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## The Seen, the Unseen, the Invented

Misrepresentations of African “Otherness”  
in the Making of a Colony. Eritrea, 1885-1896

This essay analyses the photos of Eritreans taken by professional photographers at the beginning of Italian presence in Africa—particularly from the first Italian landing in Africa in 1885 up to the “reconquest” of Saati in 1888<sup>1</sup>, after the Italian military defeat at Dogali—in order to identify their language and the extent to which they were functional to colonial rule. The photographic image is considered here as a primary element of a specific historical and cultural moment in view of the fact that it had a growing diffusion as a means of communication at the time of the “first Italian African war”, when it was already becoming a “mass” medium.

The growth of the photographic market in the last twenty years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century coincided with Italy’s participation in the scramble for Africa and with the growth of the information industry, in which a very prominent role was played by the illustrated press<sup>2</sup> which made use of photographs, particularly those taken by commercial photographers, as the preferential means of spreading Italian “knowledge” concerning Africa and its peoples.

1. I will analyse in particular a corpus of 410 images produced by four Italian photographers Mauro Ledru, Luigi Fiorillo, Francesco Nicotra and the Nicotra Brothers. Their production has been traced in the collections of the Biblioteca Reale of Turin, the Biblioteca Civica of Novara; the Istituto Italo Africano (now Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente) of Rome; the Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito of Rome and the Società africana d’Italia of Naples.
2. *L’Illustrazione Italiana* and *L’Illustrazione popolare*, the two most widely circulated illustrated periodicals of the time, are taken into consideration in this essay. Forerunners of modern magazines, *L’Illustrazione popolare* addressed the Italian lower-middle class (its cover price was 10 cents in the years considered here) while the former from its foundation in 1874, addressed the upper-middle class, who could afford the very expensive cover price of the weekly (50 cents the first issue, one lira at the time analysed here) and who until then had preferred the prestigious British and French weeklies such as *The Illustrated London News* and *L’Illustration*. See E. SIMONETTI (1963).

The scarcity, on the one hand, of actual knowledge concerning the African continent was countered, on the other, by the enormous potential of the “discourse” produced about it, along a path followed by the colonial enterprise in line with the construction of a collective imagery skilfully nurtured by photography. This contributed to the construction of greater consensus in the still very much divided public in favour of a colonial option. Photography too succeeded in this by drawing the line between the visible and the non-visible. Hence the identification of what was shown and what was omitted enables us today to measure not only the limits of Italian “knowledge” of Africa, but also the strength of a representation which, by establishing the horizon of the visible and proposing a manner of interpreting it, proved able to impose a perception—often a misleading one—of African otherness, so tenacious that it still partly survives unchanged today.

### The Colonizing Eye

On 8 January 1888, on the eve of the Italian “revenge” at Dogali, apprehension concerning of the events about to take place<sup>3</sup> was revealed by *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, which devoted its cover picture to Africa: a drawing by Ettore Ximenes illustrating “the arrest of *ras* Alula’s spies”<sup>4</sup>. In the context of a colonising action which, also in the case of Italy, tended to oppose the rulers to the ruled, the latter began to be shown, even in photographs, according to precise antinomic criteria which identified them in the first place as allies or rebels—whether actual or potential. The figure of the “spy”, the “highwayman and robber” and the “traitor” are among the first through which the new relationship with the continent began to be interpreted and brought into focus.

Part of the first photographic production on Africa<sup>5</sup> shows events that can in actual fact be defined as amounting to a series of images devoted entirely to arrests, arrested persons and trials: a theme which—along with “Italian achievements”, “views of Massawa” and “native troops”—is one of the only topics to which all the photographers devoted their efforts.

The image conveyed of African “other” thus began to emerge in the form of a criminal, a bandit brutally depicted in crude shots showing him

3. “All Italian thoughts are turned to Africa. The anxiety is very great”, the *L'Illustrazione Italiana* writes (issue no. 5 of 20 November 1888, page 80). This publication, together with *L'Illustrazione popolare*, dedicated reports to the events in Africa which since the time of the massacre had only been illustrated, counting on the persuasiveness and propagandistic force of images.

4. See *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, no. 3 of 8 January 1888.

5. For the first professional “colonizing gaze” Italian photographers had at the time of the first African war, see N. LABANCA (1988), L. GOGLIA (1989), S. PALMA (1995; 1996b; 2002).



PHOTO I. Nicotra Brothers, "Massawa. Arrest of two of *ras* Alula's spies", 1887-1888.



PHOTO 2. Nicotra Brothers, "Mohamed Nur of Arikko, leader of a horde of *baschi buzuk*, sentenced to 20 years in jail for refusing to fight. Dogali", 1887-1888.

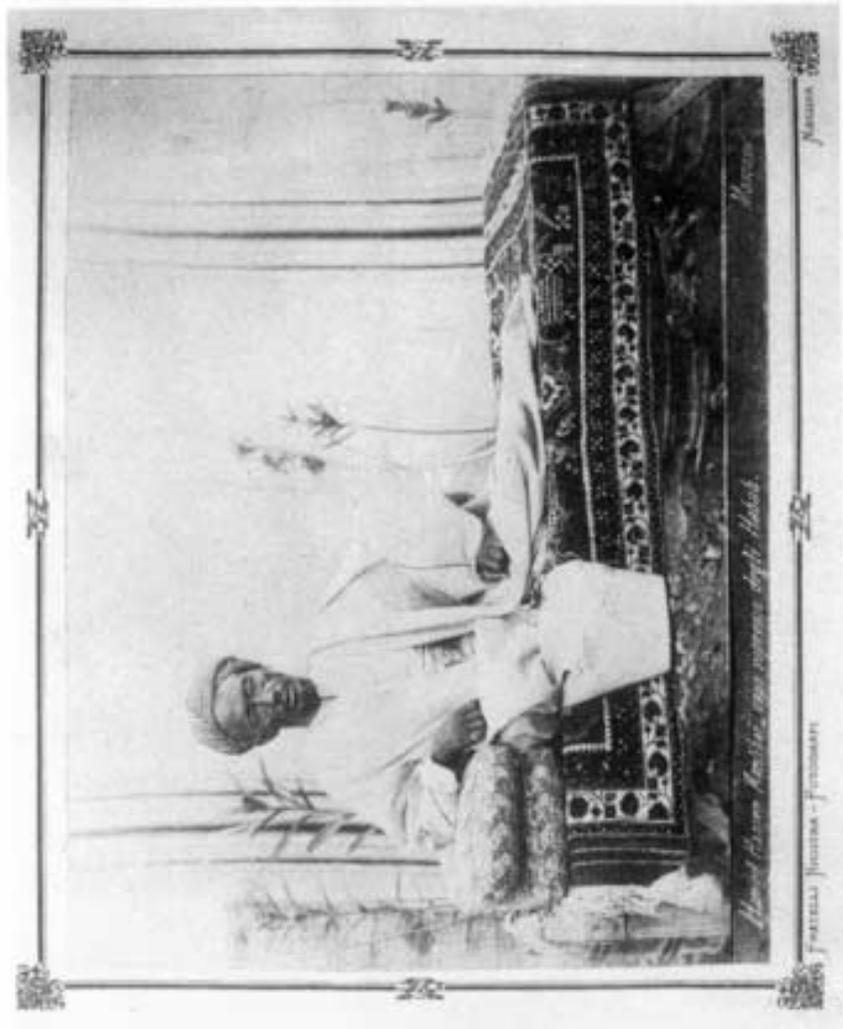


PHOTO 3. Nicotra Brothers, "Massawa. Hamed Hassen Kantibai, supreme chief of the Habab", 1887.



PHOTO 4. Anonymous, “dajjach Bahta Hagos”, pre-1894.

at the time of capture (photo 1)<sup>6</sup>, during his trial<sup>7</sup> or in prison after conviction (photo 2)<sup>8</sup>, the mute icon of a representation over which he could not exercise any control, the mere object of the victor's scrutinising gaze over the vanquished. Hardly by chance, the one feature shared by all these images is the presence of chains, serving to attest the restoration of violated law and order; a type of "representation" that strongly recalls the *genre* of forensic photography. This was enjoying rapid growth during those very same years and also included, among the various types of images featured<sup>9</sup>, those of arrests, usually showing the accused in chains on the way to prison, escorted by *carabinieri* and armed guards. But the strongest resemblances are unquestionably those linking these first representations to the images of the newborn Italian nation's repression of the revolts known as "brigandage", a tragic campaign conducted with unprecedented ferocity, whose consequences on the collective memory and mentality of the people of Southern Italy and their diffident attitude towards the state—still considered, in many ways, as something remote and hostile—remain to be examined<sup>10</sup>.

In more than one aspect, the situation in Africa appears closely reminiscent of the events that occurred in central and southern Italy at the time of the popular revolts following the nation's unification, above all in the use of the army in repressive operations. G. Rochat & G. Massobrio's (1978: 50) definition of the latter events could equally apply to the colonial campaigns:

"The Italian troops [in the words of these two historians] found that they were in fact operating like a foreign occupant amidst the hostility of the local population and under conditions made more difficult by the lack of adequate logistic organisation, geographic maps [*sic*] and any theoretical vision whatsoever of their use beyond the systematic use of terror."

For instance, in a "mopping up" operation in four provinces of Sicily against draft dodgers and deserters, an order was actually issued to arrest "whoever you may encounter in the countryside who looks the right age for a draft dodger and *has the face of a murderer* [my italics]" (*ibid.*: 51). Only apparently astonishing, this order reveals in fact the rapid diffusion and penetration in the cultural mentality of the age, nurtured as it was by a

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6. See, for instance, also the picture taken in 1888 by Luigi Fiorillo showing: "On the road to Ghinda. Abyssinian prisoner". All captions have been translated literally, keeping the original transcription of the nouns.
  7. See, the two photos by the Nicotra Brothers, showing: "Taulud. Court-martial [On the case of four Hababs accused of treason]", 1887.
  8. See also photo by the Nicotra Brothers: "Massawa. Suleiman Mohamed Habab, sentenced to 20 years' forced labour for espionage, 1887-1888".
  9. The judicial photography category includes a number of photographic genres, including crime, identification, detective and legal genres, to provide photographic documentation ranging from identifying and anthropometric photos to images of "crime scenes", executions and even unidentified corpses. See A. GILARDI (1978).
  10. See P. SOCCIO (1980).

positivistic faith in science, of the principles of Cesare Lombroso's criminal anthropology, a discipline for whose purposes, in those days, no instrument appeared better suited than photography, thanks to the possibility it offered of "scientific" recording.

Those were the very years in which both anthropological and judicial photography were developing, constantly crossing each others' paths as they discerned in somatic traits and the measurements or shape of a skull a clearly indicative sign of the criminality and moral degeneration which found its "natural" and objective incarnation in the Negro race<sup>11</sup>. Photography joined hands with the repression<sup>12</sup> of brigandage to display the "murderers' faces"<sup>13</sup>, which were quite simply the faces of the "*cafoni*", i.e. the poor peasantry of central and southern Italy, shown in prison, in chains, or photographed in images specially reconstructed in ad hoc studios, with backdrops and scenic accessories used to evoke the harsh environment of the woods. Here the brigands were made to pose, armed with rifles and often in a defiant attitude, so as to display with photographic evidence the danger they constituted for society. And it was by no means rare for brigands who had been killed to be "posed" in this manner even as corpses, in macabre reconstructions of their "career" (Gilardi 1976: 243).

In these "photographic campaigns"<sup>14</sup> the photographers' work was greatly facilitated by the military commanders, who were understandably eager to promote the most widespread propaganda about the success of their operations through the influence and power exercised by this new *medium*<sup>15</sup>.

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11. LOMBROSO (1876) argued that there was no difference between the criminal, the savage and the madman. A scientist and above all a populariser, Lombroso was a skilful exploiter of the media of the times, newspapers and popular magazines, through which his theories were given a broad audience, offering what were to a certain extent reassuring views, providing definitive and "scientific" responses to crime and, consequently, to "morality". A critical anthology of Lombroso's writings is attempted by D. FRIGESSI *et al.* (1996). After the psychiatrist-anthropologist's death in 1909 his wondrously well-received theories did not survive him long, and it is quite significant that recently in Italy, with a resurgence in racism and the preconceptions of the Northern League (in 1996 the League put forward the idea of measuring and recording the footprints of African immigrants), there has been fresh interest in the physiognomic pseudoscience that owes a lot to Lombroso's theories, with new authors bearing witness to renewed and symptomatic interest. See K. M. MICHEL (1992) and P. GETREVI (1993).
  12. In 1882 Alphonse Bertillon, prefect of the French police, invented the "identification card" that combined thumbprints with photographic identification, sanctioning the evidential validity of photography (GILARDI 1978: 53 and ff).
  13. Many images are contained in L. CARUSO & S. M. MARTINI (1976) and P. VARUOLO (1985).
  14. Campaigns well documented in the illustrated press: again in 1899 *L'Illustrazione Italiana* published images of the "last captured bandits".
  15. But they are also interested in using photography for identification purposes, for brigands that might evade from prison who "did all they could to escape from the devilish equipment". See N. DELLA VOLPE (1980: 19).

The triumph of law and order, once symbolised by the severed heads of killed or executed “wrongdoers” hanging from the town gates<sup>16</sup>, was now celebrated and amplified by the photographic image which, as we have seen, played a no less macabre role, and above all a deceptive one when it transformed the repression of the revolts of Italian populations for land rights into mere police operations against common criminals.

In this context, it is not surprising to discover that in Massawa, in the absence of adequate preparations for Italy’s imperialistic ambitions, the guidelines for the conduct of penal matters were no other than the “Instructions for the troops sent to repress brigandry in Sicily” (Labanca 1993: 269; Volterra 1995a: 207).

On his return to Africa after Dogali, during the preparatory phase of the campaign for reconquest, the newly appointed general Saletta declared the naval blockade of the Massawa coast together with that of the land towards the interior: the decree—displayed throughout the territory occupied by the Italian forces and hence more commonly known as the “*Manifesto*”—declared Massawa and its district to be in a state of war (Mori 1914), by virtue of which all trade, traffic and communications with Abyssinia were prohibited so as to cut off possible supplies of weapons for the Negus and *ras* Alula. The consequences of the blockade were dramatic for those who unwittingly broke it, being quite unaware of its existence: “At least six hundred arrests in a short time, many ending in death in prison or before a firing-squad of the poor wretches, [often] pressed by hunger, [who] emigrated from the coast to the interior or vice-versa” (Battaglia 1958: 270). This figure is not surprising when we consider that measures so severely restrictive of freedom of movement were applied to largely nomadic populations. And in fact the first trial for “treason” was held against four Habab, men belonging to a nomadic population from the region north-west of Massawa: without any proof, on the basis of a mere presumption of crime, they were condemned to 20 years’ forced labour. The court-martial, sitting in judgement on 21 June 1887, decided that the mere fact of having been “surprised in the act of going beyond the Italian outposts in the vicinity of Monkullo” was reason enough to find them guilty, and stated as grounds for the sentence the argument that once in Abyssinian territory “willingly or not, they would have to provide news and information [. . .] that could be detrimental to the security of the [. . .] [Italian] district”<sup>17</sup>.

Two photographs taken by the Nicotra Brothers in 1887 documented the event<sup>18</sup>. As they show, the court-martial was held outdoors, in the

16. A rule still in place to some extent in those years, with the “custom adopted by military commands [of] exposing the naked corpses of the fallen in town squares” (ROCHAT & MASSOBRIO 1978: 50).

17. See Archivio Centrale dello Stato (State Central Archives, hereafter ACS), *Tribunale Militare di Massawa, Massawa, 1887*, sentence no. 36 of 21 June 1887. Because of its “leniency”, this sentence was the subject of a parliamentary question to the War Minister. See A. VOLTERRA (1995b: 827-828).

18. Their captions say: “Taulud. Court-martial [On the case of four Hababs accused of treason]”, 1887.

presence of the troops drawn up in formation, evidently with the specific intention of giving the greatest possible prominence and publicity to the event, to which also photographers were not surprisingly invited or allowed to attend.

The harshness of the military regime towards the native population was such that it was a recurrent practice, until 1890 and even later, to have recourse to detention “on suspicion”, as a measure both preventive and repressive, and also to the capture of hostages as a form of control over ethnic groups, a practice wholly unknown in Italian law. This occurred in the case of the Shoan bishop Memer Walda Samaet, an involuntary victim of the overheated atmosphere following the Dogali massacre. As the Head of the Abyssinian monks of Jerusalem, he landed in Massawa in 1887 to recover the sum of 30,000 thalers destined for the construction of a monastery in Jerusalem—a sum which had been illicitly withheld by Count Antonelli—with the assurance of full support from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Instead, he was arrested in Massawa by the military authorities who held him as a hostage with the intention of releasing him only in exchange for the release of lieutenant Savoiron, held by *ras* Alula who, after Dogali, made use of his services as a physician to assist the wounded<sup>19</sup>.

Apart from this special case, duly recorded in the photo<sup>20</sup>, the increasing rigidity and harshness of the colonial military regime gave rise, as a hardly surprising result, to an extraordinary increase in the prison population (with consequences made even more dramatic by the heavy death toll due to the diffusion of scurvy and smallpox)<sup>21</sup>—a situation that the photographs unwittingly revealed, although actually they intended to testify respect or restoration of the law and provide reassurance regarding the stability of Italian rule in a situation which was, and remained, of great uncertainty.

It was, incidentally, during these very years that the popular press accentuated the image and forced the perception of Abyssinians<sup>22</sup> as a treacherous,

19. See R. BATTAGLIA (1958: 269), which quotes the bishop by the name of Menehim. Chapter xxx of G. PICCININI (1887: 589-590), is wholly devoted to the episode, giving the opinion of captain Manfredo Camperio, published in *Riforma*, commenting on general Genè's unfortunate decision.

20. See photo by the Nicotra Brothers, “Mamer Walda Samaet, held prisoner by the Italians in Massawa”, 1887.

21. See Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito (Archives of the Historical Office of the Army General Staff, hereafter AUSSME), *Carteggio Eritrea*, b.118, f.4. The cruelty of the military regime and of gaol conditions was such as to be immortalised in the verses of a Tigrai song, that goes: “A punishment you cannot forget [. . .] Massawa is the court, Assab the burial chamber”: see C. CONTI ROSSINI (1942: 324). A few admissions about the torture inflicted by Italians on prisoners emerged during the Livraghi scandal. See A. BIZZONI (1897: 248).

22. Use of the term “Abyssinian” is borrowed directly from photographic and written sources of that time, when it was used as a general term to indicate the Ethiopian population as a whole, and was often extended to include people from the eastern lowlands.

cunning and, above all, ferocious people (thus anticipating the theme of ferociousness which was later to become the *leitmotiv* of the period following Adua<sup>23</sup>) while photographs immortalised them as prisoners in chains, savages in captivity, making them the unwilling stars of Italy's colonial *rogues' gallery*.

In this manner photography authoritatively began to classify, order and organise knowledge of Africa, with all the power it drew from its claims of "technological" immediacy and reliability, placing itself at the service of a military regime which, although perhaps not encouraging it certainly made use of it, allowing photographers to obtain coverage on aspects which instead were out of bounds for journalists<sup>24</sup>. Coverage, in fact, is by no means neutral, as photography in any case can hardly be since it produces strongly coded representations which, through shot selection, framing and focussing strategies, determine what must or must not be seen. It separates the seeable from what must be rejected, according to specificities proper to an instrument which, at the very moment it reproduces reality, is in fact constructing it. And in the narrative structure of Italian early Africanist photography as a more or less conscious propaganda tool, there is not much room for a colonial reality consisting in extreme oppositions between the colonised and the colonisers. Essentially, it sought to construct a reality and spread the idea of a form of rule that made use of alliances and forms of "domestication" rather than one of conflicts—confrontations that would, incidentally, entail recognition of an independent and autonomous power and identity of the colonised.

23. "Infamy of the offence to corpses and of the murder of the wounded" is the title of an illustration published at the time, with reference to the Abyssinian practice of evirating the fallen. The drawing is in G. PICCININI (1887: 321), but see also on p. 1081 the image "Orgy of blood". *L'Illustrazione popolare* (no. 10 of 6 March 1887) proposes a full-page engraving entitled "The barbarity of Negus of Abyssinia" (p. 149), while *L'Illustrazione Italiana* (no. 49 of 20 Nov. 1887) published on two pages an engraving by E. XIMENES entitled "In the field of *ras* Alula" (pp. 373-374), which depicts the cruelty of the *ras* and his soldiers against a group of prisoners in chains appealing in vain for mercy. While the myth of Dogali was sanctioned at the altar (concerning the Church's attitude and the attempt by the Depretis government to reconcile State and Church in the name of Dogali, see R. BATTAGLIA (1958: 254-257) and fuel was added in schools, where poems such as "Rondinella di Dogali" were beginning to be learned, the process of demonising the enemy in the illustrated press gained force, with the aid of offensive rhymes. Under the meaningful title "Nemesis" *L'Illustrazione Italiana* published six short and delirious poems dedicated "To fallen Italians in Africa", in which *ras* Alula was described as a "monstrous beast", "foul-smelling dog", "dirty demon in a human guise" (see no. 10 of 6 March 1887, p. 199). Signed by L. Lizio-Bruno, these poems were published with the same title by Castaldi in Caltanissetta in the same year.
24. It is indeed well known that correspondents such as A. Franzoi of *Corriere di Roma*, F. Macola of *Fracassa* and others were expelled by general Genè after Dogali, on account of the reports contained in their correspondence on the faults and serious responsibilities of military leaders in Africa. Similar decisions would be taken a few years later at the time of Adua.

## The Visual “Chieftains Policy”

As has been effectively remarked, “the colonial relationship was by nature a false one: it could not simultaneously establish the modes of domination and recognise the Other” (Gentili 1985: 7). One might add that when this does occur, it is done in order to elicit further reasons for legitimation from it.

This need was in fact met by the iconographic prominence given to the figures of chiefs and notables who accepted the colonial system and allied themselves with the new power. In fact the alliances policy—part of the more extensive “chieftains policy” which became in the colonial world anedulcorated and vicarious form of rule—established power relationships which very clearly implied the acceptance, on the natives’ part, of the prestige and authority of the colonisers. A recognition of this kind is necessary to legitimate the existence of a minority government. Significantly enough, meetings with these potential allies were narrated and even more abundantly illustrated to the Italian public of the day, enriching them with all the pomp and circumstance deemed useful to make the event official. Often, even more significantly, local chiefs and notables were described and portrayed in the act of prostrating themselves at the feet of the new authority, or at least paying homage through meaningful signs of submission, not infrequently “refused” by the Italian authorities with paternalistic superiority.

The report of the investiture of *kantiba* Hamed Hassan by general Saletta, as narrated by *L’Illustrazione Italiana*, is an effective example of this narrative model:

“Kantibay-Hamed, chief of the Habab tribe, a valiant warrior, [...] travelled to Massawa, followed by the headmen of the Hababs, in order to swear a solemn oath of obedience to general Saletta, having placed himself and his people under Italy’s protection. Kantibay Hamed [...] was received with due military honours by two *bouluk* of *basci-buzuk* and a company of infantry troops with a band. General Saletta’s Chief of Staff accompanied him into the reception hall adorned with trophies and flags, and conducted him to his seat beneath the portrait of King Umberto. Meanwhile the band was playing the march from *Aida* [*sic*]. Kantibay-Hamed was dressed in an ample robe of blue brocade [...]. General Saletta came in a few minutes later, and went over to shake hands. Hamed wanted to kiss his hand instead, but the general prevented him carrying out this humiliating act...”<sup>25</sup>.

A specially prominent role was assumed by the images of local notables who allied themselves with the new colonial power: the weight and authority

25. See *L’Illustrazione Italiana*, no. 47 of 6 Nov. 1887, p. 339. On p. 341 there is a drawing entitled “Massawa. The commander of the garrison, general Saletta, offers an honorary sword to Kantibai, chief of the Hababs”. This event was captured in the only photographic documentation of this sort taken by the Nicotra Brothers. It bears the caption “Investiture of Kantibai Hamed Hassan—Supreme Chief of the Hababs”. A few years later photographer Francesco Nicotra was to produce two images of the same kind devoted to the “Conference on the right of the Mareb” and to the “Reception of chiefs at Godofelassi”.

they possessed in native society, which the photographs sought to enhance, made their acceptance of the colonial system even more significant, whilst they opportunely left in the shade the actual reality constituted by human beings in most cases “overwhelmed by a destiny greater than they are, forged by a quest for privileges or even mere survival” (Triulzi 1989). The only photographs taken during those years inside a studio are devoted to these figures of notables, since this method allowed for a more accurate construction of the image according to the conventional stylistic codes of representation widely used in the portraiture of the age. This photographic genre made it possible to combine physical representation and symbolic representation more effectively by using a black or white backdrop to help bring the figure into sharper definition, and also by the careful attention which could thus be devoted to pose and attitude—always very still and formal expressions and dress (due not only to the long exposure times), all intended to stress the nobility of the personage photographed and his high social status.

Significant examples are provided by the portraits of “Mohamed Zebibi, high chieftain of Zula and Arafali”<sup>26</sup> and the already mentioned “Hamed Hassen Kantibai, supreme chieftain of the Habab” (photo 3), both taken by the Nicotra Brothers, who devoted, however, far greater care to the furnishings and setting in the portrait of the *kantiba*, probably because of the greater social and political importance of this personage in the eyes of the colonial government, which in fact sought his alliance<sup>27</sup>. In the case of Zebibi<sup>28</sup>, on the other hand, he himself may have proposed his alliance to the Italians when they took over from the Egyptians in Massawa, and asked, as some journalists reported, for permission “to raise the Italian flag” in

26. See photo by the Nicotra Brothers, “Massawa. Scheik Mohamed Zebibi, great chief of Zula and Arafali”, 1888.

27. Hamed Hassan—whose alliance was sought by our military chiefs partly because of the growing Italian interest in the areas of Keren and Bogos, near the Sudanese border, where the group of Hababs could have acted as a buffer against the mahdist threat—was accorded by military authorities “a princely appanage that had probably never been equalled by rich England for the most important of its protégés: 500 thalers, or 2,000-plus lire, a month [. . .] the equivalent of the salary of an Italian minister!” (BATTAGLIA 1958: 271). “Protection” in favour of the Hababs was among the first to be agreed to by Italy, but also one of the first to be refused: “Cantibai [Baratieri stated in a note in 1895 to foreign secretary Blanc] was annoyed by our interference with collected taxes, the obligation of providing camels against payment for regular supplies to Cassala, protection accorded to his enemies against his bullying, and was afraid on account of the end of the two previous cantibai, one deported to Assab and the other in gaol in Massawa”. See AUSSME, *Carteggio Eritrea*, b.124, f.2, 8 April 1895, Baratieri to Blanc. Greater information on the policy of alliances and taxation in the colony on the part of the first colonial administration is given in N. LABANCA (1993: 297-304).

28. This appears to be the most likely transcription of the name of the personage of Zula (also reported by *L'Illustrazione Italiana* as Zebeki) which the Nicotra Brothers indicate in the photograph as Zebibi, and A. Bizzoni as Zibibi.

Zula. A permission which was hurriedly granted by Baldissera who announced on the very same day, in a telegram dated 1 August 1888, that he “had solemnly proclaimed the protectorate in Zula”, as Crispi in turn promptly proceeded to “announce to all the powers” (Bizzoni 1897: 183).

The portrait of this chief of Zula whose sole virtue, in keeping with the policy of “*divide et impera*”, was said to lie in the fact that “being a Muslim he has a sincere hatred of the Abyssinians”<sup>29</sup>, was featured in the illustrated press of the day, albeit with less prominence than was devoted on more than one occasion to that of Hamed Hassan, whose picture was accompanied by enthusiastic reportage—as already mentioned—regarding his “investiture”<sup>30</sup>.

The expedient of taking portrait pictures inside a studio makes it possible on the one hand, as we have seen, to construct them in accordance with definite criteria and intentions, but, on the other, it results in the production of figures that are totally decontextualized and isolated from their external environment, and they can, in a changed context, become charged with negative or, at any rate, different connotations from those originally foreseen. This is exactly what happened to the photograph of the *kantiba* Hamed Hassan, which was to enjoy a second wave of popularity three years later when it reappeared in a very different context in the illustrated press together with the portrait of Mussa el-Akad<sup>31</sup>, both transferred with a heavily negative charge into the “rogues’ gallery”. In a political climate that was once again uncertain, made red-hot by the polemics accompanying the scandals in the newborn colony<sup>32</sup>, the portrait of Hamed Hassan was presented as that of the

29. See *L'Illustrazione Italiana* no. 5 of 22 January 1888, p. 80, in which the print depicts him standing but without the *angareb* present in the Nicotra photograph.

30. The photo of the Nicotra Brothers was published by *L'Illustrazione popolare*, no. 6 of 5 Feb. 1888, p. 84 and *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, no. 54 of 25 Dec. 1887, p. 472, while issue no. 47 of 6 Nov. 1887 gives an account of “The investiture of Kantibai-Hamed” (p. 339).

31. A tradesman from Cairo residing in Massawa, Mussa el-Akad, belonged to the local business elite which forged mutually advantageous relations with the new Italian authorities. His arrest, along with that of Hamed Hassan, is tied up with the abuses of power committed from 1889 to 1890 by the lawyer Eteocle Cagnassi, secretary of Colonial Affairs, and by lieutenant Dario Livraghi, head of the local police, whose name was to become famous for what was immediately described as a “*livragazioni*” policy, consisting in blackmail, abuse of power and indiscriminate killings (BIZZONI 1897: 228 ff). Accused of spying and sentenced to death, Mussa el-Akad was later freed by the investigating committee; Hamed Hassan died in prison before his case could be examined. See A. DEL BOCA (1985: 435) and following pages; R. BATTAGLIA (1958: 459 ff). Mussa el-Akad was a prominent Massawa personality deemed worthy of attention by the first colonial photographers. There is a portrait of him by Francesco Nicotra, taken probably at the same time as photographs of other Italian allies. Later, however after his trial, it was re-sold with an “updated” caption proposing him as “Sajed Hassan Musa el Akad, sentenced to be executed by the Military Court of Massawa”.

32. The crisis in the colony exploded at a time when “the government was sailing quietly in the African seas, albeit without a compass” (MARTINI 1897: 64): many

“traitor condemned to death by the Court of Massawa”<sup>33</sup> and the “spy of ras Alula arrested by our soldiers”<sup>34</sup>, where a mere change of caption led to an interpretative process addressed in an opposite direction to the original one.

This operation clearly reveals one of the ambiguities specific to photography but which is at the same time one of its communicative strengths. Images, in fact, employ a complex fabric of levels and modes of communication which, in addition to codes of a more specifically visual nature, recall others such as socio-cultural and linguistic codes (as the case I have just examined demonstrates) where the “written text” supporting the image is used in reality to pilot and condition its interpretation. Thus it is clear that although the photograph registers reality, isolating the fragments which are to be given visibility, the space isolated from the image is not always significant by itself but requires a double trace provided by the written text (Krauss 1985: 131-150). The caption adds a further frame which in fact proves to be a boundary: it creates an additional space which guides the interpretation, influencing perception to such an extent that it can reverse its interpretation. And so the same image can be taken equally well to portray an ally or a traitor, a peasant or a brigand, thus confirming that images can be read in different and even conflicting ways depending on the context in which they are inserted, which also determines their possible uses (Sontag 1978: 93; Berger 1972, 1980).

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of the original anti-colonialists were beginning to review their positions and to take on the expansionist option rendered attractive by the Ethiopian situation in 1889, with the death of negus Yohannes and the succession of Menilek, with whom the treaty of Ucciali was reached. In the same year Italian action was successful in Benadir, with the acquisition of the sultanates of Obbia and Mijertejn. The occupation of Keren and Asmara and the proclamation of the Eritrean Colony helped to quell the dissenting voices of people like Giosuè Carducci, one of the few people who three years earlier had decided not to join the chorus celebrating the myth of the fallen of Dogali (concerning his adhesion to the colonial cause, see TURATI [1891: 261]). In this climate of renewed confidence, the Eritrean scandal had a destabilising effect for the government itself, which felt threatened by it. It is significant that in the illustrated press—always pro-government and colonialist in tone—illustrators returned to those “figures [of Africans] that can hardly be called human”, which had for a long time been moulded in the collective imagery (the expression quoted is taken from G. BELTRAME [1858: 13]). Old fears, preconceptions and demonizations re-emerged as a mirror of the crisis and a useful distraction. In the same issue of *L'Illustrazione Italiana* which published the portrait and news of Hamed Hassan's “betrayal”, the image of an obscure, wild and bloody Africa returned, where human sacrifices abounded, with two full-page engravings illustrating “Human sacrifices for the tributes festival” and “The people fighting for the victims' heads” in Dahomey (no. 12 of 23 March 1890, p. 205).

33. As in *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, no. 11 of 16 March 1890, p. 188.

34. This is the title given to the news from *L'Illustrazione popolare*, no. 8 of 23 Feb. 1890, p. 114, which goes back to the question in issue no. 13 of 30 March, p. 206.

## The Metamorphoses of Bahta Hagos

Where this is concerned, there is a further significant example worthy of consideration, although it is not linked to the earliest commercial photography in Africa. It bears witness to the metamorphoses encountered by the image of one subject—that of Bahta Hagos—one of the most emblematic figures of the conflictual situation determined by Italy's initial colonial policy in the Marèb-Mellàsh (Caulk 1986).

The first commercial photographers (like those who followed in their wake) did not leave any photographic record of the Eritrean leaders who opposed Italy's presence through forms of resistance which, although scattered and isolated (differing one from another and with differing degrees of impact on the population), were to create from 1890 onwards a number of problems for the stability of the colonial system. Figures such as Aberra, Mohamed Nuri, Tesfumariam, Gebremedhin Hagos and Beraki, to mention only the most incisive<sup>35</sup>, did not leave any photographic traces, nor did Bahta Hagos, the leader of the most famous revolt in Eritrean history against the policy of the state takeover of land by the colonial government from 1890 onwards (Rainero 1970). This does not mean that in the years considered here no photographs were taken of him but only that those that did exist were taken by soldiers serving in the colony at the time of his collaboration with the colonial government (Palma 1989a: 607), who had assured their relatively wide circulation, as is shown by the fact that at least one in particular is present today, amongst a great many other souvenir photos, in several photographic collections of those years. This is the picture (photo 4) that Rosalia Pianavia-Vivaldi Bossiner—in Eritrea from 1893 to 1895 with her husband, colonel Domenico Pianavia-Vivaldi—published in her diary (Pianavia Vivaldi 1901: 238) and which we also find in the photographic collection of a former governor of the Eritrean colony, Giuseppe Salvago Raggi<sup>36</sup> and in another one dating back to the same years, the “Bramanti” collection<sup>37</sup>, both donated to what was then the “governmental” photographic library of the Colonial Museum in Rome.

Chiefly in the 1930s, when the propaganda campaign of the Fascist regime in support of the conquest and subsequent “edification” of the Empire was at its height, publishing houses and the press, as well as the Ministry of Italian Africa itself, drew on this photographic library to illustrate the publications devoted to the colonial possessions and the history of their conquest. The Milanese publishing house Treves (Grillandi 1977)—at

35. On Eritrean resistance see T. NEGASH (1986) and J. GEBRE-MEDHIN (1989). An accurate picture of the native events of the time is offered by B. TAFLA (1979).

36. Successor to Ferdinando Martini, he held the post of civil governor of Eritrea from March 1907 to August 1915. Many images of his collection date back to the final years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

37. It was not possible to identify more accurately this collector, of whom we currently know for certain only his surname. Still we suppose his name was Nazareno.

the time one of the largest in the country, and committed in the 1930s to a very active role in the “consensus factory” established by the Fascist regime—made abundant use of the wealth of photographs collected and kept by this Roman photographic library. It drew on it immediately after the proclamation of the Empire for the publication of a work in three volumes entitled *La formazione dell’Impero coloniale italiano* (The formation of Italy’s colonial Empire), “richly accompanied by plates, illustrations and documents”<sup>38</sup>, intended to document the entire history of Italian colonial expansion. What is interesting here, however, is that in order to illustrate the episode of the “Batha Agos revolt” it did not use any of the portraits of the Eritrean leader owned by the Roman photographic library but used instead another picture from this library, taken between 1895 and 1896 to document a mere “native type” whose expression and general appearance were apparently more in keeping with the idea they wished to convey of the “rebel” to whom Toselli meted out justice.

The original subject of the portrait is a warrior from the bands serving the Italians, photographed beside an *askari*<sup>39</sup> to emphasise the difference in dress, which was limited in fact to the white muslin band usually worn as a sign of pride, and the sheepskin worn by the warrior, who is photographed in two different poses (photos 5 and 6)<sup>40</sup>. Of these, as we can see, the one considered most suitable for publication was the second (photo 7)<sup>41</sup>, evidently on the basis of criteria dictated by modes of information/communication focused on gestures and postures as well as on facial expressiveness. Compared in fact to the first image, the subject in the second photograph shows no trace of a smile or any signs of familiarity with the photographer; he is photographed in profile and sufficiently in the foreground so that his posture, apparel and other typifying characteristics of his clothing and person (the sheepskin, the unkempt beard, a face with very strong features), appear able to give visual expression to personality traits that can be

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38. As in the volume’s introductory note.

39. Band was the name of an already existing group of armed natives at the service of a local leader recruited by the Italians at the beginning of their presence in Eritrea, whereas *askari* was the Eritrean soldier recruited into the colonial troops on a regular basis. See M. SCARDIGLI (1996).

40. The images are in the album of souvenir photos collected and taken by Dr. G. Quattrociochi, in Eritrea with the first emergency mission of the Italian Red Cross in 1895-1896. The page they are included in bears the wording “native types” and the numbered portraits of the two armed persons are accompanied by a hand-written note: “1. band soldier; 2. regular *askari*. NB the sabre on the right side: the second [i.e. the ASKARI] shows their way of keeping cartridges ready for shooting.” This album, kept in the Roman photographic library, provides a number of photographs published not only in the volumes in question but also in other works published by Treves such as *La guerra italo-abissina. Bullettino illustrato*, edited by E. XIMENES (1896).

41. See *La formazione dell’Impero coloniale italiano*, Milano, Treves, 1938, vol. I, p. 126.

used to convey a sense of unruliness/untrustworthiness, and certainly of aggressiveness.

Physiognomy—from C. Lombroso to L. Cipriani<sup>42</sup>—had in any case by then left the closed confines of the academic world to become a common and popular pursuit which allowed all and sundry to spy out and decrypt in facial expressions or features the code of human passions and tendencies, whether normal or criminal, while confidence in the “objectivating” power of photographic images was such that they were called on to confirm the assumptions of that “science”. So it was sufficient for a caption to be altered for the original, innocent souvenir photo to be inserted in a context of signification that was in fact hyper-connoted and employed the analogical power of photography to allow an immediate, highly ideologized, reading of the image as a “mental image”. In this image there emerged once again the figure of the peasant-bandit whose criminal leanings had already been abundantly “proved”<sup>43</sup> and who became particularly dangerous and untrustworthy in the more savage African version. The close connection between soma and psyche, the physical and the mental, had become a well-known fact, and photography bore witness to it<sup>44</sup>.

From this point of view the figure of Bahta Hagos is emblematic: in the construction of his image we find heavily manipulated and selected representations that give rise to elaborations which may result either negative or positive but which are always evocative of stereotyped images, robustly sedimented in the collective imagery, such as those of the “rebel bandit” or the “noble savage”. This latter image is in fact referred to by the engraving showing him “in war dress” (photo 8) and published before the revolt he led, in the book entitled *Nell’Africa Italiana* by Ferdinando Martini (Martini 1925: 23)—a work which proved so successful that between 1891 and 1925 it totalled nine editions. And again, with a change of caption, we have a re-proposal of an existing image which until then had been used to depict, in the literature on journeys of exploration, the

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42. There are a number of contributions concerning the figure of the anthropologist Lidio Cipriani, director of the National Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology of the University of Florence. A general biography is given in J. MOGGI CECCHI (1990: 11-18). A more detailed analysis of his adhesion to the racist colonial ideology of the fascist regime is given in G. DORE (1981: 285-313). Paolo Chiozzi examined his photographic production in more than one contribution; for all aspects see P. CHIOZZI (1994: 91-94).

43. Already in 1864 one of the most important studies on criminal anthropology was conducted, which demonstrated the evidence and “measurability” of this conduct among southern brigands. See B. G. MIRAGLIA (1864).

44. An emblematic and dramatic example of this is the anti-Jewish culture which, from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards, transferred its racist design into images, verbal and illustrated, which took somatic diversities (to the point of caricature) to depict inferiority. For a brilliant excursus on the history of the iconographic typification of Jews, see P. PALLOTTINO (1994: 17-26).



PHOTO 5. G. Quattrociochi,  
“1. Soldier from a warband; 2. Regular Ascari soldier”, 1895-1896.



PHOTO 6. G. Quattrociochi,  
“1. Soldier from a warband; 2. Regular Askari soldier”, 1895-1896.



Batha-Agos, il ribelle sconfitto e ucciso ad Halai da Toselli (1895)

PHOTO 7. Anonymous, "Batha Agos, the rebel defeated at Halai by Toselli", 1895, published in *La formazione dell'Impero coloniale italiano* (1938: 126).



Bata Agos in tenuta di guerra

noble but more anonymous figure of an “Abyssinian chief in wardress”<sup>45</sup> from which the idea of nobility, which had long accompanied the description and portrayal of the Ethiopian peoples<sup>46</sup>, was borrowed for transferral to the image of the “ally” Bahta Hagos.

### Military and Photographic Recruitment

Within the wider system of the production of meaning and knowledge which developed parallel to the colonisation process, images thus became one of the fundamental instruments in the strategies and practices linked to the colonial discourse, thanks to their ability to recall *topoi* or establish new ones with an immediacy and an emotional intensity unknown to other types of texts. Indeed, the “objectivating” function of the image seems to be realised through reference to already known and shared representations, just as the introduction of new areas of meaning finds its effectiveness on the confirmation of what is already known and acquired, basing its ability to seduce and manipulate—as the example of Bahta Hagos shows—through recourse to emotionalism. This makes it possible for the same image to be charged with opposite meanings on different occasions, and the very same personage may be perceived as a noble warrior or a brutal brigand. By fixing attention on the “nobility” or “ferociousness” of the personages depicted this operation makes it possible to relegate to the background the

45. The image is given in F. SURDICH (1982: 304-305). This same image was used—clearly with the urgent need to offer visual documentation to the news of betrayal—by *L'Illustrazione popolare*, under the title: “The rebel Bat-Agos, killed in the fighting of 18 December in Africa at Saganeiti” (no. 6 of 6 Jan. 1895, p. 84). In the following issue, which gives a written account of events, the need to guide perceptions of the published image was clearly felt. The image in itself did not offer a negative idea of the person represented, and so an attempt was made to lessen the proud nobility depicted in the engraving by the denigratory tone of the caption: “We published the portrait of our fine friend in full battle-dress, wearing skins (just as well with all that cold!) and barefoot” (no. 7 of 13 Jan. 1895, p. 98).

46. A superiority which could also be reflected in their external appearance, as Vigoni himself confirmed, quoting Antoine d'Abbadie: “D'Abbadie insists greatly on the way of dressing and on the consequences—apparent at least—of dress, coming up with an affinity between the Abyssinians and the Etruscans, the Romans and the Greeks, and as the Romans made distinctions between togaed Gaul, trousered Gallia and long-haired Gaul, he argues that Ethiopia, from its dress, might be called togaed Africa” (VIGONI 1935: 153). In some ways, Ethiopians are occasionally considered untypical in Africa south of the Sahara, being a Semitic and non-Negroid people (SNOWDON 1970; MILLER 1985: 23-39). This belief, at least from Menilek to Haile Selassie, was indeed held by the *amharas* themselves who, not considering themselves black, thus justified their superiority over other subjugated populations in the region. Moreover, the legend of Menilek I descending from Solomon and the queen of Sheba is from this viewpoint a further form of legitimation of the “Abyssinian” elite. See JONES & MONROE (1969: 16).

reasons for the rebellions and “betrayals”, which were always ascribed essentially to the fundamentally untrustworthy and treacherous character of the “savages”<sup>47</sup>: an expedient which is the direct descendant of the more general attitude characterised by absolute heedlessness and total lack of knowledge of the Other, whose laws and customs remain unknown<sup>48</sup>, and no curiosity as to the real reasons for alliances and defections, collaboration and “double-dealing”, despite the fact that the whole of the early colonial period was rife with cases of this type. Bahta Hagos, *ras* Sebat and *dajjach* Agos Tafari are famous examples, together with Kafel and Debeb—the leaders of Abyssinian war bands in the pay of the Italians—who were held at the time of their collaboration in the highest esteem by the colonial military government<sup>49</sup> because of the contribution—chiefly in terms of blood shed—they could provide in the service of colonial occupations and conquests, assuming the relative risks in our stead. The reason for their “treachery” or double-dealing must, however, certainly be sought for in more profound reasons than the more simplistic explanation of unreliability as a “genetic” vice of the Abyssinians, evoked by the military command and echoed by the Italian press and particularly by the illustrated weeklies.

On the other hand, it would also be excessive to interpret the defection of Kafel or Debeb as a mere expression of patriotism, as A. Del Boca (1985: 334) appears to suggest, considering their case together with that of Bahta Hagos, which is in fact quite different. Their case should be viewed instead in the light of Ethiopia’s extremely unstable political situation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which the fragmentation of political authority assured a particularly fertile soil for power struggles, also expressed through the phenomenon of *sheftennat* (rebellion), a traditional method of ascending to power<sup>50</sup> against the established authority by force of arms<sup>51</sup>. In the days of Yohannes IV his rule was contested by more than one *shifita*: in the Marèb-Mellàsh

47. Revealing in this sense, is the apparently incoherent “explanation” for the rebellion of Bahta Hagos supplied by *L’Illustrazione popolare* to its readers. “Why on earth did he suddenly rebel against Italy?” [the journal asks] ... We well know why, unfortunately!” (no. 6 of 6 Jan. 1895, p. 82).

48. It is emblematic that the *Fetha Nagast*, the main source of Ethiopian law, was translated into Italian only in 1899. See I. GUIDI (1899).

49. Baldissera supported the use of native bands, even going against Crispi, who was more doubtful about the credibility and reliability of their alliance. See comments in the diary of A. SALIMBENI (1956: 384).

50. Tewodros II and Yohannes IV themselves constructed their political career as *shifita* (RUBENSON 1966; GABRE SELLASSIE 1975).

51. The aim of this phenomenon, chiefly limited to the local nobility as a means of emerging, was also that of fighting for survival in the rural world where, especially during periods of crisis and famine, violent abuses of power emerged. See I. TADDIA (1986: 78-81), who reasons that the *sheftennat* developed into forms of rebellion that were quite new to the local tradition—such as peasant revolts—and were no longer linked with power struggles but generated by the “indigenous policy” adopted by Italy’s colonial authority. The phenomenon is dealt with more generally in D. CRUMMEY (1986b).

by *dajjach* Walda Mikael Solomon, *balambaras* Kafel and *dajjach* Debeb Araya, who understandably sought to exploit to their greatest possible advantage the presence of foreign powers, but were prepared nonetheless to do without them at the first useful opportunity, seeking the support first of the Egyptians and then of the Italians (Caulk 1984; Negash 1984: 315-325). In the latter case they were also encouraged by Italian policy which sought to create divisions to such an extent that it actually followed criteria that could truly be defined based on authentic duplicity.

There were approximately eight war bands in Italy's service<sup>52</sup> organised by native leaders who were certainly inspired by motivations and interests both of a personal and a distinctly mercenary nature. These interests were not unknown to the military commanders who, from Saletta's days onwards, employed these bands in the most brutal operations against the native population and, above all, as useful pawns in their plan to destabilise the local political establishment, and in particular that of the highlands, where most of the war band leaders came from (they were in fact indicated by the military command, and also in contemporary reports, as "Abyssinian exiles")<sup>53</sup>.

This explains, despite legitimate doubts and perplexities as to their loyalty, the ostentatious welcome they received from the military commanders, the gifts and promises and, above all, the pomp and ceremony with which they were greeted, which are indirectly confirmed in the photographic attention that was given them: a good part of the earliest Africanist photographs are devoted to the war band leaders, with almost as many photographs as those devoted to the Italian armed forces themselves. The photographers concentrated their attention on the two people who had been most prominent since the days of Dogali: *balambaras* Kafel and *kantiba* Adam Aga<sup>54</sup>, concerning whom the photographers seem to have operated on some kind of "exclusive rights" basis, since the former was photographed solely by the Nicotra Brothers, whilst Adam and his band, consisting of some 300 men in 1887<sup>55</sup>, appear instead to have been the photographic "monopoly" of

52. See *Annuario ufficiale delle Forze Armate del regno d'Italia*. Regio Esercito, vol. I, part. III, *Sunti storici ed organici delle armi, dei corpi e dei servizi*, (1938: 603).

53. In addition to the above-mentioned works by A. DEL BOCA, R. BATTAGLIA and M. SCARDIGLI, a brief excursus on the history of their use is given in N. LABANCA (1993: 233-238).

54. Neither fascinated nor afraid of the new *medium*, Debeb appears to be the only one never to have been photographed, despite the many requests. Not being able to control his image or the use made of it, he did however appear intent on selling it for a good price. Reports from that time said that he was "very willing to pose for half a day if necessary, but only if he was given a great sabre with a gold-studded handle". See *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, no. 54 of 25 Dec. 1887, p. 474.

55. See AUSSME, *Carteggio Eritrea*, b.56, f.13. It is believed to have been Adam—considered by Napoleone Corazzini of *La Tribuna* "one of the fiercest collaborationist chiefs" (DEL BOCA 1985: 437)—who eliminated, on behalf of the Italians, about 800 men of the Abyssinian bands considered to be rebels. See *Lo scandalo Livraghi* in DEL BOCA (1985) and BATTAGLIA (1958: 233-238).

Luigi Fiorillo. But it was Kafel, who in 1887 had already teamed up with the Italians in defence of Massawa, who played the starring role as the emblematic war band leader: his handover was one of the conditions demanded by *ras* Alula for the release of the Dogali hostages; and it was he who occupied Keren in the summer of 1888 on behalf of the Italians. No other personality, whether native or colonial, attracted so much photographic attention: ten photos were taken of him sitting on an *angareb*, protected by two “bodyguards” (one armed with a rifle and the other with a fly-whisk) (photo 9)<sup>56</sup>, or amongst his men, without missing the opportunity of emphasizing their “primitive” fierceness in a pose showing them armed not with their usual rifles (partly provided by the Italians), but with shields and spears and in the act of hurling the latter, thus providing a familiar and hence easily readable image which harked back to the most traditional stereotype of African “warriors”—savage, bellicose, armed with primitive weapons (and usually half-naked). For the occasion they were even required to take off their sandals (photo 10). A fierce but also treacherous savagery was thus also supposed to be reflected in their external appearance which the chronicles of the times did not fail to stress:

“[. . .] when one looks Barambaras [*sic*] in the face [Vico Mantegazza writes in a correspondent’s report dated 1887] ... one really can say that he has *le physique du rôle*, and his companions’ faces too, to a greater or lesser degree, are anything but reassuring. When they are seen together, no-one could fail to recognise them for what they are: a band of brigands”<sup>57</sup>.

A suspicion which also accompanied subsequent reports on the successes obtained by Kafel (the occupation of Keren and the defeat of Debeb), and which reflected the more general mistrust felt also by the military high command, which decided at the very time of Kafel’s expedition to Keren on behalf of the Italians to hold his family as hostages<sup>58</sup>. His family was

56. A second version of this image, in which there are two warriors behind Kafel, both armed with shield and lance, was published by *L’Illustrazione Italiana*, no. 1-2 of 1 Jan. 1888, p. 7 and by *L’Illustrazione popolare*, no. 5 of 29 Jan. 1888, p. 77.

57. See *L’Illustrazione Italiana*, no. 54 of Dec. 25<sup>th</sup> 1887, p. 474. A comment more or less copied from that of *L’Illustrazione popolare*, which nevertheless restored his image in its readers’ eyes, with a more reassuring final comment: “Barambaras and his team chiefs [. . .] are bandits or former bandits [. . .] Looking at Barambaras’ face it is hard if not impossible to see him as anything other than a ferocious bandit [... but] now they obey our orders” (no. 5 of 29 Jan. 1888, p. 66).

58. See AUSSME, *Carteggio Eritrea*, b.56, f.13. In 1889 Kafel himself, during the second re-occupation of Keren, carried out this time by Debeb with the aid of other bands, was accused of treason and detained in Assab, with a decision which went against the earlier one, according to a report in *L’Illustrazione Italiana* which ran: “It has been said that Barambaras Kafel should have been sent to Italy, probably to show him as a trophy of our African gains, but then the news arrived that he had been deported to Assab with his chiefs” (no. 24 of 16 June 1889, p. 378).

also immortalised by the Nicotra Brothers, who took a series of shots of his wife and daughter<sup>59</sup> who posed and were dressed in a manner deliberately intended to indicate high social status: they both wear jewellery and do not reveal their nudity to the camera in contrast with the image of women proposed by most African iconography. Instead, they wear a *shamma* bordered with red, as was the custom of women of high status in the highlands, and are portrayed in another photograph<sup>60</sup> surrounded by a small domestic “court” consisting of the wives and daughters of Kafel’s soldiers.

Despite their suspected unreliability, the Abyssinian war band leaders received, as we have seen, a great deal of photographic attention during the years in which they provided their useful “collaboration”, almost as though they were morally enhanced by their participation in the colonial system<sup>61</sup>. An operation which, from this standpoint, appears as the exact opposite of the one we have already examined in the case of photographs of local Muslim chiefs and notables, which instead, through the weight of their influence and reputation (true or presumed), symbolise exemplary cases of acceptance and recognition of the civilised values represented by the new Italian authority, which was reinforced by it, and which photography took care to emphasise in its constant effort to legitimise the colonial enterprise.

In this perspective, since the attention of early Africanist photography was channelled, directly or indirectly, in a predominantly celebratory direction with the primary aim of providing reassurance concerning the prestige, soundness and success of the Italian military force, it is possible to explain the scarce incidence in early photographic production of persons of more modest social rank and prominence; for example all those who, in various but always subordinate roles, helped to consolidate colonial power: interpreters, translators, and clerical employees in general<sup>62</sup>. The only images that have survived to our day are in fact two photos of Ghengio (no better identified), one of the first interpreters in the service of the Italians, portrayed in European dress and “Abyssinian” garb, taken in 1885 by Mauro Ledru who, during a brief stay in Massawa and probably anxious to record everything he could, photographed whatever he held to be of some significance in terms of Italy’s presence. In his *reportage* however, as in those of other photographers of the day, photographs of Africans play only a marginal

59. Both photographs were published in *L’Illustrazione Italiana*, no. 1-2, of 1 Jan. 1888, p. 14.

60. See photo by the Nicotra Brothers, “Otumlo. Wife and children of Barambarsa Kafel and some of his soldiers’ womenfolk”, 1888.

61. It was not by chance that they were the object of renewed interest in later years, especially in memoirs from the fascist era. See A. FERRARA (1937); L. VALLAURI (1939); L. FAZI (1968); F. VITALI & F. LISI (1979).

62. A lack of consideration which was indirectly confirmed in later years by political customs which, starting with the civil governorate of Ferdinando Martini, were marked by the “refusal of the colonial administration to accept, much less to encourage, the formation of a local elite” (TADDIA & CHELATI DIRAR 1997: 245-246).

role. Only four images in the earliest photographic production are devoted to portraits of natives, and these include the two photographs I have just mentioned. The same limited attention is also apparent in the case of collective portraits which were usually photographed as ethnic, urban or family groups: only four photographs show anonymous Massawa, Sudanese and Arkico's Dankals "types". The lack of interest in the local world was so extreme that not a single photograph records the working activities or art and handcrafts of the local population, and only one shows a religious event, "Muslims in solemn prayer at the end of Ramadam at Ras Mudur"<sup>63</sup>.

These figures in themselves reveal the still very low level of real knowledge of the continent, in spite of the new *medium*. This lack of attention cannot be explained only by the short time the photographers spent in the colony during the period considered here (only relatively short, however, as in any case these stays lasted several months)<sup>64</sup>.

In fact the earliest photographic production reveals the internal logic of a domination which in its initial phase was massively committed to correcting the image of unreadiness it had presented right from the start and which made it eager to seek revenge and armed vengeance along with the symbolic rehabilitation which photography undertook to provide.

Thus, in this logic, it is possible to understand the highly selective gaze that the first photographers turned on the world of the colonised, a world which—apart from those who entered, as victims or allies, into the orbit of a cohabitation that was still "armed"—was depicted in last analysis by images of women, all portraying "women carrying water", usually described with "voluptuous lips, enormous clear almond-shaped eyes, full figures, some very beautiful [... and who are] as a rule, all easily-had beauties" (De Cesare & Pulce Doria 1887: 20). This type of photograph remained common throughout the early colonial period (and far beyond it), showing over the years, along with technical improvements, an increasingly aesthetic and compositional refinement, progressively oriented towards more and more sophisticated and erotically appealing representations to meet the tastes of a distinctly western public. These images proved extremely successful and above all highly appealing, strengthening fantasies which induced, as Pietro Feltr (1935: 163) later said, "the sons of court ladies bearing letters of recommendation, some from H.R.H. the King, others from H.R.H. the Queen, from government ministers or even the Chairman of the Geographic Society" to press their way to Massawa.

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63. The identification and list of photographs mentioned here may be found in S. PALMA (1989b).

64. Despite the two hundred-plus photos taken by photographer Luigi Fiorillo, there are no images of Africans with the exception of fourteen photographs portraying an armed Abyssinian, native troops and band leaders under Italian control. Even more emblematic is the fact that "his" Africa is woman-less.

For a photographic approach interested far less in seeking knowledge and information than in building consensus, a significant feature in a fundamentally self-celebrating perspective was the prominence given to images of native troops, one of the few subjects focussed on by all the photographers concerned. No other figure can express so well the dominant power and strength of the white men's civilisation as the natives fighting *for* their colonial rulers.

In an age in which the prevailing image of the Negro is that of the "despicable savage", the enemy that journalism and the press, and particularly the illustrated weeklies, undertook to depict in extremely grim hues especially after the defeats and bloodshed suffered<sup>65</sup>, the figure of the native "soldier" became that of a tamed and partially "redeemed" savage, who was not given a new name but a new status and a chance of "rebirth" in the civilisation implanted together with colonial power. Where the methods and instruments of this "rebirth" were concerned, they were those deemed at the time best suited to impose a sense of discipline on populations considered lacking in it and to tame peoples who were savage by nature.

This is the "*curbasch* approach to education" efficaciously described by Vico Mantegazza for his readers:

"[. . .] Above all, it is only by distributing a fair day-to-day ration of whip-lashes that the colonel has won the authentic veneration of his soldiers, and the title of father by which they habitually refer to him. [. . .] nothing could have been achieved in terms of order and discipline if all the officers, from the colonel down, had not always wielded a *curbasch* (hippopotamus-skin whip). This is the only way they can make themselves understood. An artillery officer, a good friend of mine, rightly calls the *curbasch* his dictionary. It really is the most useful *conversation handbook* in these countries"<sup>66</sup>.

An educational method which appears to display all its effectiveness in disciplining the natives' wildness, transforming unruly primitive warriors into such good soldiers that the *askari* were soon claimed to be "the ideal type of soldier for colonial exploits" (Raimondo 1901: 90).

The other effective contrast on which the visual representation of the world of the colonised was founded and nurtured was in fact that between

65. The demonization of Abyssinians, and of Africans in general, is a constant in Italy's African history and *débauches*: from the pictures of bloodthirsty savages killing the explorers Gustavo Bianchi, Cesare Diana and Gherardo Monari (see *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, no. 5 of 1 Feb. 1885, p. 72: "The murder of G. Bianchi and his companions") to the man-eating galla of the Adua era (see *L'Illustrazione popolare*, no. 24 of 14 June 1896, p. 380: "A man-eating galla, of the same Galla race, who attacked Italians at Adua"). With regard to the largely unexplored field of literature see G. TOMASIELLO (1984).

66. See *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, no. 18 of 22 Apr. 1888, p. 305. Reference to a "conversation handbook" is not only warranted by the irony of the phrase. It actually pinpoints the failure of Italian attempts to achieve more standard forms of communication. The few Arab language courses for officers, initiated in the first period of occupation, were a failure.

a warrior and a soldier. The former was described and portrayed according to a precise stereotype which required him to be savage and ferocious, instinctive and feral, scantily clad, armed with primitive weapons; the latter<sup>67</sup> was well equipped, disciplined, clad in a uniform that gave him higher status, membership of a superior group and, in time, absolute loyalty to the Italians, to the point of sacrificing his very life. This was to become a legendary theme.

In this way what has otherwise and elsewhere been termed the “Gurkha syndrome”—meaning the form of ethnic-political adjustment to the new situation and new order introduced by colonialism which induces local populations to join the ranks of the victorious army (Enloe 1980)—was employed in the Italian context (and that of the colonial world in general) in a self-celebratory sense, as a means of spreading the image the coloniser had and wished to convey of himself, through presenting the contrast between barbarianism and civilization, between inferiority and superiority, as moral and political justification for colonial rule. Concerning this, the description given by an Italian officer of the armed men in Adam’s band is emblematic:

“I wanted to see them, these soldiers from primitive times, and even more to speak to them: [...] they have no common uniform; they dress in what they have and as they please. I glimpsed amongst them and on them rags and tatters of our military jackets and those of the Egyptians; red, black and white waistcoats. I saw some in women’s pants, others wearing a simple *futa*, once white now the colour of their black skin from wear: all in all, a pack of blacks, soldiers because they have a rifle, more naked than clothed, more filthy than clean, but all ragged in the truest sense of the word” (Calamai 1891: 36-37).

Although the use of native soldiers and the creation of a corps of *askari* was accompanied in the early years by many doubts and a great deal of mistrust regarding their loyalty and military aptitude<sup>68</sup>, photographic records document the salient moments of the history of this corps—from the days immediately following the landing in Massawa, prior to the dismantling of the condominium regime with Egypt<sup>69</sup>, to its transfer to Italian service<sup>70</sup>,

67. See photo by the Nicotra Brothers, “Massawa. Ibrahim Scheik, guide of the Boretti column”, 1887-1888.

68. Doubts fuelled by the conduct of native troops who fled during the fighting, at Dogali and Saganeiti for example, and fears that the revolt of Bahta Hagos in 1894 in particular helped to strengthen. Concerning doubts as to the warrior attributes of natives see for example the report of Major Boretti to General Genè in AUSSME, *Carteggio Eritrea*, b.45, f.4, *Circa la condotta degli irregolari nel combattimento di Dogali*. Concerning Italian caution in their relations with the askari, see N. LABANCA (1993 : 223 ff.).

69. See, for instance, the photo by Mauro Ledru: “Massawa. Baschi Bouzuk in Italy’s pay”, 1885, which shows officers of the Ottoman arm among the *bashi-buzuk*.

70. See photo by Luigi Fiorillo, “Moncullo. Pay being distributed to the Basci-Buzuk”, 1888.



PHOTO 9. Nicotra Brothers, "Barambaras Kafel", 1887-1888.



PHOTO 10. Nicotra Brothers, "Two of Barambaras Kafel's squad leaders", 1887-1888.

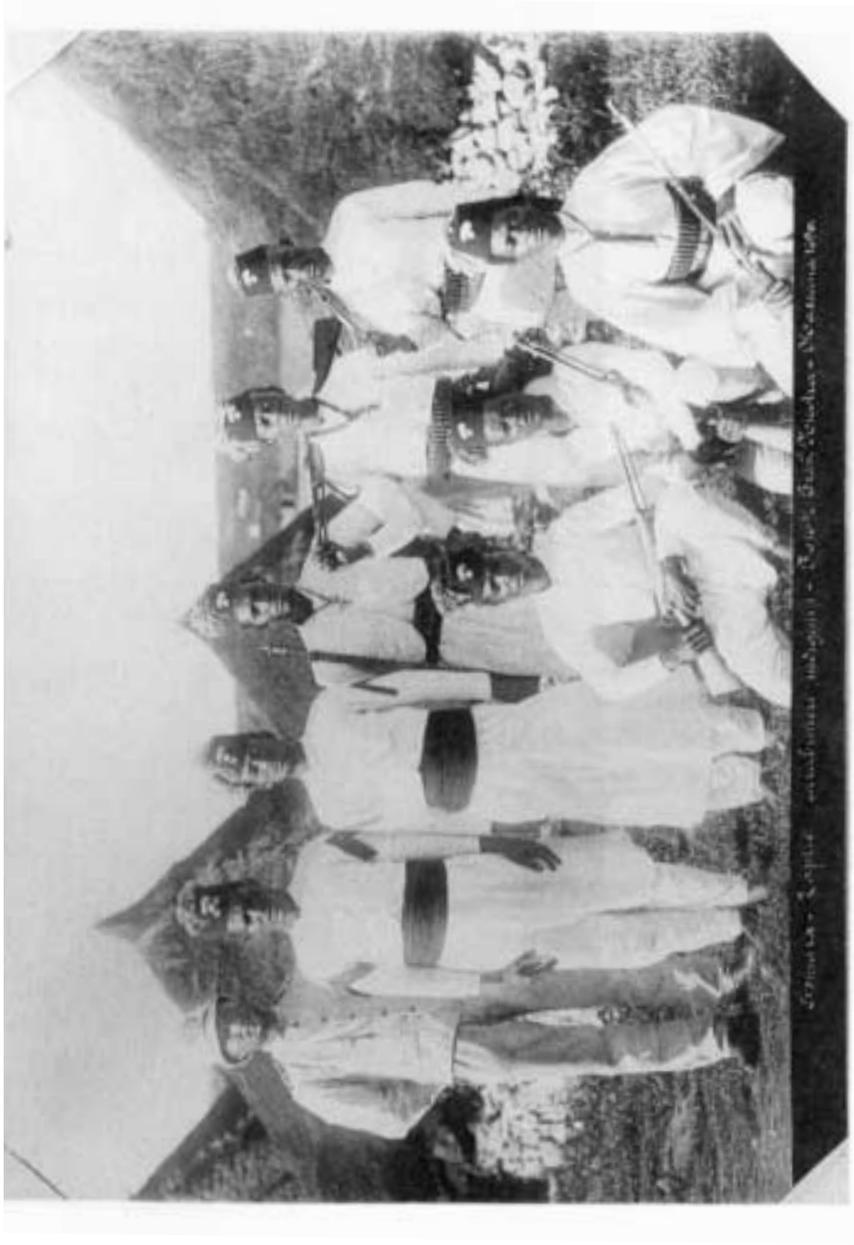


PHOTO 11. Francesco Nicotra, "Asmara. Zaptiè, native carabinieri", 1896.

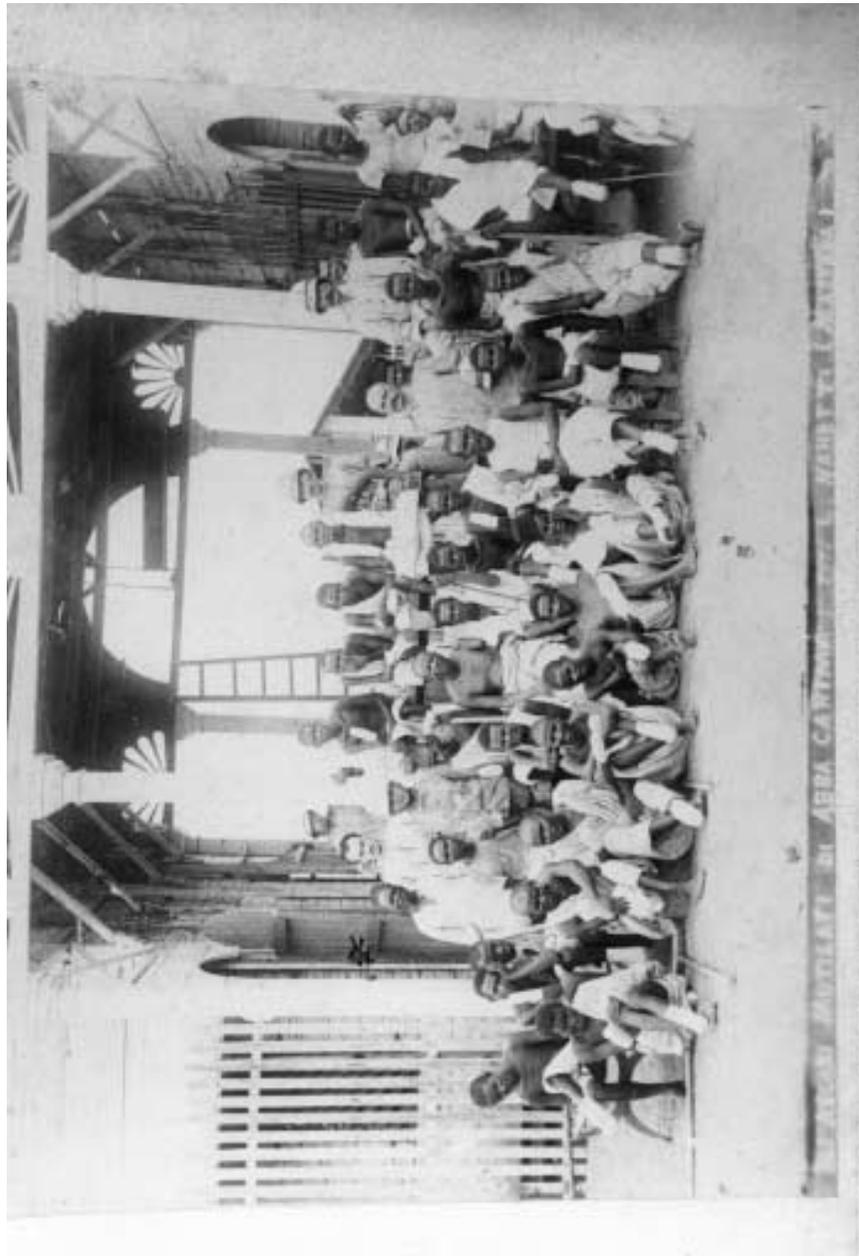


PHOTO 12. Luigi Naretti, "Massawa. The Askari mutilated by the Abyssinians at Abba Garima", 1896.

to the creation of the first regular native troops<sup>71</sup>, to one of the first groups of *zaptiè* or native *carabinieri* (photo 11), up to the celebration of the legendary loyalty consecrated by Adua with pictures of the disabled (photo 12). The Amba Alagi disaster and the subsequent catastrophic defeat at Adua are in fact handled by the earliest photographic production (along with the illustrated press and the colonial journalism of the times) by recourse both to stereotypes already well established in the national imagery and to the creation of new ones<sup>72</sup>. This is in fact the occasion of the first appearance of the figure of the loyal and courageous *askari* which was to be repeatedly summoned up, in connection with events that produced a destabilising effect on the country, to play a reassuring role concerning Italy's ability not only and not so much to dominate as to "elevate". From then on the *askari* became "subjugated soldiers, inspired to perform extraordinary feats by the valour of their leaders, [whom] they venerate like demigods"<sup>73</sup>, an image which Fascist rhetoric and propaganda made every effort to fix so firmly in the memory and perception of the Italian people<sup>74</sup> that it has survived unaltered to the present day.

\*

Called on to describe and document events but also to interpret them, photographs contribute, through what they show, hide or invent, to the construction of the imagery not only of a social group but of an entire age. Therefore they come to assume a prominence equal to that of the events to which they are called on to bear witness. Today they effectively make it possible to define the "mental landscape" that they helped to evoke, construct and reinforce in their day, thus creating, despite all their fragmentation and gaps, in a nonetheless effective and significant manner, the ideological scaffolding that accompanied and supported the establishment of Italian colonial power in Africa and guided relations between the rulers and the ruled.

71. The first group of *askari* was formed in October 1888, after the *débaclé* of the *basci-buzuk* at Saganeiti, seen almost as a second Dogali, where all the Italian officers died while the 800 irregulars fled, followed by Debeb's men who killed around three hundred of them (BATTAGLIA 1958: 342-345). See photo by Luigi Fiorillo, "Types of Basci-Buzuc and Buluc-Basci", 1888.

72. See S. PALMA (1996a: 15-20) in the special issue devoted to the centenary of the battle, and S. PALMA (1998: 491-500).

73. In *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, no. 51 of 22 Dec. 1895, p. 387.

74. One need only browse through the very extensive memoirs of the Fascist twenty-year period, bearing in mind especially the systems of propaganda, symbolic or otherwise, knowingly produced by the regime through a wide range of information methods (MIGNEMI 1985). One of these was the postcard, one of the favourite means of propaganda by virtue of its immediacy and the possibility of reaching vast portions of the population. See the series dedicated to native troops in N. DELLA VOLPE (1992).

The invention of photography, its diffusion and subsequent reproducibility in the press created a new mass visual culture able to produce *clichés* that could be almost unwittingly absorbed and interiorized; and to influence and pilot people's perception of Africa and what was happening there. The first "real" images sent back from Africa must have been greeted with the same sense of the extraordinary and probably with the same passionate excitement with which, in more recent times, we followed the images sent back from space at the time of the first moon landing, and certainly with no less trusting faith. As C. Lyman (1982: 29) incisively noted:

"Photographs were not viewed as metaphors of experience, but rather as sections of reality itself. If photographs showed gigantic trees and awe-inspiring mountains, then all the trees were gigantic and all the mountains awe-inspiring. When photographs depicted Indians as 'savages', Indians were confirmed as savages."

This is why identifying and decoding the way Africa has been viewed means, in the first place, understanding not only one of the most efficacious mechanisms but also the methods through which it was possible to create a specific perception of Africa on which the development of consensus in Italy in favour of the colonial option was founded. But it also means casting light on the ideological framework which, in colonial society, determined relations between the colonised and the colonisers.

The production of knowledge of African otherness and colonial reality is a process that has availed itself of many different surveys and perceptions, among which a far from secondary role has been played by those produced by early commercial photography. Identifying its themes and methods thus constitutes a first step towards the clarification of the origins and articulation of the *historical memory* they helped to create, which still survives, in many ways unchanged, to the present day.

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#### ABSTRACT

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the production of knowledge of African otherness and colonial reality was a process that availed itself of many different gazes and perceptions, amongst which a far from secondary role was played by photography. The essay identifies its themes and methods at the beginning of Italian colonial rule in Eritrea, as a first step towards clarification of the origins and articulation of the historical memory it helped to create, which still survives, in many ways unchanged, into the present days. Decoding the way Africa has been viewed means comprehending

the mechanism through which it was possible to create a specific perception of Africa and casting light on the ideological framework which, in colonial society, determined relations between the colonised and the colonisers.

#### RÉSUMÉ

*Le vu, le non vu, l'inventé. Trompeuses représentations de l'altérité africaine dans la construction d'une colonie. L'Érythrée 1885-1896.* — Au tournant du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, la production de connaissances sur l'altérité africaine et sur la réalité coloniale était le résultat de divers regards et perceptions, parmi lesquels la photographie a joué un rôle non négligeable. Cet article identifie les thèmes et méthodes de la photographie au début de l'autorité italienne en Érythrée comme une première étape vers la clarification des origines et de l'articulation de la mémoire historique qu'elle a contribué à créer, et qui perdure aujourd'hui, à bien des égards inchangée. Décoder la manière dont l'Afrique a été perçue signifie comprendre les mécanismes par lesquels il a été possible de créer une perception spécifique de l'Afrique, et mettre en lumière le cadre idéologique qui, dans la société coloniale, a déterminé les relations entre les colonisés et les colonisateurs.

Keywords/*Mots-clés*: Eritrea, colonial imagery, colonial photography, Italian colonialism, memory, African history/*Érythrée, imagerie coloniale, photographie coloniale, colonialisme italien, mémoire, histoire africaine.*