

# Africa e Mediterraneo

C U L T U R A E S O C I E T À

Encouraging Prospects for  
Good Relations between  
Eritrea and Ethiopia

Italy's Residual Legacy in the  
Horn of Africa as a Factor of  
Cooperation

La musica moderna in Etiopia e la  
sua diffusione a livello globale

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Mogadiscio, Lido. © Delegazione EU in Somalia.

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# Italy's Residual Legacy in the Horn of Africa as a Factor of Cooperation

An exploration of Italy's colonial venture and residual legacy in the Horn of Africa reveals the impact of its unstable domestic politics and inconsistent policies as factors for its "punching below its weight" in the affairs of its former colonies.

by Andebrhan Welde Giorgis

**E**stablishing a foothold in the Bay of Asseb in 1869, Italy proceeded to conquer Eritrea in 1890. Its attempt to expand the colony into Abyssinia was thwarted at Adwa in 1896 but succeeded in 1935. For a brief time prior to its defeat in 1941, Italy was the main colonial power in the Horn of Africa (HoA) with Eritrea, Abyssinia, and Italian and British Somaliland forming *Africa Orientale Italiana* (AOI). Only French Somaliland (Djibouti) remained outside its domain.

In the turbulent years ensuing Ethiopia's annexation of Eritrea (1962), Eritrea's 30-year war of liberation (1961-1991) and two wars between Ethiopia and Somalia (1964 and 1977-1978), Italy was conspicuous by its absence. As late as 1988, Italian officials believed that Eritrea would be unable to win independence by force of arms (Welde Giorgis 2014, p. 207).

Post-independence, Rome showed the will to reengage and provide Eritrea with substantial economic aid but lacked a genuine partner in Asmara to sustain it. The 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia disrupted cooperation and President Isaias Afewerki's erratic policies negated its efficacy after the war. Prime Minister (PM) Giuseppe Conte's visit to Ethiopia and Eritrea after the rapprochement signals Italy's desire to secure the peace and help with the development of the two countries.

Chronic interstate, intrastate and internecine conflicts have hindered economic development, obstructed social progress and undermined the wellbeing of the peoples of the HoA for over six decades. Misgovernment, democratic deficit, dysfunctional institutions and gross human rights violations mark its fragile States. Authoritarian regimes have caused immense human insecurity, mass population displacements and extreme poverty. Located at the nexus of the HoA and the Arabian Peninsula, Eritrea represents the worst situation *par excellence*.

There arose four new events in the HoA in 2018: the advent of PM Abiy Ahmed and political reform in Ethiopia (April);

the rapprochement and joint declaration of peace with Eritrea (July); the tripartite agreement with Eritrea and Somalia (September); and the lifting of UN sanctions on Eritrea (November). These events generated hope that the era of hostility and conflict would end and heal the wounds of a devastating war to boost regional peace, security and stability and create a conducive climate for political and economic cooperation in the region.

## Italian Conquest and Colonial Policy

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 turned the Red Sea into a major maritime route linking Europe with the Middle East and the Far East and gave the Red Sea a new strategic significance, fuelling Anglo-French rivalry for its control. Brit-



1896 Photo of amputated Eritrean Askari captured at Adwa in a hospital in Massawa.

ain dominated its northern gateway through its Egyptian Protectorate and occupied Aden while France set a foothold in Obock. Britain and France faced each other across the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb at the entrance to the Red Sea. Given Franco-British rivalry for control of the Red Sea commercial lanes, Britain prodded Italy to occupy Eritrea to avert the threat of French expansion from Djibouti (Trevaskis 1960, p. 8).

Italian colonisation followed the arrival of Catholic missionaries in Asseb and Massawa. An Italian missionary implored Italy to establish a presence «on the vital sea route» and arranged the purchase of the Bay of Asseb by the Rubattino Shipping Company from the local Sultan for 8,100 Maria Theresa dollars in 1869 (Finaldi 2002, p. 81-82).

Father Sapeto fixed similar deals with the Sultan of Rahaita in 1879 and 1880 to include the areas adjacent to Asseb Bay, and the Company transferred the enlarged territory to the Italian State in 1882 (Longrigg 1945, pp. 112-113). Having thus initiated its colonial venture in Africa, Italy concluded a peace and friendship treaty with Sultan Mohamed Hanfire of Asseb on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 1883.

Italy occupied Asseb and Beilul in January 1885, seized Massawa from Egypt in early February 1885 (Longrigg 1945, p. 113) and the Berlin Act recognised Italy's claim to Eritrea on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February 1885 (Almedom 2006, p. 106). Italian expansion inland met stiff resistance and suffered disastrous setbacks, notably at Dogali, 30 km inland, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January 1887. An Eritrean and Tigrayan force commanded by Raesi Alula ambushed and routed an Italian battalion sent to reinforce the embattled fort at Saati: 430 officers, men and their commander, Col. De Cristoforis, were killed and 110 wounded (Caulk 1986).

It took the Italian army another four years of sporadic fighting and heavy losses to traverse the narrow coastal plains, scale the steep escarpment of the Central Plateau and subdue the entire territory. Despite initial setbacks, the Italian army managed to advance inland and conquer the central plateau and the western lowlands by the end of 1889. Italy declared Eritrea its *primo genito* colony on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1890, just 5 years after the Berlin Conference and 20 years after the capture of Rome on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September 1870, marking Italy's unification.

Superior weapons and organisation enabled the Italian army to crush the resistance and colonise Eritrea. As sporadic resistance continued, Italy set out to fortify its grip through ruthless suppression of any opposition: incarcerated, on the notorious prison Island of Nakura in the Dahlak Archipelago, executed, exiled to Italy, or vanished hundreds of patriots who opposed or defied colonial rule (Kidane 2001). The resistance and revolts, while heroic, were localised, uncoordinated and routinely crushed. The last challenge to its colonial project was led by *Dejazmach* Bahta Hagos. Declaring that «the Italians curse us, seize our land; I want to free you... let us drive the Italians out and be our own masters» (Caulk 1986), he led a force of 1,600 men to avenge the «rights trampled on by the

Italians» (Pankhurst 1952). His death at the Battle of Halay on the 19<sup>th</sup> of December 1894 marked the defeat of the revolt and organised armed opposition to Italian rule in Eritrea.

Using Eritrea as a springboard and using Eritrean *askari* (soldiers), Italy invaded Ethiopia across the Mereb-Belesa-Muna divide. Disastrous military defeats at Emba Alaje (December 1895) and Adwa (March 1896) thwarted its attempt to extend its colony. Its defeat at Adwa marked the second major victory of an African army over a European army since Hannibal's epic victory over the Roman Republic at Cannae in 216 BC. The first was the Sudanese Mahdist army's victory over Gen. Gordon's British army in Khartoum in January 1885.

The Adwa victory shocked Europe, caused the fall of the Italian government and helped secure, along with the rivalry among Britain, France and Italy in the HoA, Ethiopia's independence and the grudging recognition of its sovereignty by Italy and the major European powers.

There was, however, a grossly inhumane act that blotted the victory at Adwa: Ethiopia's brutal amputation of the right hand and the left leg of 800 Eritrean *askari* taken prisoner while treating 3,000 Italian prisoners relatively well (Wylde 1901, p. 213).

Eritrean *askari* made up 28 percent of the Italian forces and 40 percent of the casualties at Adwa. Thousands of Eritrean *askari* fought at Adwa and in the conquests of Somalia, Libya, and Ethiopia and, with the alignment of Italy with the Axis Powers in WWII, in British Somaliland and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, from the mid-1890s to 1941. About 150,000 *askari* served in the Italian colonial army during the 1935-41 occupation of Ethiopia (Schroeder 2007), with 60,000 deployed, and 5,000 killed in the initial invasion alone (Nicolle 1997). Around 60,000 fought and built infrastructure during the Italian invasion of Libya in 1911-1932. The death toll of Eritrean and Ethiopian *askari* in the Battle of Keren in the spring of 1941 was 9,000 (Rovighi 1995). Tens of thousands of Eritrean *askari* perished in Italy's military campaigns in Africa.

The colonial regime uprooted young Eritrean men from their home villages and forcibly drafted them. In the 1930s, a staggering 40 per cent of able-bodied Eritrean males were enrolled in the Italian colonial army.

While they fought valiantly in Italy's wars, the *askari* faced racial discrimination and harsh treatment, particularly after the rise of Mussolini's fascist regime in 1922. Often forced to take «the lead during the attacks» and fighting with «great valour» in battle, discrimination denied the *askari* positions of responsibility and barred them from rising to commissioned officers (Rovighi 1995, p. 435). They endured daily brutal treatment, physical assault and verbal abuse because of their skin colour. Colonial repression and the colour bar were, however, a double-edged sword. The common experience of ill treatment and humiliation based on race and colour stirred a kind of «solidarity of the oppressed», cemented an awareness of unity in suffering and sharpened a distinctive shared national identity as Eritreans.

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**While they fought valiantly in Italy's wars, the askari faced racial discrimination and harsh treatment, particularly after the rise of Mussolini's fascist regime in 1922.**  
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### The Making of a Settler Colony

*When the Missionaries arrived, the Africans had the Land and the Missionaries had the Bible. They taught how to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them, they had the Land and we had the Bible.*

(Jomo Kenyatta)

As elsewhere in Africa, missionaries foreran colonial conquest in Eritrea with land as the prime target of Italy's project of a settler colony. Italian settlement in Eritrea was pursued as a solution to the perennial population pressure in southern Italy and Sicily. With its temperate climate, Eritrea was intended to serve as an extension of Italy in Africa and its fertile land expropriated to create space for Italian settlers. Like the British in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia or the Boers in South Africa, Italy set out to create a settler colony, declaring nearly half of the territory of Eritrea *terra demaniale* by laws issued in 1909 and 1923. Large tracts of land were expropriated in total disregard of customary land rights to settle poor farmers from Italy.

Whether privately or communally owned, land in Eritrea belongs to the people. Eritreans have a deep attachment to ancestral land as an inalienable birth right, a basis of identity and a source of livelihood. The people thus bitterly resisted dispossession, as in the case of Zimbabwe, Kenya and South Africa. Even the Italian Governor, F. Martini, complained about the land grab for use by settlers in violation of traditional land rights in his 1913 annual report:

In my previous report I did not conceal the serious consequences of the hasty appropriations of land by the State and particularly of those lands which were taken without any account being taken of local customary rights. Native opinion cannot understand how the Government is able to appropriate lands which have always been private property (Trevaskis 1960, p. 54).

The colonial State owned all land by 1926, pushed immigration into the colony and disenfranchised Eritreans without compensation. Settler numbers grew from 3,949 in 1905 to 76,000 in 1939, then 10.3 percent of the total Eritrean population of 740,000 (Podestà 2007). As land constituted the source of livelihood for Eritreans, dispossession forced much of the population into wage labour or military conscription. The influx of Italian settlers included farmers, architects, engineers and artisans. They drew up master plans, designed structures and employed Eritrean labour to build modern transport and communication facilities; they constructed laboratories, hotels, quarries, mines and irrigation projects; and they established shoe and textile factories, modern farms, and food and beverage processing plants. Experimenting with modernist avant-garde styles banned in Italy under fascism, they invested Asmara with some of the finest designs creating

«one of the highest concentrations of Modern architecture in the world» (Denison et. al. 2003, p.16).

Between 1936 and 1941, Italy's Fascist rulers transformed Eritrea into one of the most industrialized, modern colonies in Africa. [...] Asmara became an *Art Deco* laboratory during the 1930s for designs that seemed, well, just too out there for mainland Italy. Rationalism, *Novecento*, neo-Classicism, neo-Baroque and monumentalism are among the varied avant-garde styles played with here. The result today is hundreds of aging, sherbet-coloured buildings (Gettleman 2008).

Italian engineering and Eritrean labour built Asmara, aka *Piccola Roma*, for its Italianate façade (Santoianni 200), in six years as the jewel in the crown of AOI. It signified Mussolini's dream of building a second Roman Empire and symbolised Rome's "civilising mission" in Africa. Asmara became a model of a well-planned modern city with impressive architecture: beautiful villas, pedestrian pavements, *shibakha* and palm tree-lined boulevards, paved streets, piazzas, boutiques, bars, restaurants and cafés. Sadly, these enduring relics of the Italian colonial era have today lost their lustre and shine to the attrition of time, weather and neglect.

Italy built a modern transport infrastructure: road and railway network linking Massawa to Asmara, Keren, Agordat, Tesseney and Bisha, a living testament to the marvels and feat of Italian engineering and Eritrean labour. Massawa harbour and its facilities were modernised. A 75-km long aerial tramway, *La Teleferica Massaua-Asmara*, was built that «in one leap more than doubled the commercial traffic between the sea and the interior» (Ceretti and Tanfani 1937, p.4). Yet, Italy fell short of effecting significant transformation to Eritrea's economy, society or institutions due to lack of sufficient financial resources compared to its European counterparts in Africa.

Even then, the «racist and exploitative» nature of the colonial system that treated

«Africans as inferior to Europeans»(Davidson 1989, p.5) ensured the exclusion of Eritreans from the benefits of modernisation. In the 1930s, the colonial regime introduced a system of racial apartheid and enacted laws to segregate the races, grant special privileges to Italian settlers, espouse white superiority, and discriminate against Eritreans and other Africans in the colony. The modern amenities in Asmara were located in the Italian quarters and strictly reserved for the exclusive service of the 53,000 Italian residents out of the capital's total population of 98,000 (1939 *Italian Census on Eritrea*).

Confined to the crowded, sprawling slums with narrow dirty alleys in the "native" quarters without proper health and sanitary services, Eritreans had no access to tap water, private toilet or sewerage facilities. These poor districts in the capital continue to languish in a worse state of neglect,

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**A distinctive national identity evolved and nascent Eritrean nationalism emerged out of a collective experience of racialised colonial rule.**  
**The stern system of racial discrimination under Mussolini's fascist regime operated to accelerate and cement the process.**

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Freight transport in Massaua, Eritrea. Creative Commons

want, and decay today. That the entire city suffers from recurrent and prolonged power outages and water stoppages has worsened the situation for the slum residents.

### Postcolonial Retreat

In the aftermath of WWII, Italy's role in the affairs of the HoA waned rapidly, due to the aftereffects of its alliance with the Axis Powers; preoccupation with the dispute over Trieste; constant domestic political instability; and shifting stance during the post war Peace Treaty negotiations and UN General Assembly debates on the future of its ex-colonies, notably Eritrea. Italy initially supported independence for Eritrea; co-sponsored the Bevin-Sforza plan to partition Eritrea between Ethiopia and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan; and supported Eritrea's federation with Ethiopia.

After the disposal of Eritrea, Italy virtually abandoned its first colony. The fragmentation and polarisation of Italian domestic politics during the Cold War meant short-lived unstable coalition governments with erratic policies. The current Conte II cabinet is the 66<sup>th</sup> in the 75 years since the formation of the Italian Republic in 1945. From the 1960s, Italy pursued uneven policies and sent mixed signals as it tried to navigate around three unfolding regional realities: Eritrea's war of independence; Somalia's recurrent territorial conflict with Ethiopia; and complicated relations with Ethiopia.

Unable to extend military support to the rival parties, it focused on providing aid to ensure market and financial access for Italian export and maintain its historical links with Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia. Italy's efforts to dissociate from

the fascist era, closely woven with its colonial past, diluted awareness and discourse of its legacy in contemporary Italian politics and culture. There has also been a notable interruption of cultural and scholarly links with its former colonies, unlike the case with Britain and France.

While absent during the tumultuous years of conflict (1961-1991), Italy actively engaged with Eritrea and delivered 140 billion lire of an allocated 210 billion lire of financial and technical aid between 1992-1998 (del Boca 2003, p. 29). Post-rapprochement, PM Conte's visit signals Italy's renewed interest in promoting regional peace conducive to viable economic cooperation.

### Residual Legacy as a Factor of Cooperation

Italy carved up and forged Eritrea. It created a centralised State and built modern structures. It combined Italian architectural and engineering know-how and Eritrean labour to introduce modern urban design and planning and transport infrastructure. It introduced formal education, albeit limited to the fourth grade, and basic vocational skills. These awakened new social forces that helped create a new *Eritrean-ness* with an awareness of a common condition of oppression and a shared identity that evolved to transcend ethnic, religious or regional affiliations. A distinctive national identity evolved and nascent Eritrean nationalism emerged out of a collective experience of racialised colonial rule. The stern system of racial discrimination under Mussolini's fascist regime operated to accelerate and cement the process.

Moreover, Italian rule left a legacy of small-scale family owned



OMO factory, Asmara. Photo by Stefano Manservigi.

industrial, commercial and service enterprises that thrived until nationalised by the *Derg*. It also left a human bridge of tens of thousands of mixed Italo-Eritreans and family relations. Post decolonisation population movements, including growing irregular migration since the 2000s, that have created large Eritrean, Ethiopian and Somali diaspora populations in Italy, represent another link to foster cooperation and investment. The States in the HoA maintain cordial relations with Italy. Italy's initiation of the Rabat Process that shaped the 2014 *Rome Declaration* and led to the Khartoum Process, the Joint Valletta Action Plan and the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa has reduced the number of African migrants reaching "Fortress Europe" but failed to address the root causes, challenges and effects of irregular migration or alleviate the immense suffering of thousands of Eritreans and others trapped in Libya. A viable solution lies in securing peace, democratic governance and peace dividend in the home countries. The HoA is a strategic region with a large population, vast resources and great potential. Eritrea is strategically located and richly endowed with agricultural, mineral, marine, fossil fuel and hydrothermal resources. *Eritrea Vision 2030*, a macroeconomic policy framework for democratic transition and rapid, sustainable and inclusive growth of an essentially green economy, provides an excellent opportunity for Italian investment in Eritrea and access to larger markets and resources in the regional hinterland. Italy's residual historical, economic, social and cultural imprint constitutes an enduring legacy that can serve as a factor of renewed cooperation, trade and investment with Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia. Its proactive engagement could help reconfigure the regional dynamic for and in an emergent democratic Eritrea, a stable democratic Ethiopia, a stable democratic Somalia and a revitalised Intergovernmental Authority on

Development (IGAD). Given a conducive climate, there exists a potential to deploy Italian expertise, technology and knowhow and mobilise public and private investment to build human capital, modernise the national transport and communication networks and interconnect them to promote rapid and sustainable development in a context of regional integration.

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## L'eredità residua dell'Italia nel Corno d'Africa come fattore di cooperazione

**L'**articolo esamina l'avventura coloniale dell'Italia nel Corno d'Africa a partire dalle prime acquisizioni commerciali di terreno da parte di compagnie italiane in Eritrea nel 1869, fino alla sconfitta nel 1941, offrendo una panoramica storica sui rapporti tra l'Italia e le popolazioni assoggettate, e prosegue evidenziando l'assenza dell'Italia nel dopoguerra, in particolare in seguito all'annessione dell'Eritrea da parte dell'Etiopia, per poi arrivare fino alla pace tra Etiopia ed Eritrea del 2018, all'attuale rapporto politico e diplomatico.

La colonia italiana in Eritrea fu costruita con l'espropriazione delle terre degli individui o delle comunità, senza compensazioni economiche, togliendo agli Eritrei la principale fonte di sostentamento. Se il dominio italiano fece sviluppare un tessuto sociale, economico e culturale fiorente, con moderne infrastrutture, industrie e un'importante trasformazione urbanistica dell'Asmara, la sistemazione del razzismo e della repressione da parte dello Stato e dei coloni italiani escluse gli Eritrei da questa modernizzazione. Ci furono alcune ricadute inaspettate e fondamentali per le società colonizzate: in Eritrea, ad esempio, la pressione coloniale compatò i vaghi sentimenti di appartenenza degli abitanti in un nuovo senso di identità nazionale.

Al momento della decolonizzazione, che coincise con la fine della Seconda Guerra mondiale, il ruolo dell'Italia negli affari dei territori d'oltremare ormai indipendenti si assottigliò rapidamente. Alle prese con gli strascichi dell'alleanza con le potenze dell'Asse, la disputa sul possesso delle terre triestine, l'instabilità nella politica interna e la costante fluttuazione tra posizioni diverse nei trattati sul futuro delle ex colonie, Roma abbandonò di fatto il Corno d'Africa. E nei decenni successivi i governi italiani faticarono a relazionarsi con importanti eventi regionali come la guerra d'indipendenza eritrea e i conflitti territoriali ricorrenti tra Somalia ed Etiopia. Gli sforzi dell'Italia si sono da allora concentrati nel mantenere aperti dei canali commerciali tramite una politica di aiuti finanziari, ma – anche a causa dello sforzo di dissociarsi dall'eredità fascista – i legami culturali, accademici, sociali e di memoria con le ex colonie si sono andati riducendo sempre di più.

Rimane però un "ponte umano" formato da migliaia di famiglie miste e, soprattutto nel caso dell'Eritrea, uno Stato formato in parte durante il colonialismo italiano, nel suo sistema economico e produttivo come nel suo impianto istituzionale.

Questi legami, in un momento di distensione e rinnovato dialogo internazionale come quello attuale, possono essere la base su cui costruire un rapporto di cooperazione e azioni di investimento in una regione di strategico interesse per l'Italia e che beneficerebbe enormemente di uno sviluppo socio-economico rapido e sostenibile in un contesto di integrazione regionale.