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**The First World War from Tripoli to Addis Ababa (1911-1924)** | Shiferaw Bekele, Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, Alessandro Volterra, et al.

# Writing WWI with African Gazes.

# The Great War Through the Writing of Tigrinya Speaking Expatriates

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## Résumé

The aim of this paper is to shed some light on the way WWI was experienced by colonial subjects living in Eritrea or abroad. The attempt is to offer a glimpse of the gaze of colonial subjects on this global and dramatic turmoil, resorting to novels, poetry, and correspondence written in Tigrinya by colonial subjects living in Eritrea or abroad. These materials provide a rare opportunity to check alternative narratives that go beyond the conventional colonial representations of the conflict. This is even more significant as the literature dealing with original African voices talking about the First World War remains scanty. The material I will discuss is composed of correspondence among Eritreans living abroad and their relatives and friends at home as well as abroad. They are mainly original archival materials which I have collected during research in Italian and Swedish archives.

## Entrées d'index

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literature, wartime writing, correspondence, Tigrinya literature, censorship, Eritrea, Ethiopia

## Texte intégral

## Introduction

1 Eritrea, and the Horn of Africa at large, seem to be absent from the growing body of literature dealing with the First World War in Africa. This can partially be explained by the fact that the region was not directly involved in the warfare as it was the case of colonial Tanganyka, German South-West Africa, Togoland or Kamerun. However, the growing literature on the social and economic dimension of the war provides ample room for the inclusion of the Horn in the historiography dealing with World War I in Africa. A crucial element that strengthens this approach is represented by the fact that Colonial Eritrea stands out as one of the major reservoirs of colonial troops for the Italian army and, in this position, was instrumental in staffing the colonial campaigns in the Horn and in Northern Africa. As a consequence, the history of colonial Eritrea has been persistently and dramatically shaped by the military factor and this, in turn, has played a major role in moulding social institutions and cultural models.[1]

2 The aim of this paper is to shed some light on the way the First World War was experienced by colonial subjects living both within and outside of Colonia Eritrea, in the attempt to offer a glimpse of their gaze on this global and dramatic turmoil. The focus of my analysis will be on the writing of Tigrinya speaking writers[2] living both abroad and within Eritrea, keeping in mind that those writing from abroad had larger and less censored access to information on the war than their fellow compatriots had back at home. These materials provide interesting and unusual glimpses on how these colonial subjects experienced World War I and on the issues that mattered to them when the conflict was unfolding. Their gaze often challenges the conventional colonial narratives fostered mainly by official reports of the colonial administrators, and offers a rare opportunity to hear African voices expressing their views on this cataclysmic event.

3 The source materials I will discuss are composed of two main bodies, namely literary works and correspondence among Eritreans living abroad and their relatives and friends at home as well as abroad. They are mainly original archival materials which I have collected during research undertaken in Italian[3] and Swedish[4] archives.

## The Debate

4 The literature dealing with memories and representations of World War I, through novels, poetry, memoirs and correspondence, is really vast and covers a variety of thematic and disciplinary approaches and yet, a century after the end of this traumatic event, new works keep on being published, even in recent years. The more scholars delve into the issue of representation and memory of the conflict the more nuances and unexplored perspectives seem to emerge. One issue on which all scholars seem to build a growing consensus is that the First World War was the first time war was seen and understood by writers, by a whole generation of them, who did not see it remotely, through chivalrously tinted lenses but in the mud and the blood of stenchy trenches and through hissing shrapnel. Therefore, literary sources, in all their forms, are as crucial as traditional archival sources, to achieve a deep understanding of this conflict.

5 More than forty eight years after its first publication Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*,[5] remains universally acclaimed as a landmark study which has paved the ground for all further researches dealing with the way World War I has changed a whole generation, ushering it in the modern era, crumbling convictions which were considered granitic, and shaking up existing visions of the world. The late Fussell was one of the first scholars to shed light, through a comparative and comprehensive approach, on the trauma of modern warfare and on the irreversible changes that it forced upon

the humanity. He did that by venturing through the work of authors such as Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and David Jones. The main legacy of Fussell's work lays on its ability to show us how the huge body of literary products (novels, poems, memoirs, and correspondence) bears pieces of evidence of the massive changes introduced by the war in every aspect of human societies.

6 All following researches have, in a way or another, capitalised on Fussell's monumental work, focusing on specific aspects of war writing or shifting their focuses. This is the case of Bonadeo's *Mark of the Beast. Death and Degradation in the Literature of the Great War*,[6] which has explored the traumatic experience of World War I and the way it has reflected on the work of writers and artists from both sides of the conflict. Bonadeo's main focus has been on two basic themes – death and degradation – which mark wartime literature. In a more complex perspective, Ian Andrew Isherwood's *Remembering the Great War. Publishing the Experiences of WWI*,[7] has dealt with the literature produced in the aftermath of the war. Isherwood's work addresses a variety of crucial issues related to the historiography on wartime such as patriotism, cowardice, publishers' policies and strategies, their motives, readers' motivations, masculinity and propaganda.

7 The relations between literature and the Great War has also been analysed from a gender perspective as in the seminal collection of essay edited by Dorothy Goldman *Women Writers and the Great War*,[8] which explores the production of such acclaimed writers as Willa Cather, Katherine Mansfield, Edith Wharton, and Virginia Woolf together with the production of more ordinary writers such as nurses, ambulance drivers, munitions workers, and more who felt also compelled to write about the war. The contributors to this volume intended to unearth the

wealth of women's experience of the war, which for decades has been successfully superseded by masculine perception and representations. On a similar, though more specific path Angela K. Smith's *The Second Battlefield. Women, Modernism and the First World War*[9] has examined the connection between women's writing about World War I and the development of literary modernisms. Relying on unpublished diaries and letters, Smith suggests that the sudden reversal of gender roles induced by the war, which saw women undertaking new unexplored roles in society, triggered a search for new forms of expression.[10]

8 Another perspective through which the First World War is being increasingly scrutinised is the nexus between warfare and masculinity. This is the case of Jessica Meyer's *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain*,[11] Jason Crouthamel's *An Intimate History of the Front*[12] or Joanna Bourke's *Dismembering the Male. Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War*.[13] Among these studies, Santanu Das's *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*[14] deserves special attention. Drawing on letters and diaries, alongside literary writings by figures such as Owen and Britain, Das investigates how the conflict, beside the unprecedented devastation brought on the male body, yet fostered moments of physical intimacy and tenderness among the soldiers in the trenches. In his fascinating research Das shows that war writing is haunted by manifold experiences of physical contact: from the muddy realities of the front to the emotional intensity of trench life, to the traumatic obsession with the wounded body in nurses' memoirs.

9 Other authors have chosen to focus on a comparative study of memories and representations of the two World Wars. This is the case of Elena Lamberti and Vita Fortunati's *Memories and Representations of War. The Case of World War I and World War II*,[15] which explores

the way memories of the two World Wars have been recalibrated each time in relation to the changing international historical setting and through different medium of memory such as literature, cinema, fine art and monuments. Eventually, another aspect of war writing which has caught the attention of scholars has been children literature as in the case of the research undertaken by Lissa Paul, Rosemary R. Johnston and Emma Short, whose *Children's Literature and Culture of the First World War*[16] offers an unprecedented account of the lives, stories, letters, games, schools, institutions and toys of children in Europe, North America, and the Global South during the First World War and surrounding years. Analysing these materials the authors have shown the extent of the change that the War brought on existing perceptions of childhood. In a similar direction, though with a more specific national focus, goes David Budgen's *British Children's Literature and the First World War*.[17]

10 Within this continuously expanding production of scholarly works the major focus tends to be on Western literature and very little attention is paid to African and Asian written memories of World War I. Notable exceptions are the works of Erol Köroğlu, Santanu Das, Gajendra Singh, and David Omissi, which offer glimpses of alternative social and literary landscapes. Köroğlu's research deals with Turkey in its transition from the Ottoman Empire to the nation state, and focuses on a specific aspect of wartime literature, namely propaganda.[18] In his *Ottoman Propaganda and Turkish Identity. Literature in Turkey During World War I*, Köroğlu examines wartime Turkish literature, investigating the role of Ottoman-Turkish intelligentsia in the production of propaganda to support both the battlefronts and the home front. Equally with a strong geographic focus – India – but with a different research perspective is the landmark work of David Omissi *Indian Voices of the Great War. Soldiers'*

*Letters, 1914-18* which collects over 650 letters of Indian soldiers deployed on the French front.[19] Omissi's impressive collection of voices connects the reader with the anxiety, puzzlement and excitement of those *sepoys* who found themselves fighting alongside soldiers whose language, customs and indeed colour were strange to them. These letters bear persuasive witness to the *sepoys*' often disconcerting encounters with Europe.

11 On a similar path is Gajendra Singh's *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*.[20] Singh's successful attempt was to describe the horror of the war through the memories of Indian soldiers deployed in both World Wars. The voices of Indian *sepoys* are brought back to us through a scrupulous sifting of correspondence and court materials. It is a narrative of mutiny and obedience; of horror, loss and silence through which Indian soldiers came to terms with the conflicts, while reshaping their military identities.

12 Other notable attempts to de-provincialise the scholarly debate on wartime literature and society have been undertaken in recent years by Santanu Das through two powerful edited books. The first volume – *Empire and First World War Writing*[21] – based on a truly interdisciplinary perspective, collects contributions that reclaim the multi-ethnic dimensions of war memory. Contributors examine how issues of race and empire shaped wartime literature and retrieve the war experience of different communities directly or indirectly subject to colonial domination, including the Chinese, Vietnamese, Indians, Maori, Senegalese, Tanzanians, West Africans and Jamaicans. Even more ambitious is the research framework of *The First World War. Literature, Culture, Moder*nity, edited by S. Das, S. McLoughlin, and C. M. Loughlin,[22] which ventures into a very complex comparative exercise among writers from different formative backgrounds and of different provenance. The

interest of the contributors ranges over a variety of writers such as the combatant poets Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, David Jones, and Robert Service, to civilian intellectuals the like of Thomas Hardy, Rabindranath Tagore, H. G. Wells, Rebecca West, Anna Akhmatova, and Virginia Woolf, to nurse-memoirists such as Enid Bagnold and Mary Borden. This volume's major contribution lies not only in its inclusive approach, which brings together literary sources, visual and fine arts, but also in its ability to widen the canon and re-chart the terms of the debate. Not only notions of silence, sacrifice, destiny, life and death are invested with new meanings but also categories such as "war writing," "modernism," and "modernity" are re-substantiated against a more global understanding of twentieth-century literature and culture.

13 Unfortunately, much remains to do on the African side as the theme of war writing in the continent during the First World War remains scarcely developed.

## Methodology, Sources and Perspectives

14 In the introduction to the special issue of *The Journal of African History* on World War I Richard Rathbone made a poignant and still relevant comment on the challenges and limitations of the historiography dealing with the impact of this conflict on Africa. Rathbone stated that

> The study of the history of Africa during WWI raises two major problems of synthesis and a host of smaller problems. First of all the sheer diversity of the continent and the extremely uneven colonial development, let alone the patchy and different imperial and colonial penetration, make it difficult to see its experience, even of so ostensibly cataclysmic an event as World War I, as a unified whole. Indeed, the diversity of the continent was mirrored in the diversity of its experience of the war, which combined the actual agony of the battlefield

for many thousands of black troops both in Africa and in Europe at one extreme, with the undoubted uneventfulness of those same years for many others.
Secondly, there is a problem of periodization. Unlike World War II, World War I does not mark a turning point in any think like so clear a fashion. Whereas after World War II it is surely true that ‘nothing was ever the same’, the lines between cause and effect before and after World War I are far from neatly drawn.[23]

15 Rathbone was thus addressing two major issues which are still crucial to understand the impact and the relevance of World War I for Africa. On one side there is the issue of the fragmented and uneven unfolding of the conflict over the continent and its populations. Some regions where directly affected by the warfare, others seem to have been left unaffected and, allegedly, have weathered the storm oblivious of its dramatic relevance. On the other side a crucial issue raised by the author was periodisation and particularly the difficulty to identify clear-cut chronological steps in the unfurling of the conflict on African soils and of its implications.

16 It seems to me that forty years later some of those methodological concerns remain still relevant and particularly so when it comes to the case of Eritrea. In fact, during the whole conflict, Eritrea has never witnessed open warfare on its soil, nor Eritrean troops were actively dispatched to Western fronts. Moreover, the prevailing silence over Eritrea in the historical works on the First World War in Africa could convey the understanding that the tiny Italian colony went through this experience relatively unaffected. However, the enlargement of the epistemological horizon both in terms of spatial representations and chronological frameworks returns a substantially different image.

17 From a spatial point of view, as pointed out by Jay Winter and Antoine Prost in their seminal work *The Great War in History*, “war is a multinational phenomenon”[24] and it

needs to be addressed from a perspective that goes beyond state boundaries and to look at wars in a more enlarged and comprehensive perspective. Similarly, in Liebau's edited volume, *The World in World Wars. Experiences, Perceptions and Perspectives from Africa and Asia*,[25] this issue has been further developed to demonstrate how the investigation of socio-cultural facets of the two World Wars in African, South Asian and Middle Eastern societies makes it possible to recover both the diversity of perspectives and their intersections. Widening the gaze, the historian can thus identify umpteen elements which, together, concur to depict a much richer and vivid image of what World War I meant, beyond the major European war theatres. From a chronological point of view, this need for a revision of conventional frameworks is further reinforced once the issue of periodisation is taken into account. To this regard *The World in World Wars*[26] has been a path-breaking work as it questioned conventional periodisations and scrutinised both wars together, analysing the broader implications of the wars for African and Asian societies and the resulting significant social and political transformations. This need for fresher framework has emerged clearly as well during the international conference *The First World War From Tripoli To Mogadishu (1911-1924)* held in Addis Abäba on October 2016, which originated this volume. Many of the papers presented in the conference underlined that historical pieces of evidence call for a reassessment of the conventional periodisations of World War I that should challenge the existing one (1914-1918). Indeed, the Great War seen from the African side discloses all the inadequacies of the chronological framework conventionally accepted by Western historiography.

18 From an African perspective World War I appears to be a protracted continuum of warfare, economic crisis, curtailment of rights, environmental crisis, increased

repression, shortage of food and pandemics, which stretches over a period of time longer than 1914-1918. A lengthy experience which started with the invasion of Libya in 1911 and went all the way to the turmoil and political change of the early Twenties in Egypt, the Sudan and Somalia. One could even be tempted to affirm that, from the perspective of Eritrean soldiers and of their communities of origin, the social and military experience of the war started in 1911 and continued unabated all the way to 1941, when Italy was defeated in the Horn of Africa by the Allied forces. Within this refreshed framework, the First World War takes on a completely different meaning and calls for a revision of conventional analytical frameworks. Warfare cannot be the only lens through which the impact of conflicts on societies is assessed and, to this regard, Eritrea is a perfect case in point.

19 As a matter of fact, during World War I, Eritrea never was a war theatre as it did not border any territory colonised by member states of the Central Powers alliance. Nevertheless, Eritreans took part in the war actively as they fought intensively on the Libyan front. This involvement has been discussed extensively by scholars who have shown the quantitative relevance of this phenomenon.[27] However, beside the quantitative aspect, the relevance of the conflict for the Eritrean society at large can also be traced in popular culture, where the Libyan war has become a watershed, shaping collective imaginary through popular songs and literature.[28]

20 Eritrea experienced the First World War also in terms of tense international relations as it became the centre of a dramatic diplomatic crisis between the Italian colonial administration and the Ethiopian Imperial government. This crisis was triggered by widespread rumours on the alleged intention of the new Ethiopian ruler Lij Iyasu to take side with the Central Powers.[29] Italian administrators and diplomats were all caught in a frenzy as they were

expecting an imminent Ethiopian invasion of Eritrea, possibly with the concerted support of Ottoman and German forces. Witnesses of this widespread concern are scattered through a variety of archival sources and return an image of diffuse anxiety,[30] which translated into the sudden stiffening of rules regulating people's mobility and the increase of intelligence control and of censorship on media and correspondence. Special attention was paid to those segments of the colony that were considered potentially more sensible to the calls of the enemy's propaganda. Among them the composite community revolving around the Swedish Evangelical Mission went under close scrutiny.[31] Therefore informants were recruited to check whatever encounter happened among those people[32] and their correspondence was regularly sifted by the colonial censorship. Indeed, from the perspective of the historian, colonial censorship, though it was born as a tool to control and repress the flow of information, turned out to be a powerful source as it brings attention to stories and documents that otherwise would have been probably lost.

21 In those years Asmära became also the centre of an intense as well as silent confrontation between Italian and Ethiopian authorities. Epicentre of this confrontation was the Ethiopian Consulate which, not quite accidentally, opened in Asmära in 1915 after protracted negotiations. These negotiations were often marred by colonial stereotypes and racial biases which made extremely difficult for the Italians to accept the very existence of an African consulate in the midst of the colony.[33] The Ethiopian Consulate, staffed with some of the best products of the Ethiopian intelligentsia,[34] was a powerful and painful thorn on the Italian side, as Ethiopian authorities, thanks to it, were able to achieve important political goals which threatened to destabilise the colonial order. A first immediate result was the possibility for the

Ethiopians to gather first hand and detailed intelligence on Italian military activities and on the state of the colony. To this regard the Ethiopian consuls deployed a wide array of tools and exploited at its best their possibility to penetrate directly the local population and its social spaces, such as markets,[35] which were normally less easily accessible to the Europeans, if nothing else, because of the criteria of racial segregation regulating the urban space.[36] A second equally important result achieved by the Consulate was the dissemination of information on current events, including the ongoing Great War, countering the colonial narrative and the restrictions posed by the censorship that the colonial administrations was actively implementing. All these activities perturbed the political balance of the Colony and shook the confidence that colonial authorities had on their Eritrean civil servants who were all put under severe scrutiny.[37]

22 Eventually, another more painful and little investigated way through which Eritrea experienced the First World War was the spread of war-related pandemics. Between 1918 and 1921 the region went through extremely painful years, due to the combined effect of drought and the long term consequences of the Spanish influenza. On this issue, the silence of colonial sources is partially compensated by missionary sources, which convey a vividly appalling picture of Eritrea's sufferance.[38] For instance, in 1920, the missionary magazine *Annali Francescani,* reported thousands of starving people from the countryside wandering in search of food, and attempting to move to urban areas, often collapsing on their way.[39] As happened in other African colonies, Eritrea experienced material constraints, which contributed to make the political and social atmosphere of the colony tense, with outburst of open protest also on the side of the Italian settlers who, at time, felt treated unfairly by the colonial administration.[40] Moreover, the massive recruitment of Eritrean men for the

Libyan front affected severely the local labour market leading to an increase of average wages and a significant inflow of migrant labour from Ethiopia and Yemen.[41]

23 All those developments concur to suggest that a revised epistemological framework offers the chance to better appreciate the impact of the Great War on the Colonia Eritrea as well as through the deployment of a vast array of disciplinary and thematic approaches. With this paper, my aim is to contribute to exploring the impact of the conflict on Eritrean societies focusing on a specific aspect, which is the representation of the war as it emerges from the accounts written in Tigrinya language by colonial subjects. As a matter of fact, the study of the Great War in Africa tends to be based mainly on Western or colonial sources and the attempts to discuss the conflict through African voices remain scanty. It seems to me that the existence of ancient local written traditions in Eritrea and Ethiopia offers a precious opportunity to gaze at how indigenous populations perceived, discussed, and shared the experience of the conflict, in spite of all the restrictions posed by war censorship.

## The War through Tigrinya Literature

24 My paper intends to contribute to bringing to the foreground African voices on World War I from the little-known corner of the Horn of Africa that is Eritrea, capitalising on the fast-growing body of literature on wartime writing. I believe that, drawing extensively from social and cultural history as well as literary criticism, it is possible to shed light on scarcely explored aspects of the social and cultural history of the Horn of Africa.

25 The first literary text that I will discuss is *Abba* Gäbräyäsus Hailu's *ሓደ ዛንታ* [*The Conscript*].[42] The author was born in Afälba (Eritrea) in 1906 and did his studies in the Catholic mission first and then all the way to Rome, where he concluded his training as a priest. He then went

into political activities and firmly condemned the Italian invasion of Ethiopia of 1935 and joined the resistance forces.[43] After the liberation of Ethiopia from the Italian occupation he worked in different positions within the Ethiopian administration. In 1950 he published his book ሓደ ዛንታ [*The Conscript*],[44] though he claims that he had written it in 1927 but could not publish it due to the adverse political situation and specifically the censorship of the Italian colonial rule. I am discussing this book first because, in spite of his having been published in 1950, it deals with the Italian colonial war against Libya and, therefore, is the first literary mention of the impact that this protracted conflict had on Eritrean societies. As pointed out by Ghirmai Negash and Massimo Zaccaria,[45] this book is a powerful denunciation of Italian colonialism and of its use of African troops to wage its colonial war in Libya. From the point of view of my paper ሓደ ዛንታ [*The Conscript*] is also relevant as it represents one of the few cases of an African voice writing about a colonial war which is also part of the larger conflict that we could tentatively name “the Greater World War I.” The author is a perfect example of what Ghirmai Negash, borrowing from Edward Said and Walter Mignolo, has defined as “moral voices of indigenous epistemology.”[46] Conscious of his social role as an intellectual and a writer, *Abba* Gäbräyäsus describes the colonial war in Libya in all its nuanced facets, not only the mayhem unleashed by the warfare activities but also people’s feelings, incertitudes, and sorrow. What emerges from *Abba* Gäbräyäsus’s novel is the picture of a whole society under siege, both at home, where colonial troops are recruited, and on the front, were they fight a futile war.[47] The futility of a war fought on behalf of the colonial master is a central theme in the novel. *Abba* Gäbräyäsus denounces repeatedly the cecity of his fellow compatriots who seem to accept supinely to become cannon fodder for their oppressors. To strengthen

his argument, the writer, with a brilliant rhetorical stratagem, quotes a strophe from the famous Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi.[48]

26 However, *Abba* Gäbräyäsus goes beyond the mere condemnation of colonialism and explores the complexity of *askaris*' motivations in joining the colonial war. Interestingly, he refrains from the easy temptation to confine the range of motivations to colonial forceful recruitment. Indeed, masculinity, culture of bravery, economic opportunities, and youngster's spirit of competition are all brought together as equally relevant push factors to depict a lively fresco which could be considered a truly historical enquiry. Borrowing from Jewsiewicki and Mudimbe's[49] reflections on history writing in Africa, we could say that *ሓደ ዛንታ* [*The Conscript*] is one of those cases in which African history is written by means that differ from academic historiography.

27 The African experience of the Great War transpires through the lines of the novel in a gripping narrative. The author's description of the war is based on first-hand information he obtained from *askaris* he met aboard a ship on his way to Italy; therefore, his narration resorts to a variety of informants whose voices provide a vivid image of World War I seen with African eyes. Tuqabo, the main character, brings to the fore people's perception of the war though the use of popular songs, proverbs and oral poetry as well as the intimate anxiety and incertitude of youngsters venturing for the first time outside of their familiar territories. Through Tuqabo's words the experience of the war is conveyed in all its rich variety of meanings. Since the very beginning, war is also an experience of Western modernity. For instance, the train from Asmära to the port of Massawa is represented as a demon, in the words of the author "an evil force driving some miserable creatures to hell."[50] Even more traumatic

is the experience of travelling by boat through the Red Sea: the boat emits "thunderous noises" and also "howls" while preparing to leave the dock.[51] However, modernity emerges also as mimicry in the sarcastic image of the Eritrean clerks at the railway station in Asmära. Those clerks are described hastily answering "pronto" to their Italian interlocutors over the phone, while ignoring with disdain the anxious queries of their fellow compatriots, who were begging for updates on the train which was expected to bring back the *askaris* from the front.[52]

28 For Tuqabo, war is also an experience of cultural contamination. *Abba* Gäbräyäsus describes with powerful words the variety of cultures and customs that Tuqabo meets during his odyssey. To this regard, what makes *ሓደ ዛንታ* [*The Conscript*] even more interesting is that the author, while chastising colonial racism, does not shy away from addressing sensitive issues such as racial biases and stereotypes pitching colonial subjects one against the other. With rare intellectual honesty, *Abba* Gäbräyäsus puts in the mouth of *askaris* meeting Sudanese people unfiltered racial abuses: "These black people! They could never be superior to us!"[53] Therefore, writing on war also allows the author to dissect the internal contradictions of the colonial milieu and to unveil all its limitations and cultural narrowness. The travel of Tuqabo becomes also a travel beyond the narrow-mindedness and mental closure of his society of origin.

29 Another powerful literary text on World War I written in Tigrinya is Sängal Wärqnäh's poem *ብኽልተ ፡ አርዌ ፡ ሰንኪ ፡ ዓለም፡ ከምተባርዔት* [*How, because of two wild beasts the world was set alight*].[54] The author had a very adventurous life which trespassed many geographical, cultural, and social boundaries. In fact, Sängal was born in 1880 in 'Addi Abun in the Ethiopian northern region of Təgray. He went to Eritrea during his childhood and there attended the school De Cristoforis in Massawa. He then

moved to Italy, at the age of sixteen, to complete his studies and there he joined the Italian army taking his training in the cavalry, where he gained the rank of officer. He then went back to Eritrea where he worked as an interpreter in the Colonial administration. Later Sängal went back to Italy where he worked for many years as a lecturer of Tigrinya and Amharic languages at the prestigious Istituto Orientale in Naples. During this period, Sängal took part in World War I on the Italian front, which makes him a pretty unique case of an African intellectual writing on the First World War having also witnessed the conflict as an officer. After repeated denials, in 1919 he eventually obtained the Italian citizenship and maintained his teaching position as lecturer in Naples until 1922. In 1928 Sängal moved back to Eritrea where he died in 1929.[55]

30 Sängal printed his poem in Rome, apparently at his own expenses, in 1916 when World War I was raging over the world with its tail of death, devastation and pain. The poem deals with the conflict and describes its cruelty and the brutal impact that it had on civilians. In the apparent intentions of the writer, as stated in the preface, the poem had two main aims. On the one hand it was meant to give more information to his fellow compatriots in the colony on the ongoing conflict as well as to provide them with moral inspiration for the conduct of their affairs. On the other the poem was intended to expose the brutality and cruelty of the Central Powers' warfare conduct. The educational aim of the poem is clear from the very preface, where Sängal puts a conclusive note in which he explains to his fellow compatriots the meaning of the term "torpedo,"[56] providing a sketchy explanation of their functioning and of their use in naval warfare. The reason for this note is that torpedoes are repeatedly mentioned through the poem as devastating carriers of death. To this regard, it has to be recalled that, as pointed out by

Massimo Zaccaria, torpedoes left a painful scar in the memory of *askaris* and of the Eritrean society at large. In fact, on 14 October 1917, 53 *askaris* belonging to the 7th Battalion died on board of the steamer *Valparaiso* sunk by German torpedoes while it was at bay in Marsa Susa.[57] Again, as in *Abba* Gäbräyäsus's novel, war and Western modernity are two strictly interconnected themes underpinning the works of these African writers.

31 The poem portrays in vivid and sometimes graphic terms the brutality of the war, putting the blame on the armies of the Central powers accused of waging a ruthless and unnecessarily cruel war whose main victims are armless civilians. Sängal emphasises, repeatedly, that the main target of German warfare, particularly on the sea, are innocent civilians whose only fault is to be destitute migrants crossing the oceans in search of a better life abroad. This is clearly a reference to the unrestricted submarine warfare launched by Germany in early 1915.

32 In his description of the war Sängal intersperses his strophes with religious topoi drown from the wealth of his Christian religious tradition. Ghirmai Negash, in his brilliant work on the history of Tigrinya literature has dismissed quite summarily this narrative approach as expression of a relatively narrow and conservative brand of Christianity.[58] This judgement could perhaps be softened as it seems to me that Sängal resorts to this rhetorical artifice in order to make himself more immediately intelligible to his readership. Therefore, the war is represented as an attempted slaughter of Christian people by an unholy coalition of godless (German and Austrian) and Muslim (the Ottomans) forces. Similarly, the bloodbath rampaging through Europe is compared to the wars that Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ghāzī (better known under his Amharic moniker Grañ) waged in Ethiopia in the sixteenth century. Sängal's intention to use the poem as a tool to inform his people back in the colony on the

various facets of the conflict is also made clear by his detailed references to the geopolitics of the conflict. Besides describing the horrific events of the war, Sängal criticises the Spanish neutralism as well as USA's greedy involvement in the war as a shameless weapon seller.[59] The author also spends strongly sympathetic words for the Armenian people. He describes the ongoing slaughtering of the Armenian through the narrative framework of the war against Christians and he wonders how it was possible for Germans and Austrians to join forces with the Ottomans and witness unresponsive to the ordeal of the Armenians while, in Sängal words, they were made "strangers at home."[60]

33 However, one aspect that makes the poem particularly intriguing is Sängal's fervid endorsement of the Italian irredentist claims over the town of Trieste, at that time under Austrian rule. In the same perspective, the author rebuts Germans and Austrians for their patronising mockery of Italian martial skills and points passionately at the bravery and heroism of Italian soldiers during the ongoing conflict. This passionate defence of the point of view of the Italians is intriguing because it bemuses conventional expectations of vibrant anticolonial rhetoric in the writing of colonial subjects. How to make sense of what seems to be a strident contradiction? To address this issue is crucial to scrutinise notions of identities and belonging as they evolved in Sängal's complex life trajectory. He went to Italy in his mid-adolescence to pursue his studies, then he joined the Italian army not as a member of the colonial army (*askari*) but in the most difficult and unusual way, joining the Royal Cavalry. After returning home and working as an interpreter in the colonial administration Sängal applied repeatedly for Italian citizenship and had to face denials based on reasons of "racial prestige." Nevertheless, he answered the call of the army at the outbreak of World War I and

fulfilled flawlessly his military duties. From the few scattered archival sources that bring us memory of him it appears that Sängal bore consciously the weight of his multi-layered identity. Though deeply rooted in his culture, and never denying his Ethiopian roots, Sängal seems to have consistently attempted to trespass the social and cultural boundaries imposed on him by the colonial system. He seems to be a case of unconventional African agency in which a colonial subject strived to cross existing racial and cultural divides to claim a mixed identity.

34 With regard to poetry, Sängal's poem stylistic features are particularly interesting and complex to analyse. On one side, from the perspective of modern Tigrinya poetry Sängal was a pioneer and his work a harbinger of productions to come. However, Sängal's writing is especially difficult to assess as he seems to be fetching inspiration from different stylistic models. On the one hand he relies heavily on stylistic models borrowed from Tigrinya oral poetry which for him represents a deep well of cultural wealth. At the same time, it is difficult for him to resist the temptation of exploring the broader contemporary cultural and creative environment in which his poetry was located. Indeed, while Sängal was writing his poems on the atrocities of the ongoing war, a similar very rich production was blossoming in Italy and in Europe at large. To this regard comes in very helpful the impressive work done by Andrea Cortellessa who, in his *Le notti chiare erano tutte un'alba. Antologia dei poeti italiani nella Prima guerra mondiale*,[61] has brought together the Italian poetry on the First World War. In this path-breaking work, Cortellessa has done a monumental job collecting and organising in different typologies the Italian poetic production dealing with World War I. Sängal's poem seems to echo, in many of his strophes, themes and styles which mark the poetry of coeval poets.

35 However, for a sad irony, Sängal's poem, so apologetic of

Italian nationalism, went through unexpected vicissitudes and fell victim of war censorship. In fact, after having printed the poem at his own expenses the author submitted it to the Ministry of Colonies asking for its dissemination in Eritrea. The Ministry forwarded forty copies of the poem to the Colonial authorities in Asmära hinting to the potential benefits bore by the positive representation of Italy throughout the text, but leaving the final decision to the office of the Governor.[62] Interestingly, the reception of the colonial authority was quite cold and it suggested to forbid the dissemination of the text in the colony. In fact, the acting Governor Giovanni Cerrina Feroni, though acknowledging the patriotic feelings expressed by Sängal, noted some strophes which were deemed inappropriate, as they could undermine notions of racial superiority on which were based colonial power relations. In Cerrina Feroni's words:

> ...vi sono considerazioni e citazioni che non ritengo prudente siano apprese dagli indigeni, i quali, indipendentemente dall'intenzione che le ha dettate, potrebbero farsi un concetto non esatto dell'Italia e della sua potenza. Valga per tutte la citazione del passo seguente "Gli italiani che dicevate suonatori di chitarre, con i loro cannoni assordarono i vostri orecchi; l'Esercito Italiano che dicevate debole, ardentemente combatte: l'italiano che dicevate contadino incolto, infondatamente e senza pensare, invece vi vincerà ecc." Tali apprezzamenti non è il caso che queste popolazioni neppure sospettino che prima della guerra si sian da chichessia potuti fare.[63]
>
> [...there are considerations and quotations that I do not consider prudent to be learned by the natives who, regardless of the intention that dictated them, could get an incorrect idea of Italy and of its power. It is worth mentioning the following passage: "The Italians you used to call players of guitars, with their cannons deafened your ears; the Italian army that you said was weak, bravely fights: the Italian peasants that you

> carelessly and with no pieces of evidence said are ignorant peasants, will win you etc." It is not the case that these populations could even suspect that such comments could have been pronounced by whomsoever before the war.]

36 This unexpected verdict pushed the poem in a cone of shadow, leaving it inaccessible to the readership for which it had been written, and also made that exceptional character that was Sängal slid into oblivion,[64] the latter still remaining relatively unknown to the majority of the Eritrean and Ethiopian readership.

## The War through Tigrinya Correspondence

37 During the First World War letter writing was a massive and global phenomenon. It was a collective and intersectional practice, cutting across classes, education, religions, and ethnicity. Obviously, the activity of letter writing from the fronts was the most intense. To have an idea of the quantitative dimension of this phenomenon Caffarena's study *Lettere dalla Grande Guerra* comes in useful.[65] In fact, Caffarena, referring just to Italy, reports the impressive figure of four billion letters and postcards written from, to and through the fronts: a tumultuous flow of information, rumours, tenderness, concerns, and updates which provides a variety of precious data to the historian. The first to understand the unique richness of this huge production was the Austrian linguist and literary critic Leo Spitzer whom, in September 1915, got the chance to be dispatched to the censorship office of the Austro-Hungarian Ministry of War, in charge of filtering the correspondence of Italian prisoners of war: the right man in the right place at the right moment. In fact, Spitzer, then a fresh holder of a PhD in Romance philology, had adequate tools to grasp immediately the unique linguistic and historical value of the material he was in charge of

sorting. He understood that the men and women generating the immense flow of correspondence sifted by his office were answering their urge to describe the abysmal gap between the world they knew and the one the First World War generated. People scarcely literate and more at ease with orality than with writing felt compelled to share their experience of the epochal catastrophe by which they were overwhelmed. These unexpected writers conveyed their emotions in a unique mix of oral styles, dialects and popular culture. Spitzer, already in 1921, with his seminal book *Italienische Kriegsgefangenenbriefe: Materialien zu Einer Charakteristik der Volkstümlichen Italienischen Korrespondenz*[66] provided an audience to those involuntary witnesses and he accounted in detailed linguistic analysis their creative twisting of the Italian language to their insuppressible need to communicate. With pioneering clairvoyance, Spitzer defined this epistolography as "permanent popular literature."[67]

38 Similar methodological approaches have been applied to the study of epistolographies produced by non-European writers involved in the First World War. This is the case of Indian soldiers studied by Omissi[68] and Singh[69] who have both provided fascinating insights of the multifaceted experience that these soldiers had of the conflict. Unfortunately, much remains to do on the African side. Though important contributions have been made to disclose the relevance of correspondence as a tool for the study of Africa's past,[70] few studies have addressed the specific issue of letter writing in wartime. To this regard a crucial pioneering work has been done by Massimo Zaccaria who has unearthed a wealth of correspondence written by *askaris* dispatched to the Libyan front.[71] Zaccaria's research has confirmed the feebleness of what he calls the "'literate - illiterate' dichotomy,"[72] and has analysed in depth the complex interplay between colonial educational policies and the need to communicate of

colonial soldiers.

39 The sample of correspondence in Tigrinya that I am presenting here is somehow astray from the typology normally discussed in the literature. The authors discussed here are not involved directly or indirectly in the warfare, they did not soak themselves in the muddy trenches of Western fronts nor were smeared with the blood and sand of the Libyan front. Quite the opposite, they wrote from safe and faraway places such as Beirut, Paris or the *Colonia Eritrea* itself. They did not report first-hand information but rather rumours, worries and looming anguishes. None of them were illiterate and many of them represented sections of the growing Eritrean educated elite. Indeed, the correspondence that I am presenting has a unique feature: it offers a glimpse of the Great War as it was perceived and experienced by colonial subjects that, through different means, had managed to trespass the colonial boundaries. Being abroad allowed these writers to circumvent the obstacles posed by colonial censorship and gave them the privilege of enjoying a wider and relatively freer access to information. Therefore, they acted – often consciously – as a sort of buffer between colonial restrictive information policies and the thirst for news of their folks back home.

40 The first letter I am presenting here is from *Qäši* Mäzgäbä Səllase Wäldu, a member of the Evangelical community in Eritrea who played an important role in the translation of the Holy Bible into Tigrinya.[73] Writing to the famous Swedish diplomat and Orientalist Johannes Kolmodin[74] from the village of Abarda', *Qäši* Mäzgäbä Səllase[75] reports on growing tensions in his area (he mentions the villages of 'Adi Gäbray, Ḥəmbərti, Emni Ṣällim and 'Addi Ḥəzbay) triggered by the recruitment of *askaris* for the Libyan front. According to the writer each of those villages had provided from 20 to 30 combatants for the colonial war. The report is enriched by short scathing exchanges in the

form of improvised songs, between the population and the recruits leaving for the front. The population would bid farewell to the departing singing "ንሓመድ፣ ንሓመድ ተሳሕቡ ብገመድ"[76] and the conscripts would reply "ብጽጋበይ፣ ብጽጋበይ ዓጢቐያ ዘይዝናረይ."[77] Just a few biting verses that return in all their intensity the multiplicity of motivations behind indigenous involvement in the colonial war as well as the anguish of family members and remaining friends. *Qäši* Mäzgäbä Səllase describes this event as an ongoing haemorrhage which, eventually, would affect also local authorities. To this regard, the letter written by *Qäši* Mäzgäbä Səllase presents striking similarities with *Abba* Gäbräyäsus's novel, where the author frequently quotes popular songs related to the Libyan war, where greed and maleness are mentioned in many instances as a driving factor for enrolment in the colonial army.[78]

41 A second interesting group of letters is part of a thick correspondence between Yohannes Kolmodin and Täklä Mika'el 'Uq̈ba Gabər, a student at the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut.[79] In a first letter written in 1911,[80] Täklä Mika'el vents his concerns about rumours he had heard in Beirut on Italian massive recruitment of *askaris* to be sent to Tripoli. The writer expresses all his bitterness for the trashed faraway of his people in inhospitable lands, not to serve their own interests but those of their Italian masters. In Täklä Mika'el words:

> [...How sad would it be if they will die for the Italian government, but if they would fight for their government and their people there would not be sorrow. However, as they are fighting on behalf of the Italian government this is source of deep sorrow. Anyway, I do hope that all this is not true...]

42 This sentence echoes a mixed feeling of sorrow and dismay of what is perceived as the spineless passivity of Eritrean *askaris*. This feeling recurs in the writing of many Eritrean expatriates and it is the same feeling that *Abba*

Gäbräyäsus will convey some years later in his novel, borrowing from the Italian poet Leopardi.[81]

43 In a second very emotional letter written in 1913[82] Täklä Mika'el refers to a previous letter he has received from Kolmodin in which the Swedish Orientalist had informed him of the possibility of a great conflict looming over Europe and of his readiness to join the army in case of an outbreak of the war. Täklä Mika'el expresses all his shock at the possibility that Kolmodin might go to the front. To better explain his anguish the writer affirms that Kolmodin's letter has rekindled in him the recent sorrow caused by the departure of his uncle Ḥagwos and his brother Tedros to the Libyan front. Täklä Mika'el affirms that he has no whatsoever news on the whereabouts of his close relatives and that he is left only with the hope that the Almighty will bring them back home safe. Based on his personal experience, Täklä Mika'el begs Kolmodin not to join the war and embarks in a passionate defence of pacifism. In his vibrant words war is described as an illusory temptation:

> [many people, thinking that the war is good, struggle to make it start. Anyway the outcomes of war are: plagues, devastation, shedding your brother's blood, forgetting the Almighty...]

44 In another letter, written in 1914,[83] Täklä Mika'el echoes the widespread fears and concerns of those years due to the uncertain fate of the Ethiopian Imperial crown. Täklä Mika'el asks Kolmodin if circulating rumours about the alleged death of Emperor Mənilik have any element of truth. More interesting is the fact that the author of the letter shares his concerns about a possible invasion of Ethiopia by joint Anglo-Italian forces. This is quite interesting as it reverses conventional colonial narratives which tended to emphasise Italy's worries of an impending Ethiopian invasion of Eritrea. To the end of his letter Täklä Mika'el makes a digression and mentions a letter

that he has received from his uncle Ḥagwos who informs him of the fact that the colonial authorities, on the occasion of the celebrations of the religious feast of Mäsqäl, have rewarded him with a gun and, similarly have bestowed honorific titles on members of the local *banda* (local militias). This news pushes Täklä Mika'el to make some bitter considerations. Indeed, he affirms that he does not acknowledge those awards as honourable because they are rewards for activities aimed mainly at weakening and degrading his fellow Ḥabäša people and their institutions.

45 From a completely different environment comes the letter written by a certain Manna Habteṣion in 1916. Unfortunately the original Tigrinya letter is not available and the archives report only excerpt translated into Italian by the censorship office of the *Colonia Eritrea*. As it happened, while doing research, luck brought us this interesting voice of an Eritrean expatriate whose letter was caught by the alerted eyes of the censor. The letter was written from Paris, where Manna lived since 1911, and was addressed to Bäyan Susənyos, a relative of him. Manna's letter caught the attention of the censorship because he provided detailed updates on the ongoing conflict. In one of the excerpts, quoted by the censor in the Italian translation, Manna would have written:

> In mare si combatte, in questi giorni la Germania ha ucciso molti uomini in Parigi a mezzo degli aeroplani, macchine che camminano nel cielo. I tedeschi sono forti. Non ti posso dire di più perché ciò è proibito dal governo.
> [There is fighting going on on the sea, in these days Germany has killed many people in Paris by airplanes, machines that move in the sky. The Germans are strong. I cannot tell you more because this is forbidden by the government.]

46 The reference to the fact that he cannot tell more seems to echo a similar statement in a letter by a Pathan soldier

cited by Omissi, in which the former wrote: "my heart is full, but we are not allowed to write."[84] In the same letter Manna asks to be informed about the truthfulness of rumours he has heard on the forcible recruitment of *askaris* for the Libyan war. Again, this document bears evidence of the close interrelation between the Libyan war and World War I in the perception of Eritreans. Manna's letter is also very interesting because it shows elements of similarity with the writing of both *Abba* Gäbräyäsus Hailu and Sängal Wärqnäh. First of all the letter presents a similar unconcealed desire to update fellow compatriots back home on the mayhem wreaked by that unprecedented conflict that was World War I. Moreover, Manna seems also to be fully conscious of the existence of a tight control on the flow of information directed to the colony, therefore his desire to share his knowledge on the conflict has an even stronger defiant meaning.

47 A second element of similarity with previous writings is to be found in the constant pedagogic sensitivity of the writers, which make them translate into understandable terms the latest achievement of Western modernity. In this case Manna wanted to make sure that his correspondent would understand what air warfare was, therefore, he translated airplanes in the easiest way: "machines moving in the sky." However, Manna's apparently innocuous letter triggered a small diplomatic crisis between Italy and France. In fact, the colonial administration, upon intercepting the letter, asked firmly, in two instances, for the deportation of Manna to Eritrea.[85] The request was met with the refusal of French authorities, who could not find any legal ground to uphold it and, therefore, limited themselves to warning Manna to be more cautious in his future writing. From the point of view of the historian the answer given by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs is extremely interesting. In fact, in order to justify their refusal, the French authorities

offered a fascinating biographical sketch of Manna's adventurous life. We thus get to know the story of a colonial subject who had crossed the Eritrean border in 1909, venturing into Sudan, then going to Egypt and, from there, to France, where he was living since 1911 with a regular residence permit earning his living as a taxi driver.[86]

48 The letters analysed in this paper are just samples of what seems to be a much larger production that still needs to be unearthed by further archival research. Various reports from the Colonial censorship seem to corroborate my understanding. In fact, archival sources bear evidence of a widespread phenomenon of letter writing among colonial subjects, an overwhelming flow of information which colonial authorities tried franticly to discipline. Colonial reports return glimpses of the variety of African gazes on the war, ranging from the desire to be informed of ongoing international development to ill-concealed glee over Italian misadventures on the Western front.

49 Emblematic of this trend is a report from the censor office in Asmära written in August 1916[87] which mentions 6 letters intercepted from the office and never delivered to the addressee due to alleged security reasons. The first letter was sent from the Libyan front and apologised to the addressee for not having sent money, attributing the delay to the military administration, who had not paid the soldiers yet. A second letter from Addis Abäba reports the impressive changes undertaken in the country and promises to send further detailed updates. A third letter sent from Addis Abäba to an employee of the Ethiopian Consulate in Asmära asks for more updates on the ongoing war as well as on Asmära's size, population, markets and roads. A fourth letter was sent from Port Said to a monk in Däbrä Bizän. From Port Said the sender gives detailed updates on developments on both the Western and Eastern fronts. With regard to the Western front, the

letter accounts for successful Italian campaigns against Austria. With regard to the Eastern front, the report is very detailed and the sender affirms that he has very updated knowledge of the events because he is in correspondence with friends in Jerusalem, Beirut, Damascus, and Nazareth. Echoing tones used by Sängal Wärqnäh, the sender describes the conflict in the Middle East as a cruel war waged by Muslim Turks (supported by Austria) against Christian lands, and predicts the imminent defeat of the Turks. In a fifth letter sent from an Eritrean living in Paris to a friend in Asmära, the sender enquires about the situation of the colony and the perception that local people have of the ongoing war and whether or not they are scared. The only letter sent from Asmära is addressed to an *askari* fighting in Libya and begs for reassuring news as the sender says that he has heard of ongoing fights in Libya and he is worried about the well-being of the addressee.

## Insights: What we learnt and what we can infer

50 The few examples of literary writing and correspondence discussed in this paper leave us with some interesting insight on the historical relevance of World War I in the Horn of Africa and, in particular, in Eritrea. A first insight that all the material analysed conveys is that the Great War was a tragedy that did not spare the region, though it was not a direct war theatre. From all the different writings, World War I emerges as a looming tragedy and a source of deep worries for all the population of the Colony. Therefore, the war was widely discussed, regardless of colonial attempts to sanitise the circulation of news in the colony and to muzzle its African subjects. In the ongoing debate, the expatriate writers and correspondents played a major role – some of them unwittingly, some of them wittingly – as they fed their readers piecemeal

information, creeping through the meshes of the colonial censorships, or provided comprehensive and more ambitious narratives, as in the case of *Abba* Gäbräyäsus Hailu' s ሓደ ዛንታ.

51 Another important insight offered by these materials is that they all reinforce the growing historiographical awareness about the inadequateness of conventional frameworks on the history of the First World War. First of all, the Tigrinya writings examined in this paper convey a shared perception of the war as a painful protracted experience that stretched beyond the chronological framework conventionally adopted by military historiography. As a matter of fact, many writers, particularly in the private correspondence, establish clear emotional and cultural connections between the experience of the Libyan war and of World War I. Another challenge that these documents pose lies on their continuously reminding us that war is not just an event limited to the battlefield, but a rather complex and multifarious phenomenon whose impact reverberates on a larger material and symbolic space. Eventually, even a small colonial territory, apparently sheltered from the mayhem of the Great War, had its own share of this tragedy, and its scares, transformations and contradictions can still be detected in the social and cultural history of its people.

52 One more insight provided by these Tigrinya writings is that they enable us to put the Eritrean experience in a broader circular perspective. Many of the feelings, worries, and reflections expressed in this Tigrinya writings echo, in a potentially global dialogue, elements that are present in writings produced by other colonial subjects from the Global South. There is a sort of dialogue that projects these Tigrinya writings into a broader and complex experience of pain, subjugation, and despair but also of fierce agency, constantly challenging colonial hedges to

negotiate new social possibilities. The subalterns' agency emerges through different means, such as the conscious attempt to counter colonial sanitised narratives of the war – if not its sheer silence – with alternative ones. Another aspect of this circular agency can be found in the constant attention of the writers to share their knowledge of Western modernity. Eventually a further important methodological insight offered by these writings is that the gaze of colonial subjects on the First World War cannot be reduced to a plain conventional narrative of anticolonial and nationalist perspective. On the opposite, a more nuanced and cautious approach is required if we have to return a more comprehensive and historically reliable picture of the multifaceted experience of the War. To this regard, Sängal Wärqnäh's writing is a very good case in point.

53 However, these materials leave also the researcher with the awareness of more impending historiographical challenges. From the comparative study of these Tigrinya writings one can easily infer the presence of some persisting inadequacies, sorts of gaps in our understanding of the First World War in the Italian colonies in North-East Africa which call for further researches. A first and more apparent gap lies in our relatively little knowledge of the social impact of the Great War on local populations. We still need to investigate accurately the toll levied on the civilians in terms of famine, pandemic, economic crisis, curtailment of rights, environmental crisis, increase of prices, and food shortage. Another serious gap is represented by our understanding of the First World War in Eritrea from a gender perspective. Historiography has shown the relevance of women on the African fronts of World War I to the extent that, in some cases, European officers had to negotiate with them logistical arrangements.[88] Unfortunately, the voices discussed in this paper are all men's voices and

women's voices are always expressed through men's words. However, as pointed out by Christine Matzke,[89] we know that the war and particularly the Libyan campaign played a major role in redefining gender roles and fostered strategies of women's empowerment that deserve further attention.

54 Eventually another gap to be filled is related to our understanding of the First World War from the point of view of Italian settlers. The historiography dealing with other colonial environments has shown the complexity of settlers' perception of the war, ranging from enthusiastic to cold support.[90] This line of research has outlined that it would be wrong to surmise a symmetrical overlapping between the priorities of colonial administrators and settlers. As pointed out by Strachan, "The duty of Europeans, opined the East Africa Standard of Mombasa on 22 August 1914, was not to fight each other but to keep control of the Africans."[91] Some of those issues have been addressed by Massimo Zaccaria who has unearthed bitter tensions between Italian settlers and the colonial administration led by Governor Salvago Raggi.[92] However, a lot of thematic and epistemological nuances are still waiting for the historian to dig into them. Understanding all those nuances and filling these gaps would allow us to grasp how the variety of actors who populated the colonial world managed to stitch their torn social fabric back together after the traumatic events of the Great War. This paper as well as the whole edited volume seem to be just the beginning of a long trip.

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## Notes

1. Scardigli 1996; Uoldelul Chelati Dirar 2004; Volterra 2005; Zaccaria 2012 and 2013.

2. I refer to Tigrinya speaking writers because not all of them were born within the boundaries of colonial Eritrea.

3. Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (hereafter ASDMAECI), Roma.

4. Carolina Rediviva Library – Kolmodin Papers (hereafter CRL-KP), Uppsala.

5. Fussell 2000.

6. Bonadeo 1989.

7. Isherwood 2017.

8. Goldman 1995.

9. Smith 2000.

10. A more specific focus on poetry inspires N. Khan’s *Women's Poetry of the First World War* (Khan 1988).

11. Meyer 2009.

12. Crouthamel 2014.

13. Bourke 1996.

14. Das 2006.

15. Lamberti and Fortunati 2009.

16. Paul, Johnston and Short 2005.

17. Budgen 2018.

18. Köroğlu 2007.

19. Omissi 1999.

20. Singh 2014.

21. Das 2011.

22. Das and McLoughin 2018.

23. Rathbone 1978.

24. Winter and Prost 2005.

25. Liebau et al. 2010.

26. Liebau et al. 2010, 23.

27. Volterra 2005.

28. Detailed description of this aspect in Ghirmai Negash 1999.

29. Smidt 2014.

30. Evidences in the bulky folder collected in ASDMAECI, Archivio Eritrea (hereafter AE) 749, fasc. 2 'Situazione politica'.

31. Plenty of this materials in ASDMAECI, AE 833, fasc 8 'Missionari svedesi'.

32. ASDMAECI, AE 857, fasc. 2, Dimostrazione spese politiche segrete della Compagnia suddetta durante il mese di aprile 17, Asmara 1 May 1917.

33. Uoldelul Chelati Dirar 2010.

34. Bahru Zewde 2002, 76 and 2010.

35. Uoldelul Chelati Dirar 2004.

36. To counter these activities the colonial administration deployed a thick network of Eritrean informants, in charge of the constant monitoring of suspect activities and movement taking place in the market. Evidences of this abounds in ASDMAECI, AE 857, fasc. 2, Dimostrazione spese politiche segrete della Compagnia suddetta durante il mese di aprile 17, Asmara 1 May 1917.

37. ASDMAECI, AE 778, fasc. 'Personale indigeno', G. Cerrina Feroni to Direzione Affari Civili, Asmara 13 Apr. 1916; ASDMAECI, AE 778, fasc. 'Personale indigeno', F. Martini to G. Cerrina Feroni, Roma 1 Mar. 1916.

38. Some statistical data are available in Patterson and Pyle 1983.

39. Carrara 1920.

40. Some aspects of those tensions are discussed in Zaccaria 2006.

41. Guidotti and Gubellini 1936; Bellucci and Zaccaria 2014.

42. Gäbräyäsus Hailu 1950.

43. Zewde Gabre-Sellasie 2015, 242. More biographical details in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* ad vocem.

44. A great English translation of the novel has been made by Ghirmai Negash, see Gäbräyäsus Hailu 2013.

45. Ghirmai Negash 1999, 133-34; Zaccaria 2013.

46. Ghirmai Negash 2009.

47. Matzke 2013.

48. Gäbräyäsus Hailu 2013, 23.

49. Jewsiewicki and Mudimbe 1993.

50. Gäbräyäsus Hailu 2013, 13.

51. Gäbräyäsus Hailu 2013, 14.

52. Gäbräyäsus Hailu 2013, 53.

53. Gäbräyäsus Hailu 2013, 16.

54. Sängal Worqneh 1916.

55. For these biographical data I relied mainly on Puglisi's *Chi è? dell'Eritrea*, Puglisi 1952, 271.

56. In the poem Sängal uses the Italian term *siluri* (torpedoes) transcribed with Tigrinya characters.

57. Zaccaria 2012, 170.

58. Ghirmai Negash 1999, 107.

59. Sängal Worqneh 1916, 7.

60. Sängal Worqneh 1916, 9.

61. Cortellessa 1998. I am deeply grateful to my friend and colleague Angelo Ventrone for bringing this monumental research to my attention.

62. ASDMAECI, AE 778, fasc. 'Personale indigeno', G. Colosimo to G. Cerrina Feroni, Roma 17 Jul. 1916.

63. ASDMAECI, AE 778, fasc. 'Personale indigeno', G. Cerrina Feroni to Ministero delle Colonie, Asmara 28 Oct. 1916.

64. The late Lanfranco Ricci was the first to retrieve Sängal from oblivion suggesting that he could have been the author of the poem. See Ricci 1969.

65. Caffarena 2005, 40.

66. Translated into Italian in 1976 as *Lettere di prigionieri di guerra italiani*. Spitzer 1976.

67. Spitzer 1976, 1.

68. Omissi 1999.

69. Singh 2014.

70. Spaulding 1993; Taddia 1994; Taddia 2000.

71. Zaccaria 2013.

72. Zaccaria 2013, 219.

73. Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin 2011, 489.

74. A detailed reconstruction of Kolmodin intense scholarly and diplomatic activites in Özdalga 2006.

75. CRL-KP, Q 15: 10 a, Mäzgäbä Səllase to Yohannes Kolmodin, 'Abarda' 1 July 1912.

76. It could be translated roughly as "They are dragged into the sand with a rope."

77. "Because of my greed I am now wearing a bandolier which does not belong to me."

78. Gäbräyäsus Hailu 2013, 7, 15, 53, 56.

79. Chartered in 1863 in Beirut with funds raised by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the Syrian Protestant College had its first intake of students in 1866. After 1899 Swedish Missionaries Sources started sending their brightest Eritrean students to this college as Italian colonial authorities prohibited them to send their students to study in Sweden. The prohibition originated from the fact that *Qäši* Marqos Germay, upon completion of his religious studies in Uppsala, went back to Eritrea and in 1899 married a Swedish missionary there, Regina Johansson. This marriage was considered outrageous by colonial authorities as it undermined the notion of racial prestige they were trying to enforce in the colony. To avoid similar episodes to repeat, Governor Ferdinando Martini asked the Swedish missionaries not to send Eritreans to Europe anymore, where he believed they could get exposed to ideas and behaviours deemed to be dangerous for the very survival of the colonial system. On the Syrian Protestant College see Elshakry 2007. On *Qäši* Marqos Germay's adventurous life see Alazar Menghestu 2003, 31-33; Lundström and Ezra Gebremedhin 2011, 488.

80. CRL-KP, Q 15: 10 b, Täklä Mika'el 'Uq̈ba Gabər to Johannes Kolmodin, Beirut 21 October 1911.

81. Gäbräyäsus Hailu 2013, 23.

82. CRL-KP, Q 15: 10 b, Täklä Mika'el 'Uq̈ba Gabər to Johannes Kolmodin, Beirut 16 February 1913.

83. CRL-KP, Q 15: 10 b, Täklä Mika'el 'Uq̈ba Gabər to Johannes Kolmodin, Beirut 19 January 1914.

84. Omissi 2007, 376.

85. ASDMAECI, ASMAI 33/2, fasc. 20, Cerrina Feroni to Ministero delle Colonie, Asmara 12 May 1916; ASDMAECI, ASMAI 33/2, fasc. 20, Cerrina Feroni to Ministero delle Colonie, Asmara 7 June 1916.

86. ASDMAECI, ASMAI 33/2, fasc. 20, Copy of a report from

Bureau Interalliés to Ministero Affari Esteri, Paris 20 May 1916.

87. ASDMAECI, AE 775, fasc. 'Difesa dell'Eritrea', Capo Ufficio censura to Governo della Colonia, Asmara 28 August 1916.

88. Moyd 2011.

89. Matzke 2002.

90. Strachan 2004, 2.

91. Ibidem.

92. Zaccaria 2006.

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