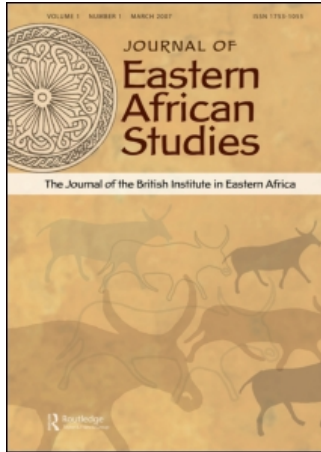


This article was downloaded by:[Uoldelul, Chelati Dirar]
On: 25 July 2007
Access Details: [subscription number 780833403]
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Eastern African Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t770239509>

Colonialism and the Construction of National Identities: The Case of Eritrea

Online Publication Date: 01 July 2007

To cite this Article: Dirar, Uoldelul Chelati (2007) 'Colonialism and the Construction of National Identities: The Case of Eritrea', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 1:2, 256 - 276

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/17531050701452556

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17531050701452556>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article maybe used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

© Taylor and Francis 2007

Colonialism and the Construction of National Identities: The Case of Eritrea

UOLDELUL CHELATI DIRAR

University of Macerata

ABSTRACT *In spite of the common agreement on the relevance of Italian rule on the political and social shaping of Eritrea, little investigation has been carried out to analyse the political, juridical and economical, nature of the colonial system in Eritrea and its impact on Eritrean society. This article focuses on the structure and strategies of the colonial state in Eritrea. Special attention is given to the development of an alternative juridical and institutional system for colonial subjects, which is described as both a key aspect of the development and consolidation of colonial powers and a crucial factor in moulding new identities. The final section of the article discusses relations between the colonial state and local elites. It is a common assumption that one of the main negative consequences of the harsh policies adopted by Italian colonialism in order to frustrate Eritrean aspiration and access to education was the suppression of a local elite. It is argued that, while true in a general sense, this assumption needs to be examined more closely. For, in spite of repressive colonial policies, a small and 'informal' Eritrean elite grew up during the fifty-one years of official Italian colonial rule, many members of this germinal 'elite' going on to play an important role in post-colonial Eritrea.*

The aim of this paper is to discuss the role played by Italian colonial rule in the development of Eritrean nationalism, and its legacy for independent Eritrea. It is generally assumed that Italian colonialism has left tangible marks on Eritrean society; however, apart from the apparent impact on urban architecture and modes of living, there is much less agreement on the relevance of this historical experience for the political history of the region. The disagreement arises from contrasting assessments of the impact of Italian colonialism on Eritrea, which is alternatively represented as a sort of marginal accident in the *long durée* of regional history, or as a substantial and dramatic rupture of it. This debate does not represent mere academic hair-splitting, but has significant political implications, as it is directly connected with the debate on the very historical legitimacy of the Eritrean state. In fact, the supporters of the first thesis, by placing more emphasis on continuity under the influence of 'Greater Ethiopia' rhetoric,¹ use the argument to deny the historical and political legitimacy of the State of Eritrea.² Proponents of the second theory link the development of Eritrean nationalism and the historical legitimacy of Eritrea as an independent state to the founding role played by the colonial experience.³ However, outside this political debate, to date few studies have been carried out with the aim of investigating the real meaning and relevance of Italian colonialism for Eritrean society. Moreover, the emphasis on the repressive and

Correspondence Address: Dr. Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, Dip. Diritto Pubblico e Teoria del Governo, Piazza Strambi 1, 62100 Macerata, Italy. E-mail: uoldelul@unimc.it

exploitative nature of Italian colonialism, which prevails in the handful of attempts at analysis of the colonial past made by Eritreans during the pre-independence years,⁴ prevents an understanding of the long-term impact of Italian colonialism on Eritrean society. The late Alexander Naty argued:

The emphasis on the exploitative relations between the colonised and the colonisers has certain limitations. One of the shortcomings is that ignores the complex interactions of the societies with the colonial powers. This is true especially in the case of multi-ethnic countries such as Eritrea where the different groups had unequal power relations among themselves prior to colonialism.⁵

I would develop Naty's statement further by suggesting that it is not only a matter of taking into account the interaction between colonisers and different ethnic groups; we must also pay attention to differences in the perception of colonialism, developed by various social groups, according to their status within Eritrean society and to the changes wrought upon society by colonial rule. It is therefore apparent that there is still need for a detailed analysis of the political, juridical and economical nature of the colonial system in Eritrea and of its long-term impact on local societies.⁶ If, in the Foucauldian sense, power is considered as a producer of factuality and complex webs of rituality, then a better understanding of these processes in colonial Eritrea can contribute to the understanding of the roots of Eritrean nationalism. To this end, it is striking that – with the commendable exceptions of Tekeste Negash, Ruth Iyob and Yemane Mesghenna – most recent work on colonial Eritrea has been undertaken by non-Eritrean researchers. This might be ascribed to a shortage of indigenous scholars, and is also clearly related to the difficulty of undertaking fieldwork in Eritrea in recent decades; but it also reflects a powerful political influence on the Eritrean intellectual debate. A further obstacle to the development of dispassionate analysis of colonialism in Eritrea is the ideological stance developed by the Eritrean nationalist organisations in the 1970s: the Ethiopian occupation of Eritrea was defined as a 'colonial occupation', which thus diluted the concept of colonialism into a broad and historically unsubstantiated label, with currency limited to the political arena.

As I will argue in this paper, it is, therefore, important to analyse the structure of colonial power from a more complex standpoint in order to properly assess the impact and relevance of Italian colonial rule. I suggest the need to look at colonialism not in terms of a unitary foundation, but rather in terms of a plurality of actions and actors which, though motivated by a broad shared logic, did not always necessarily share institutional and operational cohesion. This paper will focus on the manner in which institutional mechanisms, put in motion by the colonial administration, worked in practice and how they interacted with local identities. I will also discuss Italian colonial policies and their role in the development of Eritrean élites.

The Colonial State and the Appropriation of the Territory

In order to fully assess the impact of colonialism on pre-existing social, cultural, and economic diversity, it is important to attempt a deconstruction of the operational procedures implemented by the colonial state. In fact, the study of the structures and strategies of the colonial state enables us to analyse and better understand the colonial

experience. Indeed it was the colonial state that provided the legal and economic framework for the implementation of the broad web of operations which we commonly label 'colonial policies'. It is only through an understanding of colonial attitudes toward issues such as customary law, land tenure systems, education and health is it possible to move to a factual and non-ideological discussion of the long-term consequences of colonialism for Eritrean society.

From this perspective, a basic assumption of this paper is that, along the analytical lines developed by Mahmood Mamdani,⁷ the essence of colonialism has to be found in the practice of segregation, whether territorial or institutional; the most profound and permanent effects on colonial and post-colonial society were the result of institutional segregation. Indeed, the practice of developing separate juridical and institutional systems for colonial subjects was in many ways the cornerstone of colonial power, and it is in this process that we can discern the roots of many of the systemic institutional contradictions of the post-colonial African state. In the Eritrean case, this strategy, aimed at developing paradigms of institutional segregation, can be detected in the painstaking efforts of the colonial administration to produce on a regular basis updated maps of power relations in the colonial territory, whether structured along ethnic, religious, or social lines. In the colonial context, Eritrean diversity became functional to colonial hegemonic discourse and provided ample room for political manoeuvring.

The beginning of the Italian colonial presence in Eritrea has to be set against the background of ecological and social devastation, of food crises and a high degree of social and political instability. The demographic collapse caused by the 'Great Famine' (1888–92), together with the political fragmentation of those years, hindered the establishment of enduring and effective political systems and undermined the possibilities for strong and cohesive anti-colonial opposition. Conversely, these circumstances facilitated colonial expansion, largely by making possible a series of local alliances based on the traditional colonial principle of *divide et impera*. In fact, the early Italian colonial administration devised a successful policy of social and political manipulation revolving around ethnicity, religion, and social stratification. Ethnicity was a crucial political issue, as historically oppressed minorities provided the Italian colonial administration with support. This was the case among the Bilin,⁸ Kunama,⁹ Afar and Saho populations which,¹⁰ due to competition for basic resources such as land and water, and because of cultural and religious differences, were often in conflict with neighbouring states and communities. These tense relations were most commonly manifest in armed raids, periodically unleashed by the Abyssinians, as well as by the Egyptians,¹¹ and, occasionally, even from the direction of the Eritrean highlands.¹² As the colonial archives show, raids from the Ethiopian side continued long after the establishment of the colony of Eritrea, and were a real source of tension between the colonial administration and the Ethiopian state.¹³ Religion was another important element in the Italian colonial strategy. In a traditionally multiethnic and multicultural society, religious identities, in the context of economic and political crisis, were easily transformed into factors of conflict, and served as both catalyst and outlet for tensions stemming from the competition for access to limited natural resources. In this context, it was relatively easy for the Italians to play the role of an administration *super partes*, searching, at the same time, for a special consensus with the Muslim population, traditionally marginalised by the predominantly Christian population of the highlands.¹⁴

Finally a third successful colonial strategy was linked to social stratification. Eritrean society in the nineteenth century was characterised by strict and unequal power relations in which subaltern groups were kept in a position of subjugation. Rural communities were burdened with heavy taxation,¹⁵ frequent demands for free manpower and the responsibility for the feeding and succouring of the army.¹⁶ Similarly, amongst the so-called aristocratic societies of the western lowlands, there existed a rigid and hierarchical subdivision of the society between *Nabtab* and *Tigre* in which the former were a cattle-owning aristocracy and the latter the servile labour force over which the patron had absolute rights. Prohibition of intermarriage was one of the main strategies implemented to preserve this social division.¹⁷ Nevertheless, within these power relations, serfs had the right of animal ownership and were able to increase their wealth in livestock. The colonial impact on Eritrean social stratification has still to be fully assessed; however, it is apparent that the so-called *politica indigena* (indigenous policy) introduced over the long term certain structural modifications within Eritrean society. An important change was the progressive transformation of local authorities into salaried chiefs, appointed by the colonial administration and fully dependent on colonial prebends. As suggested by Jordan Gebre-Medhin, social transformation was effected through 'the introduction of modern and scientific techniques of livestock breeding and health care'.¹⁸ In the long term, this enabled the Tigre to significantly increase their wealth to the point at which the traditional division of society became unsustainable and there appeared pressure for social emancipation. These changes, the (relatively) more liberal levy imposed by the Italians, together with the temporary relief from forced labour and other obligations, gained the Italian administration, if not the support, then at least what we can call the 'useful apathy' of many segments of Eritrean society, which facilitated the consolidation of colonial rule.¹⁹

In a broader perspective, the following steps can be identified in the process of the implementation of colonial rule in Eritrea. These were the 'pacification' of the territory, the mapping of the geographical and social landscape, and the active construction of the colonial subject. In the colonial *milieu*, these stages did not necessarily all appear in chronological sequence, but rather they often proceeded in parallel.

After the early years of mainly negotiated territorial acquisitions, the establishment of a *pax colonica* over those territories was the first and, probably, most important step in the consolidation of Italian rule over the region. Between 1890 and 1897, under the rule of the first series of military governors, opposition (real or imagined)²⁰ to Italian rule among local élites was crushed ruthlessly, and thus an entire generation of local leaders disappeared in the detention camps established on the island of Nokhra and in the town of Assab on the Red Sea, or fled into exile in neighbouring territories.²¹

A second important step in the establishment of colonial rule in Eritrea was the mapping of the geographical and social landscape. Cartography, the collection of oral traditions, the codification of customary laws, and the redaction of the genealogies and biographies of local chiefs amounted to a considerable effort on the part of the early Italian colonial administration. In the context of Italian colonialism the need for cartographic knowledge was dictated by two main considerations. The first was the humiliating defeat suffered by the Italian army at Adwa in March 1896. It became apparent to the Italian military establishment that, apart from various tactical mistakes, this defeat could also be partially attributed to the inadequate cartographic materials with which troops on the grounds were equipped.²² In fact, inadequate knowledge of the territory and poor

cartographic instruments rendered extremely difficult the necessary communication between the troops and, moreover, turned the retreat after the defeat into a chaotic rout.²³ Another factor behind the greater emphasis on cartography was the need for the delimitation and demarcation of the boundaries between Eritrea and neighbouring territories, namely Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and Menelik's Ethiopia. This process, initiated immediately after the signature of the treaty of Addis Ababa in 1896, was a tortuous and problematic one, marked by frequent prevarications and setbacks.²⁴ Divergent views on the location of rivers and mountains, as well as on the very perception of 'space' and its delimitation, together with apparent clashes between the centre and the periphery of the Ethiopian state, played a major role in slowing down the activity of the bilateral commission in charge of the delimitation and demarcation of the boundary.²⁵ In Eritrea, this complex process of identification and mapping of the landscape also involved the production, from 1895, of guidelines for the standardisation of names of all inhabited localities in Eritrea;²⁶ this resulted a decade later in the compilation of an index of these localities.²⁷ These efforts at geographical homogenisation represented a crucial step in the process of the construction of the colonial state, though it remains to be assessed to what extent popular consciousness was thus influenced.

However, parallel to the mapping of the Eritrean physical landscape, colonial authorities engaged in an even more complex activity which in the long term had major consequences for both colonial power and Eritrean society. This was the mapping of the social landscape of Eritrea, a multifaceted process which investigated many levels of Eritrean society in the attempt to provide ethnographic and linguistic knowledge to Italian policy-makers and administrators on the ground.²⁸ To this end, from 1897 circular letters were sent to colonial administrators requesting them to systematically collect information on the indigenous legal system. The aim of this effort was to produce guidelines for the dispensation of justice based on local customary laws. It is interesting to notice that at this stage, customary laws were already considered as a viable separate and parallel legal system for indigenous people. However, colonial authorities also emphasised was the need to reorganise the juridical corpus according to criteria consistent with the Italian legal tradition and, of course, the need to codify these predominantly oral materials in written form.²⁹ Eventually this exercise, originally carried out by local colonial administrators, mainly from military backgrounds, was systematised in a scientific format.³⁰ Much pioneering work was undertaken by colonial administrators and scholars such as Carlo Conti Rossini, A. Pollera and E. Petazzi.³¹

The significance of this considerable cognitive effort is apparent in two main areas of colonial policy, namely the enforcement of law and the organisation of land tenure. With regard to the enforcement of law and order, the codification of customary laws represented a first important step in the definition of a segregated juridical space for Eritrean colonial subjects and 'assimilated' subjects,³² by creating a static concept of 'tradition' as opposed to modernity, the latter defined as a dynamic and Western prerogative. Nevertheless, it has to be stressed that the colonial revision of Eritrean customary laws had important consequences for Eritrean communities in terms of those communities' sense of identity and their social stratification. The main principle guiding colonial legislators was that customary laws needed to be compatible with the principles of order and (more ambiguously) civilisation. To accommodate these sometimes conflicting requirements, colonial scholars engaged in a form of 'sterilisation' of customary laws with the aim of creating in the longer term what they defined as a

possible 'Fetha Italiàn'.³³ This process of 'sterilisation' sought to erase from customary law violent practices associated with the prosecution of homicides, inter-community violence, and initiation rituals, which all implied a community-controlled exercise of violence. An important area of intervention was the suppression of raids as a 'legitimate' form of juridical action. In fact, for many communities raids were an important means of increasing wealth – particularly in the form of livestock – and were also considered a crucial component in initiatory rituals and processes.³⁴ Colonial intervention against practices such as raids had dramatic consequences for Eritrean communities. For instance, as pointed out by Jordan Gebre-Medhin, among the Beni Amer people, the aristocracy was deprived of one of its main means of increasing livestock and therefore led to its further weakening vis-à-vis the increasing enrichment of the Tigre serfs.³⁵ In other contexts, such as land tenure systems, the myopic colonial reading of customary laws, while debated and even criticised by members of the Italian Parliament and some colonial administrators,³⁶ was instrumental in legitimising the eviction of Eritreans from cultivable land which was then allocated to Italian settlers.³⁷ However, land confiscation policies were short-lived: Italian settlers were forced to abandon them because of both popular Eritrean resistance and the hastily-improvised nature of those schemes.³⁸

In addition to customary law, another important area of social investigation launched by the colonial administration was that into the rich and fluid field of oral tradition dealing with origins of communities, genealogies and proverbs. This exercise, the outcome of which today represents a precious collection of sources for scholars interested in the study of Eritrea, was again required for different purposes. Colonial ethnographic enquiries were mainly aimed at identifying webs of alliances and loyalties, as well as of enmity, between and among different segments of Eritrean society. In other words, this material was crucial in decoding power relations and power strategies within indigenous society, providing the colonial administration with the information necessary for the development of its own strategies for domination.

Finally, a further crucial area of colonial ethnographic activity was the collection of biographies of local authorities in Eritrea and Tigray by colonial administrators. This work, still largely in manuscript form in Italian archives,³⁹ is often anonymous, and represents the pain-staking labours of colonial district administrators (*Commissari* and *Residenti*) mainly between 1892 and 1913. These biographies, which are mainly focused on the highlands of Eritrea and on the neighbouring provinces of Tigray, offer fascinating sketches of pre-colonial power relations in the region, with special attention paid to the mechanisms for the transmission of power. As discussed by Taddia,⁴⁰ the biographies served a dual purpose in the colonial strategy for domination. A first important function was to provide colonial administrators with an understanding of Eritrean political systems, through the detailed identification of their social actors.⁴¹ A great deal of attention was devoted to the lineage of chiefs, and to the source of their legitimacy from the perspective of local political culture. Besides this cognitive function, and partially as a result of it, biographies of local authorities were also instrumental in facilitating the moulding of a new elite appointed by the colonial administration. Evidence of this second purpose can be found in the careful and detailed attention which the biographies paid to the support enjoyed by local authorities among the population and, at the same time, to their degree of loyalty to the colonial authority.

All this belongs to the domain of colonial strategy vis-à-vis Eritrean politics. However, biographies of indigenous chiefs were also designed to serve as a political dictionary of

the region, aiding the development of the 'foreign policy' of *Colonia Eritrea* in terms of the élites of neighbouring Tigray. From this perspective, kinship relations and the life stories of Tigrayan authorities were carefully scrutinised with the aim, firstly, of identifying local authorities beyond the border, who might thus be more receptive to Italian colonial discourse, and secondly of identifying Eritrean authorities who could act as mediators in this process of creating complex webs of political cohesion and attachment.

The Colonial State and Local Identities

The processes discussed above describe the symbolic appropriation of the territory by the colonial authority. It is now important to discuss the colonial approach to the issue of local identities in Eritrea. We are concerned here with the interaction between the diversity of pre-colonial society and the process of building the colonial state, which, as I will argue later, laid the foundations for the development of Eritrean nationalism. This is an issue which involves the analysis of many interdependent factors, such as religion, language, and ethnicity. Moreover, the interplay of these factors takes place through various exogenous and endogenous actors, chiefly colonial administrators, local authorities, missionaries, and local religious authorities. From this point of view, the construction of Eritrea as a colonial state can be defined as a complex process of political engineering.

1. Religion

A key factor in the definition of identities in the pre-colonial as well as in the colonial context was religion, which to a certain extent reified differences in economic patterns. The two dominant religions in the region were Orthodox Christianity and Islam, both with deeply rooted local traditions. Through a long and complex process of indigenisation, these two religions have become core elements of local identity, acting as basic instruments of social cohesion and sources of legitimacy for political authority.⁴² This had been an extremely fluid and dialectic process characterised by frequent and relevant changes in the balance of power between the two main religions.

It is clear that the social and political history of Northeast Africa in the nineteenth century is characterised by a series of dramatic developments in which religion played a major role. In fact, both Christianity and Islam became cornerstones in the process of definition of political identities. This can be seen in the case of Emperor Yohannes IV, who utilised Christianity in building a centralised state, as well as in terms of the use of Islam in Egyptian expansionist policy and in the Mahdi's later insurgency.⁴³ Linking each of these instances is the development of a radical and exclusive religious discourse which left no room for divergent views, forcing local populations to develop strategies of survival in which conversion played a crucial role.

From the colonial literature it is clear that Italian colonial administrators quickly understood the centrality of religion as an element of identity and, therefore, as an element of social and political cohesion. This awareness is apparent in the first regulations and decrees issued by the early colonial administration in Eritrea. For instance, as early as 1888, in one of the first decrees issued by the Italian military administration, then based in Massawa, Italian troops were warned to be particularly careful not to offend the

religious sensitivities of local populations.⁴⁴ Similarly, in the text of the very decree which officially constituted Eritrea as an Italian colony on 1 January 1890, the relevance of religion as a component of local identities was acknowledged. At the same time the decree anticipated the colonial attitude toward religion, expressed through the principle of the equality of all religions.⁴⁵

This point, which has been generally overlooked by the literature dealing with Italian colonialism,⁴⁶ is crucial to understanding not only an important aspect of Italian colonial policy, but also the roots of some of the contradictions which developed within Eritrean nationalism, on which I will elaborate later. As emphasised by colonial scholars, Italy's religious policy in Eritrea was directly inspired by the principles of the Berlin Conference in which the defence of religious freedom had been declared as one of the stated civilising missions of the European colonial powers in Africa.⁴⁷ In the context of the Berlin Conference, this principle was aimed mainly at facilitating and protecting the freedom of movement of missionary agencies within African territory. However, in the Italian interpretation, the principle of religious freedom was expanded to mean the equality of all religions before the colonial administration. As mentioned earlier, article 3 of the Royal bill (n. 857) called for the respect of all local beliefs and religious practices, as long as they did not clash with the principles of 'universal morality' and 'public order'.⁴⁸

This policy, which remained in place with little variation through the entire colonial period,⁴⁹ had the potential to dramatically re-map the religious landscape of a region marked by deep religious tension. Even a 'passive' implementation of the policy would have led to a radical reconfiguration of religious balances in the region, challenging the traditional hegemony of Orthodox Christianity in the highlands and of Islam in the lowlands. However, from the early colonial period, particularly under Governor Martini, colonial administrators implemented the policy in a pro-active way by insisting on the need to respect existing hegemonic relations.⁵⁰ This 'respect' placed restraints on missionary proselytising endeavours, which were mainly allowed in areas of religious hybridism or in areas where, according to the understanding of colonial administrators, support for either Orthodox Christianity or Islam was less intense.⁵¹ It needs to be emphasised that the Catholic Church was not given a privileged status within colonial religious policies, an exception being made for the education of Eritreans which was *de facto* left in the hands of missionary schools. As a result, it was in the urban centres that the new colonial religious balance was most noticeable. In the towns, change can be most clearly detected, and the few studies undertaken in this field seem to indicate a substantial improvement of the social status of Muslim communities, which under the colonial administration enjoyed a greater degree of social and religious freedom.⁵² Ultimately these developments played a crucial role in the creation of Eritrean Muslim communities as part of the urban *petit bourgeoisie*, particularly in the latter years of Italian colonial rule, leading to their active participation in early nationalist organisations.⁵³

2. Ethnicity

A second important factor in the definition of local identities was ethnicity. The pre-colonial era was characterised by a high degree of ethnic diversity which to some extent, as with religious differences, also represented diversity in productive systems and ecological environments. Again, it should be noted that ethnic identities were also

extremely fluid and were informed by a complex interplay of alliances and solidarities, which often traversed linguistic and religious boundaries.

At the outset of the colonial era, relations with Eritreans were placed under the jurisdiction of the *Ufficio per l'Agricoltura e il Commercio* (Office for Agriculture and Trade), with the mandate to maintain 'relations with indigenous people and their chiefs within and outside the colony, choose and confirm in their position sultans, na'ibs, šekhs, šums, kántyba, as well as political negotiations with Ethiopia'.⁵⁴ This says much about early colonial priorities in terms of 'indigenous affairs', which seem to have lain in the arenas of commerce and land. However, by July 1890, this organisational structure had been partially revised and a separate body, the *Agenzia per le tribù* (Agency for tribes), was set up, though still under the authority of the *Ufficio per l'Agricoltura e il Commercio*.⁵⁵ In spite of its vague formulation,⁵⁶ the creation of this new separate office marked an important shift in colonial policy which reveals the increased consciousness among colonial administrators of the relevance of 'indigenous affairs'. A further significant organisational change was introduced few months later, when responsibility for 'relations with indigenous people and their chiefs' was placed directly under the Office of the Governor of the colony.⁵⁷ This reflects, to some extent, an internal struggle for power within the early colonial administration, as well as the tendency toward increased centralisation of decision-making processes related to 'indigenous affairs'. It is, therefore, probably no coincidence that this decree was followed by a series of treaties with local chiefs who thus formally 'accepted' the 'protection' of the Italian authorities.⁵⁸ It is also worth mentioning that all the above-mentioned agreements contained specific reference to the 'willingness' of the Eritrean chiefs to collect those tributes which the colonial administration might decide to impose. In fact, the official proclamation concerning the collection of tribute from Eritrean populations, as a 'contribution to colonial administrative expenses', was issued just a year later by Governor Oreste Baratieri.⁵⁹ This reorganisation indicates the centrality of ethnicity in the Eritrean context, and its role within the broader framework of colonial strategies for domination. The colonial literature demonstrates that the Italian colonial administrator, though in possession of strong racial prejudices, had a sound grasp of ethnic relations in Eritrea and of their internal dialectic.⁶⁰

At one time in African studies, ethnicity was closely associated with linguistic classification, according to a diffusionist theory which saw the spread of Semitic languages in the region as a civilising dynamic. According to this representation of ethnicity through linguistics, the Semitic component (i.e. Tigrinya and Tigre speakers) was positioned at the top of the ethnic hierarchy, followed by the Kushitic (Saho, Afar and Bilin speakers) and finally by what colonial linguistics describes as 'Nilotic' or 'Proto-Kushitic' (Nara and Kunama speakers).⁶¹ From the outset, colonial administrators and scholars demonstrated an understanding of the unbalanced nature of ethnic relations in the colonial territory and of the significance of this for colonial policy. Conti Rossini asserted that an appreciation of such diversity was crucial, if the administration was to 'avoid serious dangers'.⁶² The early colonial administration, aware of ethnic sensitivities in the region, projected itself as the guarantor of inter-ethnic harmony and, in so doing, attempted to develop a form of national unity under the Italian flag. With the coming of Fascism, a new element was introduced as colonial administrators and scholars placed greater emphasis on the ethnic imbalance in the territory to justify both colonial rule and the introduction of tougher racial regulations. For example, Martino Mario Moreno, General Director of the Office for

Political Affairs in the *Ministero dell'Africa Italiana* (Ministry for Italian Africa), asserted that Eritreans possessed a 'deep sense' of racial differentiation and that they 'instinctively acknowledge' the superiority of the white man.⁶³

There was an ambivalence in colonial policy. As discussed earlier, in facilitating the safe movement of people and goods within the territory, and repressing raids and other forms of interethnic violence, colonial authorities adopted a proactive attitude with regard to ethnicity, empowering oppressed communities and remapping ethnic relations in colonial Eritrea.⁶⁴ This has to be taken into account when assessing the Eritrean memory and perception of Italian colonial rule, which – contrary to the simplified representation of the period in more recent political pamphlets – needs to be analysed through the lenses of religion, class and, ultimately, ethnicity. To this end it needs to be stressed that the remapping of ethnicity in colonial Eritrea cannot be analysed only in terms of a top-down process, under colonial hegemony. Documentary evidence indicates a much more intriguing interaction between colonial and indigenous strategies. For instance, these documents testify to the fact that villages, fractions of larger communities,⁶⁵ and even religious communities sought to modify their affiliations and loyalties.⁶⁶ It is clear that, in some cases, Eritreans managed to exploit colonial regulations to accommodate their specific strategies.

Again, however, there is an element of ambivalence in the colonial management of ethnicity which had long-term consequences. By manipulating ethnicity as a threat to order and political stability, and challenging its material and juridical foundations, the colonial administration, particularly during the Fascist period, did not fundamentally challenge the ideological dimension of ethnicity, which somehow survived through the colonial period as did the prejudices and stereotypes associated with it.⁶⁷ The challenge for modern researchers is to understand the extent to which the resilience of this ideological dimension was the result of the interplay of local prejudices and stereotypes common in Europe in those years, or the result of conscious colonial strategies aimed at perpetuating internal divisions within Eritrean society.

3. Language

Language is another vital area for discussion in the context of colonial policy toward identity. Indeed, language and language policy are crucial in determining the representation of communities and the power relations between them. It is a common assumption in Eritrean studies, and also in the political literature, that colonial policy aimed deliberately at the suppression of local linguistic identities, with a particular hostility toward the Tigrinya language.⁶⁸ This notion, which fails to account for the otherwise mysterious flourishing of written literature in Eritrea during the 1940s and 1950s, overlooks documentary evidence. Indeed, analysis of colonial literature, and particularly of colonial archives, suggests a rather different reality, indicating the need for further research. Needless to say, we are not concerned here to deny the repressive nature of Italian colonial rule in Eritrea; rather, we do need to aim for a more nuanced understanding of it. To some extent, the development of colonial language policy seems to have gone hand-in-hand with education policy, and this, in turn, needs to be understood within the broader framework of Italy's colonial strategy. Regarding language policy, it is possible to identify three main periods, which can mainly be inferred from the enforcement of school regulations.

The first period, from 1888 to 1911, is characterised by the tendency to stress Italian as the dominant language, and the main language of instruction. In part, this attitude reflected the fact that Eritrea was earmarked for white settlement. With regard to local languages, the colonial administration emphasised the need to teach Arabic and Amharic both to colonial subjects and to Italian settlers. In addition to schools, colonial soldiers were also identified as transmitters of the knowledge and use of Italian among the Eritrean population.⁶⁹ Behind this policy lay the assumption that the knowledge of Italian would ease relations between colonised and coloniser, making the former 'appreciate and fear' the cultural superiority of Italy; moreover, the notion prevailed that, considering the linguistic diversity of the territory, the Italian language would serve as a cohesive factor.⁷⁰ At the same time, the study of Arabic and Amharic for Italians was deemed useful, as both languages were perceived as *lingua franca* for commerce in the region, and knowledge of these would, therefore, facilitate the improvement of business activities. It is worth noting that, during this stage, colonial documents describe Arabic and Amharic as 'languages' and Eritrean languages as 'dialects'. Nevertheless, for a short period the colonial administration also tried to encourage the study of Eritrean languages among colonial officers and civil servants, and to this end organised competitions with monetary awards for the winners.⁷¹ However, this practice was soon abandoned due to changes in colonial policy, and also to what colonial documents describe generically as 'unsatisfactory results'.⁷²

The second period, from 1911 to 1921, can be considered as a transition from the early stage of Italian colonial rule – the so-called 'Liberal' period – to the Fascist period. Having abandoned the idea of transforming Eritrea into a settler colony, colonial administrators seemed prepared to enlarge somewhat the range of educational opportunities available to Eritreans, very narrow though this still was. A significant aspect of this policy was the opening of vocational schools known as *Scuole di Arti e Mestieri* which made explicit the colonial perception of education for Eritreans. As stated in their official curricula, these schools aimed at training the sons of Eritrean chiefs and former colonial soldiers to take over administrative positions, and to fill positions in the lower levels of the colonial civil service (for example as delivery men, telegraph messengers, interpreters, typewriters, and assistant telegraph operators), the private sector (as shop tellers, carpenters and tanners), and, finally, the colonial army.⁷³ To accommodate these different needs, the curricula balanced technical and military training. Organised as boarding schools, with possibilities also for non-resident students, the schools were opened in the towns of Keren (1911), Segeneyti (1914) and Addi Ugri (1914), each of them targeting a specific religious community. Keren targeted Muslims, Segeneyti Roman Catholics and mixed-birth Eritreans, and Addi Ugri Orthodox Christians. The relevance of these schools with regard to language policy lies in the fact that, as in elementary schools, they practised a policy of bilingual teaching. Alongside Italian as the main medium of instruction and the *lingua franca* of Amharic, Tigrinya was introduced for Christians and Arabic for Muslims students. This development deserves particular attention because it can be considered as a landmark in the process of strengthening local linguistic identities. A second aspect to be taken into account is the fact that the introduction of Eritrean languages marked the beginning of the systematic recruitment of Eritrean teachers into the colonial educational system.⁷⁴

The period from 1921 to 1931 can be considered a brief interlude during which extant policies were consolidated and educational facilities expanded further. Finally, the period

from 1931 to 1941 is characterised by the attempt to implement in the colonial territory the Fascist model of total society then current in Italy. One of the most important fields for the implementation of these policies was, of course, education. Paradoxically, the increased emphasis during the Fascist period on racial differentiation in society led to an increase in the administration's attention to the development of education for Eritreans. Alongside the opening of new schools, a greater emphasis was placed on the use of local languages in instruction. The policy of bilingualism – i.e., the use of Tigrinya for Christians and Arabic for Muslims – was further extended and, at least according to official curricula, the plan was also to introduce the Tigre language into schools in Aqordat and Keren.⁷⁵ A further significant development in the curricula was the fact that Amharic, while still a compulsory subject, was now defined as a non-Eritrean language.⁷⁶ Moreover, it was decided to permit, and to support financially, private schools run by Eritreans, which meant mainly Qur'anic schools and schools associated with Christian Orthodox churches or monasteries, together with a few private schools run by individuals in the urban areas.⁷⁷

Further research is needed on the growth of newspapers and magazines written in Tigrinya and Arabic during the colonial period.⁷⁸ The relevance of this phenomenon can be assessed from two complementary points of view. Tautological as it might seem, the existence of media implies the existence of journalists, and therefore the development of linguistic and communication skills. Similarly, such media implies the presence of an audience, however restricted. The qualitative and quantitative dimensions of this phenomenon need to be investigated in order to be able to assess the social composition of the readership, as well as the size of the latter vis-à-vis the entire Eritrean population. Analysis of journalistic endeavours in Eritrean languages during the colonial period would further contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the development of linguistic and national identities in Eritrea.

Absentee Elites? Italian Colonialism and Eritrean Elites

In order to assess the long-term impact of colonialism on Eritrean society, it is important to identify the social actors involved in this complex process, which means a discussion of the role played by colonialism in the formation of local elites. A recurrent theme in Eritrean intellectual discourse on Italian colonialism is the idea that, in deliberately and brutally frustrating Eritrean aspirations, the colonial system militated against the emergence of a local elite able to bridge Eritrea between the colonial and post-colonial eras. While this might be considered a correct assessment in a very general sense, it is an unsubstantiated ideological assumption if not placed in the appropriate historical context. It does not explain the vivacity of the intellectual and political debate in Eritrea in the years following the end of Italian colonial rule. Clearly, the creation of Eritrean elites was not a priority of the Italians, demonstrated by the restricted educational facilities provided for Eritreans. Nevertheless, to overemphasise the idea can be misleading, suggesting as it does a unilateral and centralised process, denying the autonomous and creative role of Eritreans in devising strategies of survival within the colonial system. At the same time the discussion of elites must not ignore the complex interaction of language, ethnicity and religion with colonialism. Finally any analysis of elites must consider the extremely elusive concept of modernity in the Eritrean context.

A close examination of power structures within colonial society reveals a number of privileged local interlocutors of the colonial authority, ranging from the lower echelons of the civil service to teachers, colonial soldiers (*ascari*) and their families, small entrepreneurs, and farm concessionaries. It is possible to suggest that the colonial authorities tried to co-opt certain elements in Eritrean society into the governing apparatus. In this ambivalent and often contradictory process, aimed at the construction of the colonial subject, *ascari*, for example, were expected to play a privileged role and were identified, together with their families, as potential agents of 'Italianisation' within Eritrean society. The children of *ascari*, in particular, because of their early and continuous contact with the colonial administration, were expected to grow up as loyal and dedicated colonial subjects.

Other members of this emerging new social group should not be overlooked. Besides colonial soldiers, there were many other Eritreans involved at the lower levels of the civil service as interpreters, telegraph and telephone operators, and clerks, as well as an emerging urban *petit bourgeoisie* linked to trade and land concessions. These new social actors played a crucial role as filters or buffers between the colonial authority and indigenous society, and coalesced in developing a *de facto* minor élite with a separate social status. Colonial literature, particularly military regulations and guidelines for civil servants, provides evidence for a noteworthy trend in the establishment of political and social loyalties. From the outset of Italian colonial rule, the main emphasis in terms of the definition of subjects' loyalty was placed on the colonial state. In the colonial discourse, the colonial state, through its mechanisms of law enforcement and establishment of social and political 'order', was defined as an institution *super partes*, which, allegedly, brought cohesion to the different components of Eritrean society. Conversely, religious or ethnic identities, though acknowledged and formally protected by the law, tended to be restricted to the sphere of local or private matters.

It is therefore apparent that, in spite of repressive colonial policies, a small and informal Eritrean elite grew up during the fifty-one years of official Italian colonial rule. Moreover, many members of this elite were integrated in the British Military Administration, which had the mandate to temporarily administer Eritrea after the collapse of Italian colonial rule in 1941, and played an important role in the shaping post-colonial Eritrea.⁷⁹ However, it is also apparent that the development of national, linguistic and cultural identities among Eritrean elites, at least in the intellectual articulation of such identities, was marked by a degree of uncertainty and ambiguity. The contradictions inherent in this process have been commendably highlighted by Alemseged Abbay, who in a recent controversial study describes 'the staggering of Eritrea to nationhood'.⁸⁰ Alemseged Abbay lays emphasis on the existence of a number of structural ambiguities in the march of Eritrea to nationhood, which he identifies at the level of linguistic, ethnic and religious identities. Basing his argument on the political literature of the 1940s, he demonstrates the substantial differences which existed, and some ways still exist, between different sections of Eritrean society with regard to the perception of Eritrea's nationhood, and he explains these by stressing the centrality of religious identities in the Eritrean context. Alemseged also points to the ambiguity of the concept of modernity, as absorbed by Eritrean elites, as a differentiating marker from neighbouring communities in northern Ethiopia with whom they would otherwise have shared many religious, linguistic and social features. In this context modernity (real or presumed) served as an

ideological tool for 'imagining the nation', and this may have led to a ridiculous parroting of European racist stereotypes.

Alemseged Abbay raises some crucial points relating to the complex processes by which Eritreans imagined the nation and, therefore, his work is worthy of scholarly attention. However, this otherwise fascinating and challenging analysis suffers from two major shortcomings. The first is what seems to be an axiomatic identification of Italian colonial rule with the Fascist period, i.e. a confusion of a part with the whole.⁸¹ The analysis thus lacks depth, especially when applied to such sensitive aspects of colonial policy as the study of customary law, land confiscation, education, racial bars and so on. The second, more serious weakness is the author's insistence on using the existence of contradictions within the broad church of Eritrean nationalism to deny *tout court* its very right to exist. To 'imagine a nation' is a dialectic process and therefore characterised by contradictions and often strident conflicts. However, this hardly has any bearing on the historical relevance of the process itself, which rather deserves further analysis. From this perspective, the ambiguity in the interplay of ethnicity, religion and language, which can be detected in the early stages of Eritrean nationalism, also reflects the contradiction inherent in colonial attitudes towards those issues.

The role of modernity in the Eritrean colonial context also deserves more rigorous scholarly attention. To a considerable degree, the case of colonial Eritrea confirms the contradiction between modernity and modernisation discussed by Jean Copan⁸², namely the notion of a modernisation without modernity. In other words, in the discourses of Eritrean elites we can discern a mimicry of Western stereotypes, which does not necessarily reflect the deeper structural transformation of Eritrean societies. However, in this regard Eritrea is by no means unique, as this seems to be a characteristic of African elites more generally, because the very concept of modernity was so deeply rooted in the mainstream of Western culture that little room had been left for an alternative conceptualisation of it.

Demonstrating this intricate web of contradictions, for example, are the arguments used by the Association of Eritrean Intellectuals to support the cause of Eritrean independence from Ethiopia. In a pamphlet produced by the Association in 1949, many of the themes are discussed which characterised Eritrean nationalist discourse in the years following the end of Italian colonial rule. Within this discourse a particular emphasis was placed on a modernised representation of Eritrea. Infrastructural and technological developments were underlined, as was the spread of literacy (in both Eritrean and European languages), which, together with the presence of a strong ethic of work, it was argued, would enable Eritreans to fill the key positions in administration and ultimately to lead Eritrea to viable independent statehood.⁸³ Apart from the fact that this publication was obviously tailored for a foreign audience in order to win support for the Eritrean cause, and also that there are few details on the writers of the document, there are two conceptual aspects which deserve special attention. A first point is that the authors openly acknowledge the seminal role of Italian colonialism in what they describe as the modernisation of Eritrea. A second notable element is that the colonial experience is lumped together with the period of British Administration and is described rather awkwardly in terms of the 'co-operation' between long pre-existing Eritrean institutions and the West. The authors asserted that 'Eritreans know that they are by far the most civilised people in East Africa.'⁸⁴

This seems to confirm what has been described as one of the main contradictions of Eritrean nationalism: unlike the majority of African nationalisms, that in Eritrea was based not on antagonism to the former colonial power but on hostility to a new occupying force. This in turn seems to suggest an uneasy and contradictory relationship with colonialism, which is described as the founding 'moment' of the Eritrean state, and at the same time, particularly in the more ideological literature of the Eritrean liberation movements, is also denounced for its exploitative and violent nature.

However, the pamphlet of the Association of Eritrean Intellectuals also attempted to demonstrate the capacity of Eritreans for ruling themselves through the restoration of their own political institutions. To this end, and not without a certain pragmatism, the authors stated that 'the centre of social life in Eritrea – *outside the large European centres* – is, on the plateau, the family group; to which corresponds in the lowland, the tribe'.⁸⁵ The document then goes on to describe Eritrean social organisation, which is presented as a viable model for an independent Eritrea within a republican framework. The contradiction in this case lies in the fact that, while on the one hand an alternative to Western modernity is presented through the reviving of indigenous institutions, on the other hand the writers fail to produce an inclusive model for Eritrean nationhood. In fact, what they describe as a set of viable Eritrean institutions reflect, in the main, the political culture of the highlands, based on the concept of *Enda* (extended family), *bayto* (village or community assembly), and *dana* (community judge, often the chief of the village).⁸⁶ There is no mention of the articulation of power within the societies of the eastern and western lowlands, which is cursorily described as 'practically the same organization – with names changed to suit the different language [sic]'.⁸⁷ This recurrent overlap between the local and the national seems to be a contradiction that has attended the development of Eritrean nationalism for some time, and is evident even during the years of liberation struggle.⁸⁸ In conclusion, it is apparent that in the Eritrean case, scholars need to adopt a more articulate and comprehensive framework which should take into account the complex interplay of colonial and indigenous strategies.

Conclusion

The complexity of pre-colonial social and political history provided Italian colonialism with the opportunity to play a defining role in the region without having to face strong and organised resistance. Italian colonial rule operated through a complex policy of simultaneous co-option and exclusion which, up to now, has been assessed mainly in authoritarian and discriminatory terms. In this regard, Italian colonialism did not deviate substantially from the broader colonial paradigm of domination through segregation, be this institutional or territorial. However, it is important to move to a further analytical level, in order to be able to assess the ways in which colonial policy interacted with Eritrean society, as well as the main outcomes of this process. This requires a deconstruction of ethnicity, language and religion in the colonial context. With regard to the issue of nationalism, it is apparent that Italian colonial policies played a significant role in moulding Eritrean nationalism. Key factors in this process were the creation of institutional procedures implemented by the colonial administration and their interaction with the different components of the Eritrean society.

In this context a crucial area for study is the process of formation of local elites and their role in the process of nation building. Such a detailed study is vital to a full

understanding of the development of Eritrean nationalism as a separate identity, encompassing a range of linguistic, cultural, religious and ethnic diversities. At the same time, it also has to be acknowledged that this process was marked by sundry ambiguities and contradictions which reflected the very nature of Italian colonial rule. The acknowledgement of these ambiguities, far from representing a denial of the historical legitimacy of Eritrean nationalism, should rather contribute to a fuller understanding of its achievements as well as of its limitations in post-colonial and independent Eritrea.

Notes

- ¹ This well-established scholarly tradition, developed by both Ethiopian scholars and Western Ethiopianists, argues for a historical continuity between the early civilisations of the region and the modern Ethiopian state. Major examples of this tradition are: Ullendorf, *The Ethiopians*; Levine, *Greater Ethiopia*; Rubenson, *Survival of Ethiopian Independence*.
- ² See Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea and Eritrea and Ethiopia*; Abbay, *Identity Jilted*; Henze, *Layers of Time*.
- ³ For example Mesghenna, *Italian Colonialism*; Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism*; Ogbazghi, *Eritrea; Iyob, The Eritrean Struggle*; Bereketab, *Eritrea: The Making of a Nation*.
- ⁴ Sabbe, *History of Eritrea*; Yohannes, *Mākhātā Antsar Italyawi*; Tesfai, *Ayn Fālalā*. This literature tends to reiterate some of the rough ideas sketched in the political literature of the main nationalist organisations during the years of liberation struggle. See for instance: Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), *The Struggle of Eritrea* and *Tarikh Sewra Iertra*; Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), *Eretran qalsan, Kab tenti Kesa'e 1941*.
- ⁵ Naty, 'Memories of the Kunama'.
- ⁶ A more comprehensive approach can be found in Taddia, *L'Eritrea Colonia*. It is also important to note the very promising research undertaken by a new wave of scholars such as Giulia Barrera, Francesca Locatelli, Jonathan Miran, Alessandro Volterra and Massimo Zaccaria, on different aspects of colonial as well as pre-colonial Eritrea.
- ⁷ Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*.
- ⁸ Gaber, *Bogos*.
- ⁹ Pollera, *I baria e i cunama*, 33–53; Naty, 'Memories of the Kunama'.
- ¹⁰ Pollera, *Le popolazioni indigene dell'Eritrea*, 255–57.
- ¹¹ Erlich, *Ethiopia and Eritrea*, 101–06; Talhami, *Suakin and Massawa*; Mengsteb, 'The Occupation of Keren'.
- ¹² Martini, *Diario Eritreo*, 322.
- ¹³ With regard to the early period it is worth noting a letter written by Emperor Menelik to *degazmach* Tafari in which the Emperor mentions that raids had been led against the Omartu people in Eritrean territory, and ordered the return of looted property: Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Rome), Carte Martini [hereafter ACS/CM] Scatola 17, Fascicolo 60, Letter *Menelik to degazmach Tafari*, 27 September 1901. Similar episodes were reported over the ensuing years.
- ¹⁴ Romandini, 'Politica musulmana', 127–31.
- ¹⁵ Pankhurst, 'Tribute, Taxation and Government Revenues', Parts I and II.
- ¹⁶ Caulk, 'Armies as Predators'.
- ¹⁷ Nadel, 'Notes on Beni-Amer Society'.
- ¹⁸ Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism*, 64.
- ¹⁹ The complexity of the Eritrean colonial *milieu*, in terms of numerous alliances and conflicts, remains to be examined in detail, but see Taddia, *La memoria dell'impero and Autobiografie Africane*.
- ²⁰ Contemporary Italian sources indicate that merely to be *rumoured* to be 'in opposition' was sufficient for prosecution: Bizzoni, *L'Eritrea nel passato e nel presente*, 226–28.
- ²¹ The most detailed study of repressive Italian policies in Eritrea is Negash, *No Medicine*; see also Yohannes, *Mākhātā Antsar Italyawi*.
- ²² Casti Moreschi, 'La "mappa" del Baratieri'.
- ²³ Detailed accounts of the battle and its aftermath can be found in Battaglia, *La prima guerra d'Africa* and Berkeley, *The Campaign of Adowa*.

- ²⁴ Guazzini, *Le ragioni di un confine coloniale*.
- ²⁵ Frequent reference to these problems can be found in the report of the Italian Boundary Commission in charge of the process of delimitation and demarcation, Archivio storico del Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Rome) (hereafter ASMAI) Posizione 35/6, f.23, *Il confine fra lo Scimezana e l'Agamè, Relazione della Commissione al FF di R. Commissario Civile per l'Eritrea*, Senafè, 4 April 1904.
- ²⁶ 'Ordinanza Governatoriale 19 aprile 1895, n. 7, relativa all'ortografia da adottare in tutti gli uffici, comandi, reparti, ecc. della colonia', *Buletino ufficiale della Colonia Eritrea* (hereafter BU), 62 (17 April 1895). It remains to be assessed how much colonial redefinition of the space and its 'normalisation' affected local perceptions of the landscape and therefore the role of geography in the definition of identities.
- ²⁷ Governo della Colonia Eritrea, *Indice delle località abitate*.
- ²⁸ The noted scholar and colonial administrator Carlo Conti Rossini clearly stated this double function of colonial studies, suggesting 'Si studi l'indigeno, anche per saperlo governare' (let us study the indigenous people, in order to be able to rule them): Conti Rossini, 'Schizzo etnico e storico delle popolazioni eritree', 90.
- ²⁹ The intricate contradictions within this process are discussed in Martone, *Giustizia coloniale*, 27–33.
- ³⁰ On the process of the written codification of Eritrean customary laws under Italian colonialism, see Kemink, 'The Tegrenna Customary Law Codes'.
- ³¹ See Conti Rossini, 'I Loggo e la legge dei Loggo Sarda', 'Sulla dichiarazione di paternità da parte', *Lo statuto dello Scioatte Ansebà*, 'Consuetudini giuridiche del Seraé', Parts I and Part II. See also Pollera, *Il regime della proprietà terriera in Etiopia*; and Petazzi, *L'odierno diritto penale*.
- ³² In 1908 colonial legislation had declared that Arabs, Egyptians [*sic*] and Indians were to be considered as 'assimilated' as colonial subjects: 'Decreto Governatoriale 8.10.1908 n. 787', BU, 787 (8 October 1908).
- ³³ This curious definition was used by Conti Rossini, paraphrasing the famous juridical text known as *Fetha Negest* [*Law of the Kings*], which had been edited by Ignazio Guidi in 1899. See Conti Rossini, *Principi di diritto consuetudinario dell'Eritrea*, 16.
- ³⁴ References to these practices among the Kunama can be found in Pollera, *I baria e i cunama*, 118. However, the author seems to have failed to understand the complexity of the cultural system behind them.
- ³⁵ Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism*, 65.
- ³⁶ Mesghenna, *Italian Colonialism*, 90–92.
- ³⁷ Taddia, 'Sulla politica della terra nella colonia Eritrea'.
- ³⁸ Negash, *No Medecine*, 23; Caulk, "'Black snake, white snake'"; Yohannes, *Mākhātā antsar Italyawi*, 23–25, 41–49.
- ³⁹ A significant portion of this material is kept in the Martini Papers in the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome under the title 'Biografie dei capi indigeni della colonia Eritrea', in ACS/CM Scatola 8, fascicolo 3, and in the archives of the former colonial administration of Eritrea under the title 'Ruoli e biografie di capi indigeni', in Archivio Eritrea, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Rome) (hereafter AE), Pacco 178, 1893. For a more detailed list see also Taddia, *L'Eritrea Colonia*, 206, n.62.
- ⁴⁰ Taddia, *L'Eritrea Colonia*, 198 and 'Constructing Colonial Power'.
- ⁴¹ To this end a noteworthy document was drafted by the Ministero della Guerra (Ministry of War) to provide colonial officers and civil servants in the colonial office with guidelines in their correspondence from and within colonial territories. See Ministero della Guerra, *Dizionario dei nomi di persone*.
- ⁴² See Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*; Kaplan, *The Monastic Holy Man*; Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*; Ahmed, *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Walla*.
- ⁴³ Caulk, 'Yohannes IV'.
- ⁴⁴ Ordine del giorno del 28 Maggio 1888 del Comandante superiore, in Mori, *Manuale di legislazione della Colonia Eritrea*, 608.
- ⁴⁵ 'Regio Decreto 1 gennaio 1890, n. 6592 Relativo alla costituzione della Colonia Eritrea', in *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 7 January 1890 n.4
- ⁴⁶ An important exception is Marongiu-Buonaiuti, *Politica e religioni nel colonialismo Italiano*.
- ⁴⁷ Agnesa and Deciani, eds, *Trattati, convenzioni, accordi*, 109.
- ⁴⁸ Mori, *Manuale di legislazione della Colonia Eritrea*, vol. I, 6. It should be noted that at this stage the Italian colonial presence was limited to the bay of Assab, and therefore the declaration was here referring mainly to the Islamic population of the area.
- ⁴⁹ Even the fascist regime, in spite of the improved relations with the Catholic Church, insisted on the non-privileged status of the Catholic church in the colony: see Bertola, *Il regime dei culti nell'Africa Italiana*, 43.
- ⁵⁰ Dirar, 'Michele da Carbonara'.
- ⁵¹ Romandini, 'Politica musulmana in Eritrea'.

- ⁵² The cultural and social complexity of Muslim communities in colonial Eritrea can be evinced quite clearly in Miran, 'Grand mufti'.
- ⁵³ Gherzi, 'Di alcune questioni di politica indigena'.
- ⁵⁴ This organisational set-up was created by the very Decree which formalised Eritrea's status as a colony: 'Regio Decreto 1 gennaio 1890, n. 6592 Relativo alla costituzione della Colonia Eritrea', in *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 4, 7 January 1890.
- ⁵⁵ 'Decreto Governatoriale 23 luglio 1890', *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 243, 7 August 1890.
- ⁵⁶ Early colonial legislation and literature in general does not contain any clear conceptualisation of terms such as 'tribe', 'clan', 'population', and so on, which were subsequently used in a fairly ambiguous manner.
- ⁵⁷ This measure was first announced with the 'Governatoriale, 15 settembre 1890, n. 8' and then ratified by the 'Regio Decreto 29 settembre 1890, n. 7160', in *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 248, 22 October 1890.
- ⁵⁸ Details of these treaties can be found in Mori, *Manuale di legislazione della Colonia Eritrea*, vol. II, 186–95.
- ⁵⁹ 'Bando Governatoriale 10 ottobre 1891, n. 25', in Mori, *Manuale di legislazione della Colonia Eritrea*, vol. II, 371.
- ⁶⁰ See Perini, *Di qua dal Mareb*; Conti Rossini, 'Schizzo etnico e storico delle popolazioni eritree'; Pollera, *Le popolazioni indigene dell'Eritrea*.
- ⁶¹ Evidence of this attitude can be found in Conti Rossini, *Etiopia e genti d'Etiopia*, 124–26 and 'Schizzo etnico', 64; Perini, *Di qua dal Mareb*, 307–09.
- ⁶² Conti Rossini, 'Schizzo etnico', 89.
- ⁶³ See Moreno, 'La politica indigena italiana in A.O.I.'.
- ⁶⁴ This process was not merely a 'virtual' one: the administrative partition of Eritrea into units (*Commissariati*) represented an attempt to take into account as much as possible ethno-linguistic differences. See for instance the Decree which in 1898 first established the partition of Eritrea into four *Commissariati*: 'Decreto Governatoriale, 29 Giugno, 1898, n. 444', *BU*, 28 (30 June 1898).
- ⁶⁵ This was particularly true following the battle of Adwa, for example among the Saho. Sections of the Saho people applied to the colonial administration to have their status modified from what the colonial literature defines as fractions (*frazioni*) to that of tribe (*tribù*). See 'Decreto Governatoriale 26 ottobre 1896, n. 317', *BU*, 82 (6 November 1896); 'Decreto Governatoriale 30 novembre 1896, n. 322', *BU*, 1 (6 January 1897).
- ⁶⁶ An example is the case of the religious community (*māhabār*) of Enda Yohannes Tädrär, which in 1910 applied to the administration for an upgrade of its status to the dignity of convent. The official documentation related to this process is available in the *Ellero* papers in the archives of the Department of History of Bologna University, Fascicolo 6, Sottofascicoli 4a, a4b, 4c, 4d. An inventory of these documents is also available in Dore and Dirar eds, *Carte coloniali*.
- ⁶⁷ Notably, some of these stereotypes survive until the present day, in both popular culture and the exoticised representations of Eritrean cultural diversity found in the official press, namely in the cultural pages of the newspaper *Haddas Ertra* and the English weekly magazine *Eritrea Profile*.
- ⁶⁸ See for example Weldeab Weldemariam's introduction to Poscia, *Eritrea: Colonia tradita*, 7.
- ⁶⁹ To this end, Italian language schools were established within each battalion of *ascari*: Baratieri to Commander of Royal troops in Massawa, Asmara 15 July 1892, in Posizione 33/1, Fascicolo 8.
- ⁷⁰ Baratieri to Minister of Foreign Affairs, Asmara 11 June 1894, in ASMAI, Africa III, Pacco 37.
- ⁷¹ *BU*, 54, 16 December 1894.
- ⁷² *BU*, 587, 1 April 1900.
- ⁷³ See 'Regolamento per la Scuola di Arti e mestieri di Cheren' and 'Regolamento per la Scuola S. Giorgio di Adi Ugri', in Colonia Eritrea, *Istruzione pubblica*.
- ⁷⁴ de Marco, *Italianization of African Natives*, 3.
- ⁷⁵ Mention of the introduction of the Tigre language in vocational schools in Keren and Aqordat is made in the regulations for colonial schools issued on 25 April 1931: see Colonia Eritrea, *Ordinamento Scolastico*, 23. However, during my archival research, I was not able to find any documentary evidence of the effective implementation of this policy.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ⁷⁷ According to a colonial report from 1913, when the colonial state was not subsidising these schools, Qur'anica and Orthodox schools had a combined total of 601 students, distributed among 61 schools: 'Scuole italiane in Africa', 1913, ASMAI, Africa III, b.37.
- ⁷⁸ See Pankhurst, 'The Foundations of Education'; Johnson, 'Media History of Eritrea'.
- ⁷⁹ The most detailed studies of this crucial period of Eritrean history are Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, and Tesfay, *Ayn Fälalä*. Aside from their opposing interpretations of the 1940s, the main difference between the

two studies lies in their use of sources: a preponderance of archival sources characterises the former, while the latter relies largely on an extensive collection of oral sources.

⁸⁰ Abbay, *Identity Jilted* and 'Not With Them, Not Without Them'.

⁸¹ Abbay, *Identity Jilted*, 24.

⁸² Copans, *Longue marche de la modernité africaine*, 229.

⁸³ Association of Eritrean Intellectuals, *Some Points on the People of Eritrea*. This pamphlet was published in both English and Italian.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 8. The italics are mine. The notion of tribe with regard to the social organisation of the lowlands is, again, typical of colonial ethnographic and administrative conceptualisations.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸⁸ See Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, 67–69; Makki, 'The Aporias of Radical Nationalism'.

References

- Abbay, Alemseged. *Identity Jilted or Re-imagining Identity?* Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1998.
- . "Not With Them, Not Without Them: The Staggering of Eritrea to Nationhood." *Africa* 56, no. 4 (2001): 459–91.
- Agnesa, G., and V. Deciani, eds. *Trattati, convenzioni, accordi, protocolli ed altri documenti relativi all'Africa, 1825–1906*. Vol. I. Roma: Ministero Affari Esteri (MAE), 1906.
- Ahmed, Hussein. *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wallo, Ethiopia: Revival, Reform and Reaction*. Leiden: Brill, 2001.
- Association of Eritrean Intellectuals. *Some Points on the People of Eritrea in Support of their Striving for Independence*. Asmara: Tipografia Zuco, 1949.
- Battaglia, R. *La prima guerra d'Africa*. Torino: G. Einaudi, 1958.
- Bereketeab, Redie. *Eritrea: The Making of a Nation*. Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2000.
- Berkeley, G. F. H. *The Campaign of Adowa and the Rise of Menelik*. London: Constable, 1902.
- Bertola, A. *Il regime dei culti nell'Africa Italiana*. Bologna: Cappelli, 1939.
- Bizzoni, A. *L'Eritrea nel passato e nel presente*. Milano: Sonzogno, 1897.
- Casti Moreschi, E. "La 'mappa' del Baratieri: la Sconfitta di Adua e la Vittoria dell'Autoreferenza Cartografica." *Terra d'Africa* 6 (1996): 17–79.
- Caulk, R. "Armies as Predators: Soldiers and Peasants in Ethiopia c.1850–1935." *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 11, no. 3 (1978): 457–93.
- . "'Black snake, white snake': Bahta Hagos and his Revolt Against Italian Overrule in Eritrea, 1894." In *Banditry Rebellion, and Social Protest in Africa*, edited by D. Crummey. Oxford: James Currey, 1986.
- . "Yohannes IV, the Mahdists, and the Colonial Partition of North-East Africa." *Transafrican Journal of History* 1, no. 2 (1971): 22–42.
- Chelati Dirar, Uoldelul. "Michele da Carbonara e la Prefettura Apostolica dell'Eritrea (1894–1910)." *Quaderni Storici* 37, no. 1 (2002): 149–88.
- Colonia Eritrea. *Istruzione pubblica*. Asmara: Tipografia Franciscana, 1914.
- . *Ordinamento scolastico per sudditi coloniali ed assimilati*. Asmara: Tipografia Fioretti, 1931.
- Conti Rossini, C. "Consuetudini Giuridiche del Seraé Raccolte dall'Assemblea dei suoi notabili a cura del Commissariato Regionale di Addi Ugri." In *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, Part I. Roma: Istituto per l'Oriente, 1948. Part II. Roma: Istituto per l'Oriente, 1953.
- . *Etiopia e genti d'Etiopia*. Firenze: Bemporad, 1937.
- . "I Loggo e la legge dei Loggo Sarda." *Giornale della Società Asiatica Italiana*, 12 (1904): 1–63.
- . *Principi di Diritto Consuetudinario dell'Eritrea*. Roma: Tipografia dell'Unione, 1916.
- . "Schizzo etnico e storico delle popolazioni eritree." In *L'Eritrea Economica*, edited by F. Martini. Roma: De Agostini, 1913.
- . *Lo statuto dello Scioatte Ansebà (Eritrea)*. Padova: Cedam, 1939.
- . "Sulla dichiarazione di paternità da parte della madre nella consuetudine abissina." *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* 12, (1937): 102–06.
- Copans, J. *La longue marche de la modernité africaine*. Paris: Karthala, 1990.
- Dore G. and Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, eds. *Carte coloniali: i documenti italiani del Fondo Ellero*. Torino: l'Harmattan Italia, 2000.
- Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). *The Struggle of Eritrea*. Damascus: ELF, 1965.

- . *Tarikh Sewra Iertra* [History of the Eritrean Revolution]. Field: ELE, 1973.
- Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), *Eretran Galsan, Kab tenti Kesa'e 1941* [Eritrea and its Struggle, from Ancient Times to 1941]. Field: Information and Propaganda Department of the EPLF, 1978.
- Erlich, H. *Ethiopia and Eritrea during the Scramble for Africa: A Political Biography of Ras Alula (1875–1897)*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 1982.
- Gaber, Michael. *Bogos (1890–1941)*. Baghdad: Sarafian, 1992.
- Gebre-Medhin, Jordan. *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*. Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1989.
- Gherzi, E. "Di alcune questioni di politica indigena." *Rivista delle Colonie* 7, no. 10 (1936): 770–83.]
- Governo della Colonia Eritrea. *Indice delle località abitate*. Asmara: Tip. Francescana, 1903.
- Guazzini, F. *Le ragioni di un confine coloniale: Eritrea 1898–1908*. Torino: L'Harmattan Italia, 1999.
- Henze, P. *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia*. New York: St Martin's Press, 2000.
- Iyob, Ruth. *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Johnson, D. "A Media History of Eritrea." *Eritrean Studies Review* 1, no. 1 1996: 143–54.
- Kaplan, S. *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonian Ethiopia*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1984.
- Kemink, F. "The Tegrenna Customary Law Codes." *Paideuma*, 37 1991: 55–72.
- Levine, D. *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1974.
- Makki, Fouad. "The Aporias of Radical Nationalism: Political Culture, Ideology and Democracy in Eritrea." In *Living in War Times, Living in Post-war Times*, edited by H. Quehl. Felsburg: Eins, 2002.
- Mamdani, M. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- de Marco, R. R. *The Italianization of African Natives*. New York: Columbia University, 1943.
- Marongiu-Buonaiuti, C. *Politica e religioni nel colonialismo italiano*. Milano: Giuffrè, 1982.
- Martini, F. *Diario Eritreo*. Vol. II. Firenze: Vallecchi, 1942.
- Martone, L. *Giustizia coloniale*. Napoli: Jovene, 2002.
- Mengsteb, Adhana. "The Occupation of Keren by the Egyptians, 4 July 1972–10 April 1885." In *Proceedings of the First National Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, edited by R. Pankhurst, A. Zekaria and T. Beyene. Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1990.
- Mesghenna, Yemane. *Italian Colonialism: A Case Study of Eritrea, 1869–1934*. Lund: Studentlitteratur 1988.
- Ministero della Guerra. *Dizionario dei nomi di persone e titoli che più comunemente si riscontrano nelle corrispondenze coll'Africa*. In Archivio Eritrea, Pacco 178, no date (presumably before 1894).
- Miran, J. "Grand mufti, erudite et nationaliste Érythréen. Note sur la vie et l'oeuvre de Cheikh Ibrâhîm al-Mukhtâr (1909–1969)." *Chroniques Yemenites* 10 (2002). Available from <http://cy.revues.org/document126.html>; ONLINE.
- Moreno, M. M. "La politica indigena italiana in A.O.I." *Gli annali dell'Africa Italiana* 5, no. 1 (1942): 61–77.
- Mori, A. *Manuale di legislazione della Colonia Eritrea*. Vol. I. Roma: Tipografia dell'Unione 1914.
- Nadel, S. F. "Notes on Beni-Amer Society." *Sudan Notes and Records* 26, no. 1 (1945): 51–94.
- Naty, A. "Memories of the Kunama of Eritrea towards Italian Colonialism." *Africa* 56, no. 4 (2001): 573–89.
- Negash, Tekeste. *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 1997.
- . *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882–1941*. Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1987.
- . *No Medicine for the Bite of a White Snake: Notes on Nationalism and Resistance in Eritrea 1890–1940*. Uppsala: University of Uppsala, 1987.
- Ogbazgh, Yohannes. *Eritrea: A Pawn in World Politics*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1991.
- Pankhurst, R. "The Foundations of Education, Printing, Newspapers, Book Production, Libraries and Literacy in Ethiopia." *Ethiopia Observer* 6, no. 3 (1962): 241–90.
- . "Tribute, Taxation and Government Revenues in Nineteenth Century and Early Twentieth Century Ethiopia, part I." *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 5, no. 2 (1967): 37–88.
- . "Tribute, Taxation and Government Revenues in Nineteenth Century and Early Twentieth Century Ethiopia, part II." *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 6, no. 1 (1968): 21–72.
- Perini, R. *Di qua dal Mareb: Mareb Mellasc*. Firenze: Tipografia Cooperativa, 1905.
- Petazzi, E. *L'odierno diritto penale consuetudinario dello Hamasen (Eritrea)*. Asmara: Tipografia Francescana, 1918.
- Pollera, A. *I baria e i cunama*. Roma: Reale societa geografica, 1913.
- . *Le popolazioni indigene dell'Eritrea*. Bologna: Cappelli, 1935.
- . *Il regime della proprietà terriera in Etiopia e nella Colonia Eritrea*. Roma: Tipografia Nazionale, 1913.
- Poscia, S. *Eritrea: Colonia tradita*. Roma: Edizioni Associate, 1989.

- Romandini, M. "Politica musulmana in Eritrea durante il Governatorato Martini." *Islâm, storia e civiltà* 3, no. 2 (1984): 127–31.
- Rubenson, S. *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence*. London: Heinemann, 1976.
- Sabbe, Osman S. *The History of Eritrea*. Beirut: Dar al-Masirah, 1974.
- Taddia, I. *Autobiografie Africane*. Milano: Franco Angeli, 1998.
- . "Constructing Colonial Power and Political Collaboration in Italian Eritrea." In *Personality and Political Culture in Modern Africa*, edited by M. E. Page *et al.* Boston: Boston University, 1998.
- . *L'Eritrea Colonia, 1890–1952: Paesaggi, strutture, uomini del colonialismo*. Milano: Franco Angeli, 1986.
- . *La memoria dell'Impero*. Manduria: Piero Lacaita, 1988.
- . "Sulla politica della terra nella Colonia Eritrea, 1890–1950." *Storia Contemporanea* 1, no. 13, (1984): 42–78.
- Talhami, G. H. *Suakin and Massawa under Egyptian Rule, 1865–1885*. Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1979.
- Tamrat, Tadesse. *Church and State in Ethiopia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.
- Tesfai, Alemseged. *Ayn Fälälä [Let us not be Divided]*. Asmara: Hedri, 2002.
- Trimingham, J. S. *Islam in Ethiopia*. London: Oxford University Press, 1952.
- Ullendorff, E. *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People*. London: Oxford University Press, 1960.
- Yohannes, Zemehret. *Mäkhätä Antsar Italyawi Mezä'ti ab Ertra [Resistance against Italian Colonialism in Eritrea]*. Asmara: No publisher, 1991.