely rare, and often only religious and performed when the partner was about to die. Some “traditional” marriages took place, but Italian men tended not to respect the commitments those marriages implied.²⁷ However, in some rare but significant cases, such encounters could be quite complex and nuanced, involving several emotional, material and juridical aspects of a controversial nature.

During the last decades, only few scholars (mostly women) have worked on *madamato* and colonial concubinage in the Horn of Africa. I can mention:

²⁴ *Piccolo amore beduino* won the first edition of the colonial novel prize, sponsored by the fascist government in order to increase a “colonial culture” in the country. On the contrary, ten years later the novels that portrayed “interracial” encounters in the colonies became unacceptable.

²⁵ “Questa del ‘mabruchismo’, è un’altra delle piaghe che ha travagliato la colonia, di cui resta qualche traccia, o qualche nostalgia, che io voglio assolutamente estirpare”; cfr. RODOLFO GRAZIANI, “Relazioni di ufficiali con donne indigene”, *Circolare a tutti gli ufficiali del 17 maggio 1932* (reported by GOGLIA – GRASSI 1981: 354)

²⁶ Several oral sources suggest that both Italians and Greeks (who share Christian-Orthodox beliefs with the Ethiopians) were prone to “mixed” relationships in Northeast Africa. Apparently Greeks were usually more willing than Italians to acknowledge their children born from African mothers in Northeast Africa.

²⁷ Amhara and Tigrinya speakers provide various forms of legitimate marriage, such as: the religious marriage performed as a sacrament in church (rarer than other types of marriage); marriage by a civil contract which is generally the preferred form (although the agreement between the families may be followed by a religious ceremony); *gördanna* or *dämoz* marriage, involving payment by the husband to the wife of a monthly or annual stipend. According to this type of temporary marriage (generally considered of lower status than the previous two) a man and a woman live together for a certain period under the terms of a contract (cfr. KAPLAN 2007: 799–800). However, as Richard Pankhurst pointed out during our recent conversation, in Ethiopia such notions as “marriage” and “getting married” are usually quite “open” or even controversial.

Barbara Sòrgoni, Ruth Iyob, Gabriella Campassi and, most of all, Giulia Barrera. All of them focus mostly on the Eritrean case though, because, since colonialism in Eritrea lasted almost 60 years, colonial life is usually more documented in Eritrea than elsewhere in the Italian colonies in Africa.

In the colonies, Italians came from both the middle and lower classes. According both to colonial and postcolonial sources (such as Pollera and Barrera), living with a “madama” did not seem to characterize one particular social class. Towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, when the Italian settlers – the old *coloniali* – were still likely to remain in Eritrea for several or even many years, colonial concubinage was usually tolerated by the colonial authority, even if not appreciated (especially by the governor of Eritrea Ferdinando Martini). At that time, for Italian officers and civil servants, having a steady local concubine for some years in the colony was probably considered more appropriate, “clean” and decent than having many different prostitutes. A revealing example was the colonial official and prolific ethnographer Alberto Pollera (1873–1939) who, himself, lived with two “madamas” and had several children he formally acknowledged. Just before dying in 1939 (even if officially prohibited) Pollera married in a religious ceremony his second “madama”, Ghidam Menelik, who probably was the main informant for Pollera’s semi-ethnographic research.²⁸

According to Pollera, *madamoto*, even if not the optimal solution, was an “inevitability” for those young Italians who were living temporarily in Northeast Africa. Moreover this land, considered inappropriate for Italian brides, was inhabited by “Abyssinian women” who, thanks to their “Semitic ancestry”, were supposed to mate easily with Italian men.²⁹ Pollera, like other colonial sources, stressed the existence in the Horn of Africa of a local form of temporary marriage, the *dämoz*, thus implicitly justifying the use – and also the abuse – of colonial concubinage by Italian men in the Northeast African colonies. Barrera pointed out that “Italians systematically violated the customs that informed such marriages, meaning that thousands of Eritrean women and their children were left without economic support”.³⁰ This form of temporary marriage – as suggested by Steven Kaplan – was associated with urban populations, traders, and warriors far from home. Oral and written sources highlight that today *dämoz* is in decline, being often considered by Ethiopians closer to prostitution than to marriage. But Barrera argued that *dämoz* marriage could have permanently degenerated into either unregulated concubinage or prostitution precisely because Italians abused it in colonial Northeast Africa. Pollera stated

²⁸ See: SÒRGONI 2001.

²⁹ Cfr. POLLERA 1922: 73–85.

³⁰ Cfr. BARRERA 1996: 21.

that the concubines of Italian men were generally “Abyssinian Christians”.³¹ Barrera argues that Pollera probably included in this group the inhabitants of both Ethiopian Amhara and Tigray, as well as Eritrean Tigrinya (please note that the great Ethiopian famine of 1888–1892 pushed people to migrate from some northern Ethiopian provinces to Eritrea).³²

Ann Laura Stoler has already pointed out that in a colonial context sexual encounters were not mere private and isolated affairs, but were “foundational to the material terms in which colonial projects were carried out”.³³ In all European colonies relations between colonizers and colonized were a key political issue and, therefore, they were regulated by colonial authorities. In the earliest stages of European colonialism, unions between colonizer and colonized were usually left alone or even encouraged; but in the later stages (usually from 1920 on) this kind of “mixed relations” was progressively discouraged or persecuted³⁴. In the Italian case the banning of colonial concubinage was particularly relevant and controversial, as part of a wider and complex process of State racism and segregation. After some preliminary restrictive norms on the legal status of African-Italians issued during the first half of the 1930s, then, between 1937 and 1940, fascist Italy activated an important set of “Race Laws”. Racism and segregation were addressed against various groups: Jews, Africans, colonial subjects, homosexuals, and other minorities. Even if 1938 is the year when the majority of Italian “Race Laws” was promulgated, racist legislation – as has been said – had already been activated in the African colonies, thus demonstrating that also in the Italian case colonies were a sort of “laboratory” for the motherland. The genesis and the effects of Italian “Race Laws” in the African colonies are still partly unexplored or underestimated by Italian historiography. Racist legislation also affected those individuals who were considered as having too close relations with members of the segregated groups. Some groups, like the Egyptians for example, were hard to define, however. Likewise, “mixed-race” unions and miscegenation were a problem for the legislator, difficult to solve.³⁵ Thus, Italian racist legislation was often confused or contradictory.³⁶ Surprisingly though – as attested by Giorgio Israel and Pietro Nastasi in *Scienza e razza nell’Italia fascista* –

³¹ Cfr. POLLERA 1922: 73–74.

³² Cfr. BARRERA 1996: 22.

³³ Cfr. STOLER 2002: 14.

³⁴ Cfr. BARRERA 1996: 2–3.

³⁵ See: BARRERA 2002: 21–54 [transl. “Patrilinearity, Race, and Identity: The Upbringing of Italo-Eritreans during Italian Colonialism”, in: BEN-GHIAT – FULLER 2005: 97–108]; GABRIELLI 1996: 61–88.

³⁶ See: RASPANTI 1994: 101–112; SARFATTI 1999: 312–332.

several sources suggest that in the 1930s Italian intellectuals were more prone to racist behaviour than was the Italian population of the time.³⁷

Shortly after the occupation of Ethiopia, a law clearly grounded on a racial and racist base was promulgated in 1937: precisely the one that banned “relations of a conjugal nature” (*Relazioni di indole coniugale*) between Italian citizens and “colonial subjects” in Africa, meaning by this expression the so-called *madamato*. However, only the “morally superior” Italian citizen was punishable, with up to five years imprisonment.³⁸ In November 1938 “mixed” weddings between Italian citizens and colonial subjects were also banned. In 1939 life in the colonies became segregated and the “Penal sanctions for the defense of racial prestige against the natives of Italian Africa” (*Sanzioni penali per la difesa del prestigio di razza di fronte ai nativi dell’Africa Italiana*) provided a comprehensive legal framework for racial segregation. Surprisingly, even if patrilineality was preeminent among Italians, in 1940 Fascism forbade Italian citizens to recognize as theirs the children born from relationships between Italians and “non-whites”.³⁹ However, even before racist legislation, Italian men tended not to acknowledge and legitimate their children born in Africa.⁴⁰

³⁷ When recently Richard Pankhurst asked me who really wanted in the 1930s this racist development in fascist Italy and why they did so, I answered that both national reasons (embedded in the Italian anthropological discourse of that time) and international ones (i.e. Nazi Germany) drove Mussolini to pursue racist legislation.

³⁸ In February 1937, on the first page of the newspaper “L’Azione coloniale”, a 30 year old Ruggero Orlando – before becoming one of most famous Italian journalists of the post-war period – gave an exhaustive (now forgotten) portrait of the “ideal goals” of Italian colonialism during Fascism, between racism and “good will”: “The physiological *metisage* is worrisome, as it is the result of repugnant sexual crossings, and it is humiliating both for the white and for the black person, in the same manner any form of political and moral *metisage* is to be avoided, because it corrupts the innate tendencies and the best prerogatives of both subjects. The Italians, a people of nobility and feelings, will create a colonial system based on the real understanding of the needs of the coloured people, so as to diminish in the fastest and most progressive way their suffering. But it would bring great harm to the black people if they were to be considered outside of their environment”.

³⁹ On colonial racism and racist legislation, see: BARRERA, *Patrilinearità, razza e identità*, cit.; BARRERA 2003: 425–443; GABRIELLI 1996: 61–88; LABANCA 1999: 145–163; LE HOUÉROU 1994; PANKHURST 1969: 270–286.

⁴⁰ This happened not only because many of those men wanted to abandon their African partners and children in Africa, but also because before the mid 1970s the Italian civil code forbade married Italian men to acknowledge the children they had with other women outside marriage, while married.

As attested by various oral and written sources and as implicitly shown by racist legislation itself, *madamato* was an important phenomenon in Italian colonies in the Horn of Africa and it never really disappeared, even after the promulgation of the “Race Laws”. As far as the Ethiopian case is concerned – considering the large number of soldiers that in 1935–36 moved from Italy to the Horn of Africa, the fact that Italians occupied Ethiopia only for five years, and the official banning of colonial concubinage in 1937 right after the occupation – at a first glance we could reasonably think that prostitution, rather than concubinage, should have characterized “mixed” men-women relationships in Ethiopia. On the contrary, oral and written sources point out that also in Ethiopia *madamato* was a relevant phenomenon.⁴¹ Oral sources widely suggest that the law was only partially enforced. However, historian Richard Pankhurst told me – during our conversation in Addis Abāba in November 2009 – that in the late 1930s in some areas of Ethiopia, without any formal trial, some deportations of Italians who were living with an Ethiopian partner probably occurred.⁴²

Decades later in Addis Abāba, one of the numerous Italian men who “went native” and remained in Ethiopia after the end of World War II (the so-called *insabbiati*) told his French interviewer Fabienne Le Houérou: “Who respected the racial laws? Not even the *Carabinieri* did!”⁴³ The *insabbiati* developed long-term (sometimes emotionally contradictory) relationships with Ethiopian women and remained for decades in Ethiopia after World War II.⁴⁴ Most of them came from proletarian and sub-proletarian social classes. During our conversation in Jerusalem in May 2006, Abebe

⁴¹ From September 1937 colonial courts in Ethiopia started reviewing cases of *madamato* (or *madamismo*); see among others: “Concubinaggio: Relazione d’indole coniugale con suddita dell’A.O.I. Elementi del reato”, R. Tribunale Penale di Addis Abeba, Udienza 13 gennaio 1938; “Madamismo elementi costitutivi”, R. Corte d’Appello di Addis Abeba, Udienza 24 gennaio 1939; “Madamato. Estremi. Coabitazione. Pattuizione economica. Mancanza di sentimenti superiori. Irrilevanza”, R. Giudice di Harar, Udienza 13 settembre 1939.

⁴² In 2009, my conversation with Ethiopian-Italian writer Gabriella Ghermandi confirmed this information.

⁴³ Cfr. LE HOUÉROU 1994: 97. Similar statements confirming the non-observance of the law are reported by GABRIELA CAMPASSI (1987) in her seminal article, and by IRMA TADDIA (1998) who collected some oral testimonies in Eritrea. Moreover, as suggested by GIULIA BARRERA (1996: 43), according to the Italo-Eritrean Association, the number of Eritrean women living with Italians was 1,150 in 1935, 10,000 in 1937, 13,000 in 1939, and finally reached 15,000 by 1940.

⁴⁴ As documented by Fabienne Le Houérou in the early 1990s and as attested by the colonial/postcolonial “love-story” of Lomi and Totò I collected elsewhere (TRENTO 2007; see the Bibliography below).

Zegeye – an Ethiopian sociologist based in South Africa – referring to *madamato* and concubinage in Ethiopia during and after colonialism, added that “it was quite common among Italians who *got married* to Ethiopian women decades ago to avoid getting in touch with their Italian relatives”.⁴⁵

At the beginning of the fascist regime Africa continued to be presented to young Italians as a sexually attractive place. Vice versa, during the 1930s the *metissage* and its representations were slowly abolished, in the name of the defense of the purity of the “Italic race”. It is however indicative of the complexity and the contradictions of the Italian case that at the beginning of the film *Il grande appello* – filmed by Mario Camerini in the Horn of Africa in 1936, the year before the institutionalization of State racism – in the hands of an Italian sailor leaving for the Horn of Africa we can clearly see the booklet of F.T. Marinetti (the father of Futurism) called “How to seduce women” (*Come si seducono le donne*). On the contrary, going through the photographic archive of the Istituto Luce, founded in Rome by Fascism in 1924, we can interestingly note that, while the “official” or “semi-official” pictures of East-African women taken before 1936 usually show women of a “standard” or even great beauty, the Istituto Luce portrayals of African women taken on the Abyssinian plateau towards the end of the 1930s suddenly show non-attractive or even “ugly” women (pitifully thin, no teeth, dried-up skin, etc.).

I would like to call to mind that, although often forgotten, between the 1890s and the 1940s Italian fictional literature and cinema produced a certain amount of novels and films set against an African colonial background, meant to portray Italian colonialism and colonial life. The erotic element is the pivot of a number of Italian colonial novels set in Africa in the 1920s and 1930s, and in particular of what I would call “erotic-love novels”. Many colonial novels were built around the image of a “white” colonial hero living with a “black” woman. Usually in colonial “erotic-love novels”, even if the Italian man might feel attracted and enchanted by the exotic lands and women, he never abandoned himself to the kind of feeling which might be described as “romantic love”. In fact his superiority was evident both to him and to the colonized peoples, thus opening the path to the Italian “mission of civilization” in Africa.⁴⁶ As has been said, during the second half of

⁴⁵ The great majority of those Italian men did not get formally married to their Ethiopian partners in front of any Italian authority. If unmarried in Italy, sometimes they did so years later, when they decided (or were forced to decide by the political situation) to move from Ethiopia to Italy with their “wife” and children.

⁴⁶ BONAVITA 1994: 53–64; 1999: 491–495; PAGLIARA 1991: 363–457; TRENTO 2008: 137–148.

the 1930s the rising of “State racism” and the promulgation of “Race Laws” forbade “mixed unions”. Consequently, the literary representations of relationships and encounters between “white men” and “black women” became unacceptable. At that point the colonial “erotic-love novel” could not *de-facto* exist and came to an end.⁴⁷ However, such literary representations of colonial life seem partly to contradict what actually happened in Italian colonies in Northeast Africa. In fact, when *madamato* became a crime, several colonial courts judged that the involvement of “superior feelings” (*sentimenti superiori*, meaning by this expression affection and “romantic love”), and not only of “material deeds” (meaning sexual intercourse and money), was essential for a man to be convicted as guilty of *madamismo*.⁴⁸ Thus I wonder what the banning of *madamato* in the late 1930s was really about: was “romantic love”, rather than “carnal knowledge”, the real object of the ban?

Ethiopian “Madamas” (A Story to be Told)

The relevance of love and erotic elements in the construction and in the representation of Italian colonialism has already been pointed out, but not much has been written on the background of African colonial concubines. Who were these women? How and why did they become “madamas”? Was colonial concubinage economically and socially suitable enough for Northeast African women? How were/are such terms as “madamato” used and perceived by Ethiopians, “madamismo”, and “madama”? To what extent were these terms considered inappropriate or offensive in Ethiopia? Moreover – as suggested by Allan Hoben – we should also explore how Ethiopian men reacted to colonial concubinage and to its repercussions on postcolonial Ethiopia, knowing that, according to oral sources, some Ethiopian men seemed to be jealous of Italian men living with Ethiopian women, while others developed positive feelings about those “mixed” relationships.

Giulia Barrera mentions that – as Frederick Cooper pointed out in *Conflict and Connection* – “recognition of the much greater power of the Euro-

⁴⁷The so-called “colonial cinematography” was more chameleonic and inventive than colonial fictional literature, managing to be able to go around the racist legislation, whose directives are discernible in several films that illustrate the life in the colonies (*Il grande appello*, *Sentinelle di bronzo*, *Sotto la Croce del Sud*). These films mix, originally and in an ambivalent way, the evocation of an erotic imaginary, by now largely acquired, and the need to adapt to the official legislation, thus bringing to light the extent to which life in the colonies and its representations were subordinated to constant adjustments.

⁴⁸As stated on September 9th, 1937 by the Addis Abāba colonial court reviewing a case of *madamismo*: “è necessario il concorso degli elementi tutti, che ineriscono e servono a caratterizzare la società coniugale [essi] consistono in quello materiale dell’unione sessuale e in quello morale dell’unione o comunanza di vita”; cited by: SÒRGONI 1998: 243.

peans in the colonial encounter does not negate the importance of African agency in determining the shape the encounter took". However, even if some colonial sources suggest that *madamato* "gave the woman concerned considerable prestige in her own society",⁴⁹ Barrera has stated that "for many Eritrean women, to become a "madama" was to experience a form of oppression in which various incarnations of exploitation based on gender, racial, and class inequalities combined".⁵⁰ Does this picture portray in full the condition of Ethiopian "madamas" as well? Most of these controversial questions still need to find appropriate answers.⁵¹

As I said, the Ethiopian case has been less studied than the Eritrean one.⁵² Even if in Eritrea and Ethiopia some similarities surely characterized colonial concubinage, its motivations and its consequences on local societies, some differences also occurred. For instance, in both cases the woman was frequently employed firstly by the Italian man as housekeeper and then she became – or was forced to become – his concubine.⁵³ However, in Ethiopia several Italian men remained there after the return of Haile Selassie and continued to live with the same woman (although they sometimes developed contradictory feelings about their relationships). Being often too late to study *madamato* by interviewing the "madamas" and their Italian partners, working with the second generation can be of great help, as much as comparing the Ethiopian case to the Eritrean one.

Oral and written sources highlight that Eritrean-Italians in Eritrea were stigmatized by the local population; here I refer both to Eritrean-Italians born in the colonial period and to those born in postcolonial Eritrea, in contexts that often reproduced colonial man-woman dynamics. In fact in the Horn of Africa, as far as those colonial dynamics and interpersonal frames were concerned, a certain degree of continuity between colonial and post-

⁴⁹That is the opinion of the French observer Paul de Lauribar (1898) as reported by PANKHURST (1969: 270).

⁵⁰Cfr. BARRERA 1996: 5–6.

⁵¹Richard Pankhurst reminds us that during the founding of Gondär, courtesans enjoyed great consideration and independence (cfr. PANKHURST 1974: 160–164). This element could hopefully give rise to further considerations also on the agency of Ethiopian "madamas".

⁵²That is why I consider of great historical and anthropological relevance the visit I paid in 2009 in Nazret (Ethiopia), to F***, a former colonial "madama", who recently passed away.

⁵³Some evidence (for instance some photographs) may suggest that hiring a housekeeper to turn her into a concubine was a ploy that used to happen more in 20th century than in 19th century Italian East-Africa. That is particularly true in the Ethiopian case, due to the fact that from 1937 on concubinage was officially forbidden.

colonial periods often occurred.⁵⁴ Several interviews and conversations I had pointed out that both in the colonial period and after decolonization, Eritrean-Italians tended to have Eritrean-Italian (or Italian) partners (for instance the case of M***, an unrecognized Eritrean-Italian lady born in Asmara in 1918, who became herself a “madama” and in 1936 gave birth to an unrecognized Eritrean-Italian boy, F***, who married an Eritrean-Italian girl in the 1960s). Among others, two Italian-Eritrean individuals I met in Ethiopia in 2008, both born in the 1940s and both children of former “madamas” (C*** and L***), explicitly highlighted the fact that Eritrean-Italians and Ethiopian-Italians feel less stigmatized in Ethiopia than they feel in Eritrea, to the point that for this reason this particular Eritrean-Italian couple decided to leave Eritrea and move to Ethiopia.

Why were African-Italians less stigmatized in Ethiopia than they were in Eritrea? We may answer by saying that colonial concubines were already less stigmatized in Ethiopia than they were in Eritrea, as suggested by the case of M**** (Eritrea, 1918–), if compared to the Ethiopian case of F*** (today almost 90 years old), who at first was a colonial concubine and then spent most of her life with her Italian partner in postcolonial Ethiopia. Even if a certain degree of stigmatization definitely occurred also in Ethiopia against Ethiopian-Italians (as attested by R***, V***, S***, A***, etc.), further evidence suggests that the pressure experienced by Eritrean-Italians was harder: this is precisely what I understood from interviewing Eritrean-Italian and Ethiopian-Italian young ladies born in the early 1960s in the Horn of Africa, who, as children and teenagers, grew up together in Rome in a boarding school for Italian *profughi* (fugitives). They developed different “identity strategies” to put together their complex cultural heritage, but Eritrean-Italians seemed to have a heavier psychological burden to deal with.

But why do “mixed” relationships in the Horn of Africa and the “inter-cultural fruits” they delivered during colonialism and right after decolonization seem to be less stigmatized in Ethiopia than in Eritrea? Here I provide some preliminary answers that indicate a direction to be followed in further research. I have identified three main sets of circumstances: the different length of the Italian occupation (5 years in Ethiopia, almost 60 in Eritrea), the role played by the Catholic church and educational system in Eritrea, and the fact that “mixed” relationships and *madamato* were somehow more “politically” connoted in Ethiopia than in Eritrea.

The shorter length of Italian rule in Ethiopia, when compared to Eritrea, reduced the formation of segregated groups that tended to mirror and re-

⁵⁴ Cfr. LE HOUÉROU 1994; TRENTO 2007; also the life of the famous Ethiopian actress and singer Asnaketch Worku (born during the Italian occupation), who had an Italian partner in postcolonial Ethiopia, somehow suggests this kind of continuity.

produce their own “diversity” (as happened with the Eritrean-Italians in Eritrea). Moreover, the role of the Catholic Church was very important in Eritrea, as far as the impact of colonial concubinage and the upbringing of the *meticci* were concerned.⁵⁵ Giulia Barrera’s research has pointed out that, owing to patrilineality (which characterized both Italian Catholics and Tigrinya Orthodox Eritreans), the Eritrean mothers of Eritrean-Italian children tended to raise their children “as Catholic Italians”, even if the mother and her child had been abandoned by their Italian man/father.⁵⁶

As reported by several oral sources, Eritrean colonial concubines and the mothers of Eritrean-Italians were sometimes rejected by their original families and were supported by Catholic institutions. On the other hand several Italian men, in spite of abandoning in Africa their Eritrean-Italian children and their African partners, used to give a small amount of money to a Catholic mission in Eritrea (or *istituto per meticci*), in order – as highlighted by Barrera – to provide Catholic Italian education to their formally unacknowledged children. An Eritrean-Italian lady born in Eritrea in the early 1940s repeatedly praised how she used to feel welcome when she was staying with the Catholic nuns in Asmara, while with most Italians and Eritreans, as a girl, she felt uncomfortable and “different”. But, paradoxically, even if Catholic institutions and activists in Eritrea were the ones who strove the most for the rights of the Eritrean-Italians, they also inculcated into Eritrean-Italians – even unconsciously – a typical Catholic sense of sin and shame (the sense of being “fruits of sin”), that made them feel somehow like aliens and act as members of a “different” group.

All this did not occur in Ethiopia, because Italian Catholic institutions were not so numerous and well-established. Moreover, the sense of national pride has always been very strong in Ethiopia and it might have played a substantial role in the development of this kind of issues as well. Hence, even if Ethiopian-Italians usually were not considered by Ethiopians as “full Ethiopians” (as attested by various oral sources), I think that Ethiopian-Italians felt sufficiently “at home” in Ethiopia.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *Meticcio* was the term used during colonialism to define African-Italians. This term is generally no more used in current Italian, but in the 1970s Pier Paolo Pasolini still referred to the term *meticcio* to describe African-Italians in the Horn of Africa; cfr. TRENTO 2011.

⁵⁶ BARRERA 2005: 24–31.

⁵⁷ The Italian father of S*** (an unrecognized Ethiopian-Italian lady born around 1950) was already living in colonial Eritrea before taking part in the Italo-Ethiopian war. After the occupation of Ethiopia in 1936 he settled in Ethiopia, where he died during the 1950s. According to S***, after the death of her father an Italian brother of hers asked her Ethiopian mother to let him bring S*** back to Italy with him. But apparently S***’s mother proudly refused this proposal.

Oral sources suggest that, on one hand, relationships between Italians and Ethiopians were perceived by Ethiopians as inappropriate, because of religious differences (most Italians are Catholics while Christian Ethiopians are usually Orthodox). Moreover, the population was conscious of the fact that such relationships happened within the oppressive frame of fascist occupation of Ethiopia. Nevertheless, even if the official Ethiopian judgment on Italians was always very bad (we do not forget the massacre perpetrated by the Italians on the streets of Addis Abäba in 1937 after the attempt on General Graziani's life), in everyday life Ethiopians often appreciated all those "love-stories" and the fact that all Italian occupiers, Generals included, were eager to "get married" and to "mix blood" (as D*** put it) with the Ethiopians, in spite of the fascist efforts to ban "mixed" unions.

Additional "political" nuances of the way *madamato* was perceived by Ethiopians in Ethiopia were interestingly suggested to me by the historian Shiferaw Bekele (during our conversation in Addis Abäba in December 2008). Even if Ethiopian families are usually very religious, during and right after the war of occupation, in years marked by emergency and transition, some families were willing to accept the fact that a young family member had an Italian partner. This happened not only because most Ethiopians were aware of the fact that in many cases there was no choice (meaning that women were often forced to please the colonizer), but also because, on the other hand, the girls were supposed (or even required) to somehow benefit from it, by getting some extra-money for their families or by having "access to modernity" (such as broadcasts, perfume, etc.).

The position Ethiopian "madamas" had in Ethiopian society was then quite complex and difficult. In fact, the *fiancés* or husbands of some of those "madamas" had left their homes to fight against the occupiers, while their partners – precisely those young ladies – were seen by locals to be cohabiting with the enemy. That is why (as suggested by various oral sources) colonial concubines in Ethiopia were sometimes considered as spies and traitors, who were favouring the enemy. But at the same time most Ethiopians also perceived colonial concubines as potential informers for the partisans, who had infiltrated into the occupiers' homes. Finally, the position and the agency Ethiopian "madamas" and their children had (or still have) in Ethiopian society are complex and nuanced, or sometimes even contradictory. Such a rich complexity – as this article has pointed out – still requires to be fully outlined by scholars and researchers.

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Summary

Colonial concubinage in Ethiopia during the Italian occupation (1936–1941) has not been deeply studied yet. This article explores the peculiarities of the so-called *madamato* – that was banned under Fascism in 1937 but developed despite the racist legislation – by firstly comparing its practices in Ethiopia with that which took place from the late 19th century in Eritrea. Indeed, on the Eritrean case a small body of significant literature already exists. In addition, by relying on both written and oral sources, this article highlights the relevance of local agency, the influence of “traditional” customs and religion, and the role played by Ethiopian women in the impact of and the shape taken by colonial concubinage in Ethiopia. It also points out some continuity between the colonial period and the post-colonial one (in terms of social behaviours) and the complex roles played in local societies by Ethiopian-Italians and Eritrean-Italians (including the offspring of relationships based on concubinage). Furthermore, this article highlights that gender relations in the region during Italian rule were also affected by the fact that Italian colonialism in the Horn of Africa influenced to some extent the construction of Italian national identity and self-representation.