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Dangerous LIAISONS
Colonial Concubinage in Eritrea, 1890S1941
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Dangerous LIAISONS

To think that little plaything is my wife!
From *Madama Butterfly* by G. Puccini/G. Giacosa
—L. Illica

Mogli e buoi dei paesi tuoi.
“Wives and oxen [must be] of your own country.”
—Italian popular saying

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Introduction

During the era of Italian colonialism in Eritrea (1890–1941),¹ a large number of Italian men had African concubines. We do not know precisely how many because reliable figures are difficult to find, but colonial sources overwhelmingly suggest that mixed-race unions were very common. As well, the Fascists' vociferous campaign in the late 1930s against mixed-race unions and miscegenation (*métissage*) indirectly attests to the magnitude of the size and social impact of this phenomenon. Another piece of indirect evidence is the large number of mixed-race children born at the time.² Decades later, a sizable Italo-Eritrean community still forms an important component of the Eritrean social landscape.

Generally speaking, Italian men categorized their Eritrean sexual partners as either “*sciarmutte*” or “*madame*.”³ *Sciarmutta* was an Italianization of the Arabic term “*sharmāta*” and stood for prostitute; the term *madama* applied to concubines who associated with Italian men, although Italian men and their madame did not always cohabit. In a broader sense, the term seems to have referred to an African woman in an exclusive relationship with an Italian man. By Italian standards the *madamato* or *madamismo* (i.e., the relationship with a madama) had no legal sanction; Italians considered it something different from marriage, questioning whether or not an African woman could ever become a “real wife.” Italians debated the issue throughout the colonial period, but for most the answer was a definite “No.”

My research focuses on the history of the madamato. In choosing to use Italian terminology to define my object of study, I am aware that these labels and the notions they

¹ The Italian penetration of Eritrea started in 1869, when the Rubattino Shipping Company acquired the port of Assab. In 1882 the Italian government took over Assab; in 1885 it occupied Massawa and started heading inland. On January 1, 1890, the Italian government formally established the colony, naming it Eritrea. For a general history of the first period of Italian colonialism in the Horn, see Battaglia, *La prima guerra d’Africa*; Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*; Labanca, *In marcia verso Adua*.

² In 1947 the Italo-Eritrean Association, an organization established after the collapse of Italian rule in east Africa, claimed to represent approximately 15,000 mixed-race persons and about 17,000 Eritrean women who were living with Italians or were mothers of mixed-race children (Four Power Commission of Investigation for the Former Italian Colonies, *Report on Eritrea*, London, 22 June 1948, app. 111, *Memorandum of the Italo-Eritrean Association*, Asmara, 10 December 1947 [British Museum, Dept. of Printed Books, UNP 211, P53/1353]). Gino Cerbella, Italian assistant consul, estimated the number of mixed-race people to be 15,500 in 1959 (Cerbella, *Eritrea 1959*).

³ According to a 1957 Italian dictionary, “madama” is an “honorific or respectful title, given to a quality woman; but [it] is a Gallicism, and we rather prefer ‘signora,’ ‘dama,’ ‘donna’ [lady, lady of rank, woman]” (*Novissimo dizionario della lingua italiana. Seconda edizione* [Milan: Ceschina, 1957]). The term probably implied, at least at the beginning, a certain ironical contempt. It became popularly used in both everyday parlance and scholarly literature.

signify bear the imprint of the Italian marriage and racial ideologies of the time. Of course my suggestion that language is not a neutral medium is nothing new; however, in this case the term “*madamato*” is a useful analytical tool—not in spite of, but precisely because of its bias and opacity. Italian men devised and used this term only in Italy’s colonies in the Horn because they needed a name for those relationships they considered to be different from their relationships with Italian women. Exactly what this difference was they really were not able to say. Scholars and judges grappled with the question—especially at the time of the racial laws—but answers proved to be extraordinarily elusive.

Use of the term “*madamato*” also illustrates how defining and categorizing different mating patterns can be a problematic and ideologically loaded enterprise. Examination of the *madamato*’s history exposes the ideological nature of any clear-cut divisions between different categories of relationships (prostitution, concubinage, lovers, marriage, etc.). Sex, emotional attachment, exploitation, violence, money exchange, mutual support, etc. all combined in the *madamato*, but by no means were they peculiar to this kind of union. To varying degrees and in myriad forms, these elements coexisted in many mating patterns, marriage included.

The sexual ideology of the Italian men concerned in my research could be summarized in terms of two “ideal” polar opposites: at one pole was their idea of a strictly sexual relationship, involving only bodily contact and physiological functions; at the other pole was marriage, a social institution and the only appropriate context for affection and sentiments. Ideally, black women were for sex and white women for sentiments. But reality contradicted this model: the *madamato* exceeded the boundaries of a “sex-as-a-physiological-function” relationship. This is one reason the Fascist government outlawed it.

Mixed-race unions, in Italian as well as other colonies, were never merely private affairs between individuals. Interracial relations were a key political issue and the subject of careful regulation by colonial authorities; the regulations sometimes explicitly addressed concubinage. In its earliest stages a mixed-race union was usually left alone or even encouraged; but as it deepened through later stages it was increasingly discouraged and persecuted. Referring to different colonial contexts, anthropologist Ann Stoler points out that

concubinage was a domestic arrangement based on sexual service and gender inequalities which “worked” as long as European identity and supremacy was clear. When either was thought to be vulnerable, in jeopardy, or less than convincing, at the turn of the century and increasingly through the 1920s, colonial elites responded by clarifying the cultural criteria of privilege and the moral premises of their unity. Structured sex in the politically safe context of prostitution, and where

possible in the more desirable context of marriage between “full-blooded” Europeans, replaced concubinage.⁴

The pattern Stoler outlines accurately depicts Italian colonial policy in Eritrea, although the “clarification” the Italian colonial elites would try to impose came later, more suddenly, and in violence. On the heels of the Italo-Ethiopian war (1935–36) and the establishment of the Italian empire in *Africa Orientale Italiana* (Italian Eastern Africa or AOI), the Italian Fascist regime adopted a blatantly racist policy. The racial legislation began in 1937 with a decree outlawing “relations of a conjugal nature” between Italian men and African women. In other words, the madamato became a crime.

Though declared illegal, the madamato certainly did not disappear. It might have changed in nature and/or practice, but we cannot be sure. Much evidence suggests that the number of cases of madamato actually rose after it was banned (largely because more Italians were living in Eritrea in the late 1930s than were before)—reminding us that the gap between governmental policies and actual behaviors can be considerable. Thus, to understand the madamato’s history it is necessary to unpack received notions of “the colonizer” and analyze colonial society in its different articulations.

For instance, the attitudes of different authorities (metropolitan vs. colonial, military vs. civil, religious vs. state, etc.) and different categories of people certainly merit a closer look. Did military officers and rank-and-filers, high officials and low-rank employees share similar ideologies and practices? In the Italian colonies—probably more than in any other European colony—colonists came from both the middle and lower classes.⁵ At the time of the Italo-Ethiopian war, more than 50,000 unemployed men went to Eritrea to work in street construction and in other public works.⁶ We do not know if the Italian men who had a madama typically belonged to one particular social class. Apparently, servicemen viewed a madama as a luxury only commanding officers could afford, and rank-and-filers had to resort

⁴ Stoler, “Carnal Knowledge,” 60–61.

⁵ On Italians in the Horn and their social background, see Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa orientale*; and Le Houérou, *L'épopée*. For research specifically addressing the experience of Italian subalterns in the colony (mostly as servicemen), see Dore, “Guerra d’Etiopia,” 475–87; Tassis Torriani, “‘A te caro libro,’” 63–74; Taddia, *La memoria*; Labanca, “Coscritti in colonia,” 95; Guerrini, “Esotismo,” 117–23; and idem, “Chissà quante stramberie,” 71–88.

⁶ Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa orientale*, 296; Longrigg, *Short History of Eritrea*, 140.

to prostitutes.⁷ I found nothing to suggest that having a madama was a function of class among civilians; in fact, some evidence supports that socioeconomic status and the probability of associating with madame were inversely related.⁸

It was probable that the Italian men who had a madama came from very different economic, social, and cultural backgrounds. Their relationships and the meanings they attached to them might have varied accordingly. One can reasonably expect, for instance, that a mason from rural Sicily and a colonial official from Milan had fairly different ideas about marriage, or sexual and racial relations, as well as different life strategies.

Also, to speak of “colonized women” or “Eritrean women” as a single entity is a gross generalization. Eritrea was home to nine different ethnic groups,⁹ who spoke nine different languages¹⁰ and practiced various religions including Christianity (predominant in the highlands), Islam (in the lowlands), Judaism, and various local religions. Agriculture supported the population in the highlands, while in the lowlands pastoralism and agropastoralism were common. Marriage customs varied widely from one group to another, and differences also existed within each group. Furthermore, some of the madame could have come from neighboring countries, particularly from Tigray. It is therefore very difficult to characterize the madame’s background and, consequently, to understand the causes underlying their relationships with Italian men, their ideas of marriage, and their conceptions of the madamato. How Eritrean madame defined Italian men and their relationships with them is unknown, and we lack evidence to show whether they used “madame” or a different term to define themselves.

Indisputably, colonialism was an essential precondition for the madamato. However, here I should caution that colonial power, exoticism, racism, and sexism are necessary but not sufficient to understand the madamato. To different degrees sexual relations and concubinage between colonizer and colonized could and did occur in any and all colonial

⁷ Labanca, *In marcia verso Adua*, 219.

⁸ See for instance the research by Le Houérou on the Italian *insabbiati* (literally, “covered with sand,” figuratively “gone native”) in Ethiopia. She interviewed some 30 Italian men still living in Addis Ababa; many of her interviewees were from the lower classes, and they cited their relationship with an African woman as a reason for their permanence in the country. Le Houérou, however, did not explore the nature of the relationships between these men and their African partners (Le Houérou, *L’épopée*).

⁹ Afar, Bilen, Hadareb, Kunama, Nara, Rashaida, Saho, Tigre, and Tigrinya.

¹⁰ Afar, Bilen, To Bedawi, Kunama, Nara, Arabic, Saho, Tigre, and Tigrinya.

settings; colonialism per se does not tell us why the madamato was so commonly practiced in Eritrea.

A review of the Italian settlement policies of the time yields some useful leads. The Italian population in the colony was always rather low, and of that number women were a tiny minority. In 1905, after 15 years of Italian colonization, only 2,333 Italians lived in Eritrea, 834 soldiers included; Italian women numbered 482.¹¹ The number of Italians in the colony grew during the following decades, and the male-to-female ratio eventually grew more balanced. A census in 1931 indicated the presence of 4,188 Italians in Eritrea, 2,471 men and 1,717 women. But counting only unmarried people aged 15 and over—1,076 men, 398 women—it is obvious that the sex ratio remained quite uneven. From 1935 on, the Italian population skyrocketed, peaking at 75,000 in 1940 (59,000 men and 16,000 women).¹² All these figures show how a high percentage of the Italian men seeking a relationship—whether strictly sexual or sentimental—with a woman in Eritrea might be apt to turn to Eritrean women.¹³

However, as Stoler observes, “demographics were not the bedrock of social relations from which all else followed.”¹⁴ The dearth of Italian women in the colony accounts for the demand for Eritrean women, but it does not explain why the demand was successfully met or how specific forms of the madamato came into being. What combination of necessity, hope for economic improvement, physical coercion, personal choice, social pressure, sentiment, or ambition motivated some Eritrean women to become madame? What did they think of it? How did it fit into their personal life strategies? One can also wonder if and in what ways their families were involved: did a woman become a madama in obedience to or in spite of her family’s will? Was it because these women lacked a family to arrange a marriage?

¹¹ Martini, *Relazione sulla Colonia Eritrea*, 46.

¹² In 1931 the Italian population included approximately 500 soldiers. No proper census took place after 1931; thus the population figures supplied for 1940 must be considered as purely indicative (Castellano, “La popolazione italiana,” 530–40). The Eritrean population in 1947 was around 850,000 (Four Power Commission, *Report on Eritrea*).

¹³ The sex ratio in the period under examination varied from 3.8:1 in 1905, to 1.4:1 in 1931 (the figure becomes 2.7:1 if one considers only unmarried people aged over 15), to 3.6:1 in 1940.

¹⁴ Stoler, “Carnal Knowledge,” 64.

Were they madame because their family support was inadequate or because they had to support their families?¹⁵

Much evidence suggests that for many Eritrean women, to become a madama was to experience a form of oppression in which various incarnations of exploitation based on gender, racial, and class inequalities combined. However, as Frederick Cooper recently pointed out, “recognition of the much greater power of the Europeans in the colonial encounter does not negate the importance of African agency in determining the shape the encounter took.”¹⁶ The madamato was a set of relationships grounded in the material basis of colonialism and shaped by colonial discourse,¹⁷ but it was lived out by concrete individuals: by men who participated in very different ways in the colonial enterprise and by women who were not merely passive victims.

My paper builds upon these methodological assumptions but does not provide final answers to the complex set of questions I have suggested so far. Rather, my aim is to lay out pertinent elements leading to new questions for further research. This is the first step of a work in progress; more archival research and personal interviews, both in Italy and in Eritrea, will be required to advance our understanding of the madamato.

Because this present research is based almost exclusively upon published sources, it substantially benefits from research by other scholars on the madamato¹⁸ and more generally on colonial Eritrea. However, the existing research on Italian colonialism¹⁹ on the one hand,

¹⁵ Luise White points out that it is a mistake to assume that women who become prostitutes are “victims of weak families”; they might actually be “victims of strong ones.” The same might be true for the madame (White, *Comforts of Home*, 9).

¹⁶ Cooper, “Conflict and Connection,” 1529.

¹⁷ For a thorough analysis of Italian juridical and anthropological discourse on interracial sexual relations, refer to Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi*.

¹⁸ The madamato has already been briefly described in studies of the general history of Italian colonialism (e.g., by Angelo Del Boca and Alberto Sbacchi) and of the history of colonial racial policies (by Richard Pankhurst in 1969 and Luigi Goglia in 1988). Only Gabriella Campassi has written an article entirely devoted to the issue. She considers the madamato a paradigm for the relations of colonizer and colonized; her analysis concentrates on the exoticism/eroticism nexus in Italian colonialism. In all these studies the focus is on Italian colonial policies and on the attitudes of Italian men; the agency of Eritrean women has been totally ignored or else considered impossible to assess (Campassi, “Il madamato in Africa Orientale,” 219–60).

¹⁹ Historians have frequently complained about the scarcity of research on the social history of Italian colonialism. For years archival sources have been barely accessible to scholars, and this has been a major hindrance to the development of historical studies. For instance, see Rochat, “Colonialismo,” 107–20; Triulzi, “Italian Colonialism and Ethiopia,” 237–43; and *Gli studi africanistici in Italia* (in particular R. H. Rainero, 95–110;

and on Eritrean history²⁰ on the other leaves vast territories unexplored, particularly where social history is concerned. An obvious gap is the almost complete lack of research on Eritrean women's history.²¹ My paper clearly reflects the difficulties of working in largely uninvestigated territory. True to the nature of a working paper, it shares the preliminary results of my efforts to date, and these results which are necessarily tentative and temporary. I will be very grateful for critical remarks.

Rochat, 111–17); Taddia, *La memoria*; and Labanca, *In marcia verso Adua*, 3–33.

²⁰ For a general survey of recent historiography on Eritrea (prior to Eritrean independence), see Crummey, "Society, State, and Nationality," 103–19. Two consequences of 30 years of war in Eritrea are that field work was rendered virtually impossible and the attention of many scholars was directed to political history.

²¹ To my knowledge, the only exception is Araia Tseggai, "Eritrean Women and Italian Soldiers," 7–12. Research on women's participation in the war of Eritrean liberation also offers scattered information on women's history. For instance, see Wilson, *Women and the Eritrean Revolution*. Some information can also be derived from general studies on Ethiopian women's history, such as Tsehai Berhane Sellassie's *In search of Ethiopian women* and Pankhurst's "The History of Prostitution in Ethiopia."

1 • African women in the Italian colonial imagination

Another colonist, who was coming back from Keren, was very impressed by the provoking figures of Bilen girls. These girls are considered, and correctly, the most beautiful of the country, they are aware of that, and therefore ask at least 100 Maria Therese Thalers for their virginity. The colonist told me he was extremely surprised that in a conquered country, like Eritrea, it was not allowed to the white ruler to possess these girls with violence, or at least a much smaller price was not imposed.²²

For the most part, European men were wont to assume that colonial conquest entitled them to sexual rewards, as this letter from 1911 brutally exemplifies. The conquest of women, as Stoler suggests, was not only a “metaphor for colonial domination” but also part of its substance.²³

During the colonial period the popular press and colonial literature amply supplied the European male imagination with erotic images of African women. Photographs and postcards (see plates 1–4) were powerful vehicles for exciting male fantasies.²⁴ During the Italo-Ethiopian war, such imagery was part of the specialized propaganda required to motivate hundreds of thousands of Italian men to wage war in a distant land.²⁵ One of the most popular songs in Italy at the time was “*Faccetta nera*” — “Little Black Face” — which included the refrain:

²² Letter to consul Piacentini, 1 July 1911, published in Goglia and Grassi, *Il colonialismo italiano*, 136. The author of the letter was not given; the original is in the Archivio storico diplomatico del Ministero per gli affari esteri, Archivio Eritrea, 11/8/79.

²³ Stoler, “Carnal Knowledge,” 54–55.

²⁴ See for instance Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*. For the Italian case, see Campassi, “Uomo bianco, donna nera,” 54–62; and Goglia, *Colonialismo e fotografia: il caso italiano*.

²⁵ Alberto Sbacchi reports that 358,000 Italian soldiers participated in the Italo-Ethiopian war in 1936 (Sbacchi, *Ethiopia under Mussolini*, 178). On Fascist colonial propaganda at the time of the invasion of Ethiopia, see Mignemi, ed., *Immagine Coordinata*.

Little black face, beautiful Abyssinian woman, wait and hope, because the time is close, when we will be with you, and we will bring you a new king and a new *duce*.²⁶

²⁶ “Facetta nera, bella abissina/aspetta e spera che già l’ora s’avvicina/quando saremo vicino a te/noi ti daremo un nuovo duce e un nuovo re.” Rochat, *Il colonialismo italiano*, 170-71.



• PLATE 1. A "BLACK VENUS"
Postcard. Circa 1930.



• PLATE 2. "BILLION GIRL."
Postcard. Circa 1936.
Published by A. Booth, Asmara.

PLATES 3-4. POSTCARDS FOR THE ITALIAN TROOPS DURING THE ITALO-ETHIOPIAN WAR.
DESIGNED BY THE PAINTER ENRICO DE SETA.



• CIVILIZATION:

"HEY, TAITÙ, WE'RE STARTING TO GET CIVILIZED: THIS ONE CAME OUT WHITE."



• AT THE POST OFFICE:

"I'D LIKE TO SEND THIS SOUVENIR OF EAST AFRICA TO A FRIEND OF MINE."

The propaganda successfully penetrated the collective imagination of the masses. A soldier, Dino Colombara, wrote in his diary in 1935 that he used to run away from the barracks into the nearby village “and have fun with *ebony little faces*”; and he further noted that these women “stank like hell.”²⁷ Placing erotic images side by side with negative stereotypes was neither rare nor contradictory. Savagery and sensuality were represented as complements to each other in Italian images of African women. These themes recurred in colonial literature and were echoed, as far as we can infer from the scarce sources available, in writings by subalterns.²⁸

African women, radically depersonalized, thus became an open space upon which racial and erotic stereotypes could be freely created. Much colonial literature often depicted the African woman as, on the one hand, a beast of burden exploited by a lazy man, and on the other hand as a highly desirable sexual plaything, an untamed animal dominated by sensuality.

A similar pattern, as Francesco Surdich observes, characterized colonial images of Africa itself. By exalting the beauty of the continent and simultaneously offering a barbarous caricature of its indigenous populations, colonial images of Africa stimulated a desire for conquest while seeming to provide the moral justification for it. At the same time, a deep misunderstanding of African customs engendered the idea that all Africans enjoyed unlimited sexual freedom; thus, the women of Africa were both passionate and available.²⁹

Authors who depicted the passions of African women in hyperbolic terms struck a responsive chord in many bourgeois European males. European middle- and upper-class women had been conditioned to fit a desexualized stereotype in which they “represented the emotions, the Hearth, or sometimes the Soul, seat of morality and tenderness,” as Leonore Davidoff suggests. By contrast, African and lower-class European women were thought to be closer to nature; they “supposedly allowed their sensuality to spill out over their total lives.”³⁰ Thus, the sexual gratification of white middle-class men was negotiated in between these two

²⁷ Emphasis added. The diary of serviceman Edoardo (Dino) Colombara, workman from Novara, is published in Mignemi, *Immagine coordinata*, 224.

²⁸ On images of African women in Italian colonial literature, see Surdich, “La donna dell’Africa Orientale,” 193–220. We can learn something about the Italian sailors’ gaze vis-à-vis African women from Guerrini, “‘Chissà quante stramberie,’” 122.

²⁹ Surdich, “La donna dell’Africa Orientale.”

³⁰ Davidoff, “Class and Gender,” 19–21.

self-created polarities: if white middle-class women were for the soul, then black women were for the body; if the former had delicate sentiments, the latter had instinct; the former represented beauty, the latter sensuality; the former was for love and family, the latter for passion. The “black Venus” promised a triumph of the senses over—but still compatible with and useful to—strict European moral codes. An explicit example is offered by Renato Paoli, an Italian journalist who visited Eritrea in 1906. He wrote that he felt in the colony “the lack of the fair sex ... I mean women, not females. There are females, black, exuberant and generous; but women are missing, and *women can be only white*.”³¹ However, the white women he missed never arrived—at least there were never enough to meet the need. So who were these “females”?

2 • Clues to the identity of the *madame*

As my introduction forewarned, we lack a satisfactory answer to the question of who these “females” were. That is, we do not know the identity of the madame in terms of their ethnic origins, social background, age, marital status, etc. In this section I summarize information—mostly from colonial sources—about marriage customs and the division of labor by gender in Eritrea. This data will lead to some working hypotheses about the Eritrean women who were likely to become madame and the madame’s ideas about marriage and conjugal relations.

According to the colonial official and prolific ethnographer Alberto Pollera—who, by the way, lived with a madama—Italian men’s concubines were generally “Abyssinian Christians.” Abyssinian Muslims, he supposed, viewed a difference of religion as a major obstacle to mixed-race unions.³² Although Pollera’s explanation is unsatisfactory—given that Italian men found African concubines even in entirely Muslim countries³³—his claim that most madame were “Abyssinian Christians” is probably valid, and religious compatibility is

³¹ Paoli, *Nella colonia Eritrea*, 106. Emphasis added.

³² Pollera, *La donna in Etiopia*, 73.

³³ There is no research on the issue, but several clues signal that concubinage was practiced, albeit probably less frequently, in Libya and Somalia. In 1932, for instance, General Rodolfo Graziani, vice-governor of Cyrenaica, sent officers a circular letter expressing his intention to eradicate the “plague” of “*mabruchismo*,” a local equivalent for madamato (Goglia and Grassi, *Il colonialismo italiano*, 354). The practice of the madamato in Somalia is mentioned, for instance, in Perricone Viola, *Ricordi somali*, 203–8.

likely to have contributed to the prevalence of Christians among the *madame*. Another reason might be simply that most Italians lived in Asmara, where Tigrinya Christians formed the largest portion of the local population.

Pollera's definition of "Abyssinian Christians" would have included the inhabitants of both Ethiopian Amhara and Tigray as well as Eritrean Tigrinya. Nothing in the colonial sources suggests that the *madame* were other than Eritreans. However, there are indications that a certain number of *madame* might have come from Tigray.³⁴ For instance, when Italo-Eritreans living in Italy applied for Eritrean citizenship after Eritrean independence, there were some whose mothers were from Tigray.³⁵ It is not easy to assess to what degree osmosis took place decades ago between the populations living on one side or another of the Mareb, the river that marked the border between Eritrea and Tigray.³⁶ Certainly some migration from Tigray to Eritrea coincided with the great famine of 1888–92;³⁷ it may have subsequently resurged during the years 1936–41 when Eritrea's administrative borders were enlarged to include Tigray, and Asmara's population boomed. It is important to keep in mind that since most Italians lived in towns—especially Asmara but also Massawa, Keren, and others—the *madamato* was by and large an urban phenomenon, and that urbanization in Eritrea was a consequence of colonialism;³⁸ therefore, the *madame* were necessarily urban newcomers, having migrated from both distant and nearby rural areas.

³⁴ Some of the Eritreans I interviewed shared this belief. However, the notion that the *madame* were not from Eritrea might have arisen from a desire to defend the reputation of Eritrean women; thus, reports that many *madame* came from Tigray effectively comprise a hypothesis that needs further testing while simultaneously making the compelling suggestion that the *madame* bore a social stigma.

³⁵ Mr. Haile, cultural attaché of the Eritrean Embassy in Rome, personal communication with author, July 1995. Unfortunately, he did not have statistical data on the issue, but I am grateful to have had his help.

³⁶ The territory of Eritrea was historically known as Mareb Mellash (Across the Mareb), an expression which "served the Court and officers of Ethiopia to differentiate it from the rest of the Tigrinya-speaking northern areas of the kingdom" (Longrigg, *Short History of Eritrea*, 9).

³⁷ Speaking of that period, James T. Bent writes: "Asmara is quite the most prosperous place in Abyssinia in these later days. Crowds of pauper fugitives come in here from Abyssinia proper in search of work" (Bent, *Sacred City*). Pankhurst reports a sizable migration from certain northern Ethiopian provinces to Eritrea (Pankhurst, "Great Ethiopian Famine," 277–80).

³⁸ "Eritrea in 1890 had no towns whatsoever, save the shabby jumble of huts that was Massawa. Fifty years later Asmara [had] 40,000 Europeans and 60,000 or more native inhabitants" (Longrigg, *Short History of Eritrea*, 138). Since different sources give different totals, it is advisable to regard such population estimates as suggestive at best. According to Castellano, for instance, Asmara's population in 1940 was 53,000 (Castellano, "La popolazione italiana").

Ethnographic sources describe the Tigrinya as a patriarchal society organized along rigid gender-role divisions and strict customary norms. Their rigidity might have been exaggerated by ethnographers who, assuming that Africans' lives were governed by tradition, looked for "rules" to include in their codes of customary laws. Customary norms in Eritrea traditionally underwent periodic revision within each community, but we do not know much about how the codification of customary norms by colonial authorities interacted with local social dynamics.³⁹

Scholars have emphasized the centrality of marriage in Tigrinya social organization. Historian Irma Taddia, for instance, points out that only married men could get a share of communal land.⁴⁰ "There is an element of fiction in the description of any customs, a wish to read order into diversity," as Landeg White observes.⁴¹ Such an "element of fiction" is apparent in efforts by some ethnographers to divide local marriage customs into a fixed number of types; but just how many is accurate? Two, three, five?

At the turn of the century, Conti Rossini, by far the most prominent ethnographer of Eritrea, singled out two basic forms of marriage among the Tigrinya:

The first one is based on a true solemn pact among two kin groups; the second one is an agreement that states that the woman will go to live with the man under a given payment and, usually, for a given time. A further development of the first one is the religious marriage. But, in general, the religious component is not within the marriage contract, and it is not necessary at all in order to have a perfectly valid and legal union.⁴²

Other scholars, however, viewed religious and civil marriage as two different institutions, as Eritreans do today. Both were considered legitimate by the church, but the former—with holy communion—was indissoluble and generally practiced only by the clergy.⁴³

³⁹ On colonial ethnographers' codification of Tigrinya customary norms, see Kemink, "Tegreñña Customary Law Codes," 56–72. On the historical creation of "customary law" and the way it affected women in particular, see Chanock, "Making Customary Law," 53–67.

⁴⁰ Taddia, *L'Eritrea colonia*, 187.

⁴¹ White, *Magomero*, 101.

⁴² Conti Rossini, *Principi di diritto*, 189.

⁴³ See for instance Masucci, "L'unione," 29. Francesco da Offejo went so far as to identify five forms of marriage (Francesco da Offejo, *Dall'Eritrea*, 90–91). In contrast Ruffillo Perini viewed religious marriage as a simple variant of the solemn marriage as Conti Rossini did; Perini, however, singled out two other forms of "marriage or rather conjugal union": "the conjugal union per contract [*seb dummòz*]" and "concubinage *cingherèt*]" (Perini, *Di qua*

According to Conti Rossini, the solemn marriage or *māraqal kidan* in Tigrinya—a marriage for pact—“must be considered the true marriage (the other one, I would say, is a sort of simple conjugal union).”⁴⁴ The complex set of norms that ruled such a marriage is irrelevant here, but I will summarize selected elements with a view to understanding the background of the madame.

Generally, a marriage for pact was arranged by the fathers (mothers had no authority in the matter) while the designated bride and groom—especially the bride—were still children. According to Pollera, fathers arranged marriages when their children “were usually not younger than seven years old.” The bride went to live permanently with her groom when she was 12, although her marriage would have been finalized earlier and she would have lived with her spouse for some time before. (An extremely early marriage age is still reported in recent times.⁴⁵)

Among the Tigrinya the bride brought a dowry, but Muslims required the groom to pay a bride-price.⁴⁶ This difference might help to account for the high percentage of Christians among the madame. For a young Tigrinya woman, especially if her family could not afford a dowry, the madamato might have been an appealing alternative. Muslims, assuming that most Italian men were not keen to pay a bride-price, were likely to suffer an economic loss when a daughter became a madama.

Before a marriage took place, the genealogy of the future son- or daughter-in-law was the subject of much scrutiny by both families involved. Many Eritreans (not just the Tigrinya) assigned extraordinary value to the “purity of blood”—i.e., the assurance that a prospective spouse’s ancestry did not include slaves, minstrels, or outcastes such as blacksmiths and goldsmiths—categories often charged with witchcraft.⁴⁷ “For the slave girl

dal Marèb). On marriage in modern Eritrea see Paulos Tzadua, “Le diverse forme del matrimonio,” 5–30. Some information can also be derived from the literature on women’s participation in the liberation war, such as Silkin, “‘Women Can Only Be Free,’” 147–63; and Wilson, *Women and the Eritrean Revolution*.

⁴⁴ Conti Rossini, *Principi di diritto*, 190.

⁴⁵ “Normally a girl is betrothed between the ages of 8 and 14 years old, and she is married around the ages of 13, 14, or 15. Her husband may be a few years older and can even be of her father’s generation” (Silkin, “‘Women Can Only Be Free,’” 149).

⁴⁶ The EPLF has tried during the last 20 years to eradicate these practices, which tells us they were still in use. See for instance the National Union of Eritrean Women’s 1980 publication *Women and Revolution in Eritrea*.

⁴⁷ “Purity of blood” remains a concern in recent times. See Wilson, *Women and the Eritrean Revolution*, 123.

there is no hope of marriage,” noted Pollera, while music players, blacksmiths, and goldsmiths could marry only among their own people.⁴⁸

Another apparently important precondition for a daughter’s marriage was her virginity. “It is well known,” Giovanni Masucci stated, “that virginity is highly considered in Ethiopia.”⁴⁹ The extremely early marriage age in Eritrea, for example, has been explained as a consequence of the absolute requirement for girls to remain virgins until marriage.⁵⁰

From this brief description of marriage for pact, it can be deduced that such strict rules were likely to marginalize certain women, some of whom might welcome the mating opportunities offered by Italians. Predictably, non-virgin girls, women of “impure blood,” and women without a dowry constituted a pool of viable candidates for becoming madame.

Except for religious marriages, in Eritrea divorce was possible and seemed to be quite commonplace. But here it should be noted that since divorce did not exist in Italy, Italians might have been inclined to exaggerate its occurrence in the colonies. If she consented, a divorced woman could remarry; quite often the request for remarriage was addressed directly to her.⁵¹ It is difficult to know the frequency of remarriage because colonial and contemporary sources are contradictory in this regard.⁵² For instance, according to Letenkiel Tewolde, an Eritrean woman I interviewed who was about 20 years old in 1935, remarriage was difficult, particularly if a woman already had more than two children; men did not want to support such burdens. However, Letenkiel divorced and remarried even though she already had four children. “But I had a very strong will,” she explained. “In the countryside,” she said, “remarriage was also arranged by families simply because women did not have the opportunity to meet men outside the family. But in the towns women had the opportunity to meet men in drinking houses. Only the lucky ones remarried, and many divorced women

⁴⁸ Pollera, *La donna in Etiopia*, 34–35. According to Conti Rossini, most goldsmiths were Jews (Conti Rossini, *Principi di diritto*, 93).

⁴⁹ Masucci, “L’unione,” 38. Opinion on this point, however, was not unanimous. Pollera, for instance argued that “in most of Christian Abyssinia virginity is not taken into consideration,” while it was considered very important by Muslims (Pollera, *La donna in Etiopia*, 15).

⁵⁰ Tsehai Berhane Sellassie, *In Search of Ethiopian Women*, 13. As a whole, research on modern Eritrea greatly emphasized this issue. See for instance Cowan, “Women in Eritrea,” 79.

⁵¹ Conti Rossini, *Principi di diritto*, 245.

⁵² For example, see Wilson, *Women and the Eritrean Revolution*, 125–26.

ended up becoming prostitutes.”⁵³ It is reasonable to expect that others ended up becoming madame.

In the early 1960s Wolfgang Weissleder studied the high incidence of divorce and remarriage among the Amhara. He pointed out that both marriage and divorce were driven by strategic choices aimed at maximizing access to the labor force and economic assets.⁵⁴ Conflict over land, as Donald Crummey points out in his study of family and property among the Amhara nobility, was an inherent feature of family dynamics. However, “conflict,” Crummey argues, “does not preclude the family’s also being the locus of affection and nurture.”⁵⁵ It is hard to say to what extent these considerations regarding the Amhara might also have applied to the Tigrinya since the two groups had different land tenure systems and other significant dissimilarities. Amhara women, for instance, had access to land property and inheritance to a degree unknown to Tigrinya women.⁵⁶ In any case, these observations certainly suggest important lines of research. If both the Tigrinya and the Amhara conceptualized marriage and divorce as strategic tools for maximizing access to economic resources, unions with Italian men might also be understood in these terms. At the same time, one should keep in mind that to conceptualize marriage in these terms was not to reduce it to an arrangement devoid of affection.

The second kind of marriage identified by Conti Rossini is of special importance for my research. Known as marriage for pay or “*dāmòz*,” in it “a woman commits herself, directly or through her family, to live in conjugal union with a man, for a given length of time, and for the payment of a given sum.”⁵⁷ At this point Conti Rossini noted that superficial observers—especially Catholic missionaries—mistook such unions for concubinage:⁵⁸ “It is

⁵³ Letenkiel Tewelde et al, 13 May 1995.

⁵⁴ Weissleder, “Amhara Marriage,” 67–85.

⁵⁵ Crummey, “Family and Property,” 217.

⁵⁶ On land tenure systems among the Amhara, see: Levine, *Wax & Gold*; Hoben, *Land Tenure among the Amhara*; Crummey, “Abissinian Feudalism,” 115–38; and idem, “Family and Property.” On land tenure systems among the Tigrinya, see Taddia, *L’Eritrea colonia*

⁵⁷ Conti Rossini, *Principi di diritto*, 249. The term is also spelled “*demoz*” or “*damoz*”

⁵⁸ Catholic missionary Francesco da Offejo, for instance, described the marriage for *dāmòz* as a union of Muslim origin, particularly common among soldiers: “they take a woman with them almost like a servant, they pay her something per month, they get rid of her when they want and they call her *ghered*, which means, in fact, servant” (Francesco da Offejo, *Dall’Eritrea*, 90–91).

a mistake. I deem it to be the continuation or, at least, the equivalent of an extremely ancient Semitic [temporary] marriage.”⁵⁹

According to Conti Rossini, a comprehensive set of rules regulated such unions. The amount of payment was usually fixed in advance; the man always had to provide for the woman’s living expenses; the woman had to live with the man, take care of him and his house, and be loyal to him. Children of such marriages were considered fully legitimate, and their fathers had to pay their expenses. Children usually lived with their mothers for the first three years, but subsequently custody had to be granted to the father. Even if the father refused custody, he was required to continue to provide support. Customary laws also prescribed special norms regarding the length of the marriage and the possibility of its early dissolution. It was also possible for the union to develop into a solemn marriage. Guarantees for the respect of the agreements and the customary laws were also provided.⁶⁰

The colonial sources unanimously confirm that marriages of this kind were common. Dāmòz marriage still occurs today among the Amhara, with features similar to those described by Conti Rossini for the Tigrinya. “It is not a prestigious form of marriage,” Weissleder argues, “and is usually entered into by poor women who bring no land or wealth to the union.” He further points out that “rather than being the loosest form of marriage, it tends to give maximum protection to the economic interests of the woman.”⁶¹ Also, recent ethnographies of Indarta, a district in south Tigray, describe a form of temporary marriage similar to a dāmòz union⁶² using different nomenclature.

There is no mention of dāmòz marriage, however, in recent literature on women and marriage in Eritrea. Several hypotheses might explain the discrepancies between colonial and contemporary accounts concerning dāmòz marriage (or temporary marriage by any name) in Eritrea. One or both sets of authors may simply be wrong, or Italian men may have exaggerated the prevalence of dāmòz marriage since to them it seemed to offer built-in justification for their behavior; that is, they felt at liberty to claim that the madamoto was

⁵⁹ Conti Rossini, *Principi di diritto*, 249. Shi’i Muslims have a form of temporary marriage which is commonly practiced in modern Iran and elsewhere. See Haeri, *Law of Desire*.

⁶⁰ Conti Rossini, *Principi di diritto*, 249–55.

⁶¹ Weissleder, “Amhara Marriage,” 74. See also Laketch Dirasse, *Commoditization*, 5, 8–9.

⁶² Haile Michael Misginna talks of “*gcrdcnna*,” from “*gäräd*,” the term for servant (Haile Michael Misginna, “Betrothal and marriage customs,” 49), while Dan Bauer refers to “temporary marriages by *q’usar*, literally by ‘accounting’” (Bauer, *Household and Society in Ethiopia*, 136).

perfectly acceptable because Eritrean society approved of *dämòz* marriage. But *dämòz* marriage may have been customary only among limited groups of Eritreans or only in neighboring regions. Still another hypothesis could be that contemporary researchers may have failed to report this kind of marriage, or they may have mistaken it for concubinage.

It is also possible that *dämòz* marriage was commonly practiced during the colonial period, but that thereafter it progressively disappeared due to a trend in the last century toward more standardized forms of marriage. Already in 1942 Masucci argued that “the original institution of *dämòz*, in its historical and juridical evolution, is degenerating, and is getting closer and closer to concubinage. ... Even the natives I interviewed mistook *dämòz* for concubinage.”⁶³ Certain particulars of the colonial experience in Eritrea—especially the experience of the *madamato*—could have played a decisive role in the demise of *dämòz* marriage. Italians systematically violated the customs that informed such marriages, meaning that thousands of Eritrean women and their children were left without economic support. Neither the colonial authorities nor the local communities that traditionally enforced *dämòz*’s provisions were able to prevent this from happening. Thus, *dämòz* marriage could have permanently degenerated into either unregulated concubinage—a considerably more disadvantaged arrangement for women—or prostitution.

Both colonial literature and recent studies report that labor in the region was rigidly divided along gender lines. These divisions were (and are) different from ethnic group to ethnic group. Traditionally, for example, “among the Tigrinya, men weave and women do not, while among the Rashida the reverse is true.”⁶⁴ Among the Tigrinya a customary interdiction against women’s plowing was enforced,⁶⁵ and women were usually excluded from owning land. Different customs applied, but in general it seems that women could buy land but keep it only temporarily, and they could not inherit it.⁶⁶

The inability to own land and the customary prohibition against plowing deprived women of two fundamental means of survival in an agricultural society. As a result it was not uncommon for a woman to spend most of her life ensconced in male-headed households: first

⁶³ Masucci further explained that the same term, “*garad*” (from the verb *garrada*—to hire a woman, a servant, a slave), was used for both a concubine and a temporary wife in *dämòz* marriage (Masucci, “L’unione,” 33–34).

⁶⁴ Reentemeesters, “Women and Development Planning,” 73.

⁶⁵ Taddia, *L’Eritrea colonia*, 155. Customary interdictions against women performing certain tasks still persist today (Reentemeesters, “Eritrea,” 6).

⁶⁶ Taddia, *L’Eritrea colonia*, 117.

she lived with her father, then with her husband, and, in the case of divorce or widowhood, with either her father or a brother. Among her few alternatives to living by agriculture were performing domestic service, running a small beer house, or resorting to prostitution.

Interestingly, studies about Amhara and Tigray show that strict enforcement of traditional gender roles made life difficult not only for female-headed households, but also for monosexual households in general.⁶⁷ “The prohibition against males functioning in the domestic field,” Dan Bauer argues, “means that a household may not operate, even for a short time, without a woman old enough to prepare food.” Particularly useful to understanding the rationale behind some *dämòz* unions is Bauer’s subsequent observation that “in recognition of this problem, temporary marriage ... may be arranged.”⁶⁸

To a significant degree the living conditions of Eritrean women during the period of the highest diffusion of the *madamoto* (i.e., from 1935 on) were also shaped by the fact that Eritrea was used as a reservoir of soldiers for the Italian colonial army. Tekeste Negash has convincingly shown that even though Italian colonialism failed in many respects—including, but not limited to, its settlement policy and its exploitation of Eritrea as a source of raw material and as a market for Italian products—it was very successful at turning Eritrea into a source of colonial soldiers or *askari*. From 1907 on, Italy recruited Eritrean *askari* for its colonial wars in Somalia, Libya, and, to a larger extent, in Ethiopia. Over 60,000 Eritrean *askari* were deployed in the Italo-Ethiopian war, depriving the Eritrean economy of 40% of its male labor force (see table 1). “During the 1935–41 period,” Tekeste Negash remarked, “from the few studies available on the economy of the peasantry, recruitment to the colonial army appeared to have caused the virtual collapse of the subsistence economy.”⁶⁹ He did not articulate his analysis in gendered terms, but one can infer that this drainage of men from the countryside and the consequent agricultural collapse must have deleteriously affected women’s lives. Presumably, some of the Eritrean women who were compelled to seek alternative means of self-support suddenly found themselves in a position to meet the Italians’ demand for prostitutes, domestic servants, and madame. To be sure, more than a few women were able to live on their husband’s pay; in fact, *askari*’s wives tended to depend

⁶⁷ According to Weissleder, the rigid division of labor compelled people to marry because “neither men nor women can carry a household independently from each other”; actually, from the works of Levine, Hoben, and especially Bauer, we can learn that monosexual households did exist (Weissleder, “Amhara Marriage,” 72; Levine, *Wax & Gold*; Hoben, *Land Tenure among the Amhara*; Bauer, *Household*)

⁶⁸ Bauer, *Household*, 136.

⁶⁹ Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea*, 51.

on and follow their husbands whenever and as far as possible. Letenkiel Tewolde says that she stayed alongside her askari husband and they were much better off than peasants.⁷⁰ But not all women married to askari could follow their husbands; it was impossible, for instance, when the askari were sent to Somalia or Libya.

Table 1. Percentage of the colonial army out of the total male labor force

year	size of army	total population	actively productive men	percentage in army
1912	5,990	330,000	82,000	7.3
1925	9,080	480,000	120,000	7.5
1935	60,200	600,000	150,000	40.3

Source: Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea*, 51.

3 • The *madamato* in the liberal and early Fascist period (1890–1933)

In a written report on the state of the colony from 1902 to 1907, Governor Martini informed the Italian parliament that it was “because of this imbalance [between white men and white women] that the serious inconvenience of unions between white men and native women takes place.”⁷¹ Ascertaining the exact nature of the “unions” Martini deemed a “serious inconvenience” is difficult because he applies the term “madama” in his diary to any Eritrean woman in a relationship with an Italian man, while at other times he seems to use it as a synonym for prostitute. In 1898, for instance, he wrote:

⁷⁰ Letenkiel Tewolde et al, 13 May 1995.

⁷¹ Martini, *Relazione sulla Colonia Eritrea*, 49.

Obscene hubbub this night. Four topographers were lodged in a state building. They divided with a sheet the only room in four parts, in each of them they put an *angareb* [Eritrean bed], and upon each *angareb* a topographer lay with his madama. The use was tolerated, but it degenerated into abuse and cannot be tolerated any longer. State buildings become brothels; officers lose with these whores any sense of dignity and decorum. Even worse, low officials.⁷²

It can hardly be disputed that Italian colonialism brought with it incentives for prostitution, as Richard Pankhurst points out.⁷³ But apparently those who had enough money—officers and officials—preferred to have a concubine and leave the part-time prostitutes to soldiers, although confusion between the two roles seemed to persist.

Evidence suggests that while most Italians readily distinguished between occasional prostitutes and concubines, some believed there was an apposition or a continuity between the status of a prostitute and that of a madama. For example, Martini mentions in his diary the mistress of a certain Lieutenant B., “today the owner of a brothel.”⁷⁴ According to P. Ambrogetti, a physician involved in monitoring the health of prostitutes, “often officers chose their madame at the *horse-shoe* [the brothel].”⁷⁵ In 1900 he wrote in his booklet on “Sexual Life in Eritrea”: “The woman in Abyssinia early reaches puberty and very early becomes free. When she does not immediately get married, she almost always becomes a prostitute.”⁷⁶ Unrestrained in touting the contrast between putative Eritrean sexual freedom and the unhealthy sexual repression dominant in Italy, he went on to explain that “prostitution in Abyssinia has not the features of degeneration. ... It is a fairly respectable job. ... It is neither like among us [Italians] a cause of corruption, nor a school for sexual perversion.”⁷⁷ It is possible that Ambrogetti was misinterpreting the exchange of money within a marriage for *dämòz* as a sign of a client/prostitute relationship, or maybe he was simply seeing only what he wanted to see; but another hypothesis is also plausible.

⁷² Martini, *Diario eritreo*, 1:220.

⁷³ Pankhurst, “History of Prostitution,” 16.

⁷⁴ Martini, *Diario eritreo*, 1:89.

⁷⁵ After an 1885 Italian regulation prostitutes had to live in a special area outside villages; their huts were configured in the shape of a horseshoe. Among Italians in Eritrea, thus, “horseshoe” was synonymous with “brothel” (Ambrogetti, *La vita sessuale*, 9–10, 13).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

Laketch Dirasse, who has studied prostitution in Addis Ababa, argues that the Italian occupation induced the decline of traditional prostitution, which historically had been locally regarded as an honorable activity. Early in the century, many women, she argues, ran small drinking places and “supplemented their trade in native brew by consorting with multiple mates for remuneration.” According to tradition in Addis Ababa (as elsewhere in Africa), “the relationship between the prostitute and her regular clients [was] not merely a commercialized sexual transaction.”⁷⁸ As Pankhurst shows, Italian colonialism led to the progressive commercialization of prostitution in Eritrea.⁷⁹ In turn-of-the-century Italy, prostitution was subject to state regulation; prostitutes were registered and underwent periodic medical evaluations.⁸⁰ At that same time the influential Italian anthropologist Cesare Lombroso was popularizing his belief that some women were “born prostitutes” and were lower on the evolutionary scale than “normal women.”⁸¹ Thus, many Italians arrived in Africa believing that prostitutes belonged to a different category of people who should be strictly confined to the margins of society. So it should not surprise us that in 1885, as soon as they landed at Massawa, the Italian army issued a regulation on prostitution: prostitutes could no longer live in villages, where they could freely mingle with the rest of the population, but had to live instead in a segregated area.⁸²

By introducing their own categorizations of sexual relationships, Italian men contributed to the transformation of local ones. In all likelihood, some of the “prostitutes” Ambrogetti identified actually were women who ran drinking houses. Thus, when reading sources from the earliest period of Italian colonialism, it is essential to realize that a dynamic tension arose between the renaming undertaken by the colonizers and the preexisting social realities.⁸³

If they were not already prostitutes before becoming madame, some Eritrean women could have been forced to become prostitutes after having been madame. According to Pollera:

⁷⁸ Laketch Dirasse, *Commoditization*, 7, 26–30. See also White, *Comforts of Home*.

⁷⁹ Pankhurst, “History of Prostitution,” 16.

⁸⁰ In the period under consideration, Italian legislation regarding prostitution changed at different times. See Gibson, *Prostitution and the State*.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 135–37.

⁸² Labanca, *In marcia verso Adua*, 219.

⁸³ As Hilda Kuper observed, “In a colonial situation name-giving tends to become name-calling,” quoted in Hunt, “Noise over Camouflage,” 471–94.

Abandoned by the European the madama easily and quickly falls into deep poverty, as it will be difficult for her to marry, because nobody wants to bear the burden of another man's children. She cannot find an honest job, because there are no occupations or workshops, and thus she often falls into the lowest prostitution.⁸⁴

The union preceding abandonment like this, one can infer, was not a client/prostitute relationship in the Italian sense thereof, but rather a form of concubinage. Pollera, who seemed to have more knowledge of Eritrean customs than many of his fellow colonists, was aware of *dämòz* marriage and blamed “the Europeans” (when he could more honestly have said “the Italians”) for not respecting its rules.

Before becoming madame, some women were little more than children. Many Italian males had sailed to Eritrea dreaming of Africa as a “virgin land of virgins,” and at least some of them seemed determined to take full advantage of that. It appeared that for many men, possessing a young virgin was more gratifying than procuring a prostitute, as the quotation at the beginning of the first section implies. Furthermore, the customary marriage age in Eritrea rendered young girls accessible, whereas in Italy the marriage age was considerably higher.⁸⁵ One of the *insabbiati* (i.e., Italians who “went native”) recently interviewed by Fabienne Le Houérou marked the contrast: “Ethiopia [was] a paradise for us old men. I, an old man, [could] have a twelve-year-old girl!”⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Pollera, *La donna in Etiopia*, 79.

⁸⁵ At the turn of the century the average marriage age in Italy was 27-28 years for men and 25-26 years for women (De Giorgio, *Le italiane dall'Unità*, 321).

⁸⁶ Le Houérou, *L'épopée*, 101.



• PLATE 5. A MIXED-RACE GIRL.
Photograph. Circa 1905



• PLATE 6. A MADAMA
Photograph. Circa 1900

In 1898 Governor Martini wrote in his diary:

At Keren the nuns had converted some girls to Catholicism; an officer caught sight of one of these neo-Catholics that had grown up a bit (here they are fully women at thirteen-fourteen years old), and he brought her away from the mission and made her his madama.⁸⁷

A few days later he wrote that he had ordered back to Italy an officer “whose main occupation, or at least the one he liked best, was to raise little girls with ‘tender-loving care,’ to later make them concubines for himself and his comrades (poor Castellani’s Cagigia called him *daddy*).”⁸⁸ Martini’s conclusion was that “this was further proof of the ignorance of many of these soldiers, who stay in the colony only because it is easier to express one’s brutality, and because one can be idle most of the day.”⁸⁹

Martini’s descriptions of cases of child abuse—his accounts confirm that having sex with a very young girl was a form of child abuse by Italian standards—provide other important insights into how a madamato relationship could start and what kind of women were involved. Women who were alone—especially orphaned girls who had no family to support them—were virtually defenseless in their encounter with the colonizers. One can easily imagine how the difference in power between an orphaned girl and an Italian officer would be so extreme as to render her unable to negotiate the terms of the relationship.

Other women, however, seemed to be in a stronger position vis-à-vis the Italian men in their lives. For instance, some were able to ask 100 MT Thalers for their virginity, as noted in the letter quoted at the beginning of the first section. Possibly others were able to negotiate an agreement similar to *dāmòz* marriage. As well, it is likely that some men were seeking more than just an outlet for sex, desiring instead the material and emotional comforts of a home. For instance, G. M., an Eritrean woman I interviewed, explained to me that when the Italian man for whom she kept house asked her to live with him, her grandmother intervened and negotiated the terms of the relationship with the man. Her grandmother’s foremost concern was that he would respect G. M. and her children: “If you want to keep her well, it’s not just a matter of money; it’s a matter of truth.” The lasting relationship that

⁸⁷ Martini, *Diario eritreo*, 1:84.

⁸⁸ “Anche il capitano C..., la cui principale occupazione, o almeno la più gradita, fu di tirar su bambine a minuzzoli di pane per farne poi le concubine sue o dei suoi commilitoni (la Cagigia del povero Castellani lo chiamava *babbo*) anche il capitano C. ... rimpatrierà con lo stesso piroscrafo” (Martini, *Diario eritreo*, 1:89). Emphasis in the original. Cagigia (or more likely Khadija) must have been the concubine of this Mr. Castellani, whom Martini called “poor” possibly because Castellani may have been deceased at the time Martini wrote.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

resulted, although not legally sanctioned, bore a strong resemblance to a typical marriage: together they shared affection, community of life, responsibility for the education of their children, etc. However, I perceived in G. M.'s account a lingering awareness of the inequality of their partnership, as she repeatedly referred to her partner as "the engineer" rather than as "my husband" or by his name. This was her habit, although she once said, "When we got married...",⁹⁰ before sharing another recollection of the relationship.

The words of former Eritrean Governor Riccardo Astuto dei Lucchesi conjure scenes of a European-style middle-class conjugal life thriving, it would seem, where he had not expected it to take root. Officers and officials, he wrote with scorn, centered their lives on concubinage with their madame: "They sometimes held them like ladies in their houses, so that it could happen ... that the General Staff's Head was invited for lunch by a captain and his madama."⁹¹ Martini also alludes to relationships that resembled a conjugal union. In 1898 he wrote in his diary about his discussion with Michele da Carbonara, a Roman Catholic prefect in Eritrea, concerning religious marriage between "whites and native Catholic women." I should note that until the Concordat of 1929 between the Vatican and the Italian state, religious marriage had no legal value in Italy. Martini argued:

The native woman perhaps believes that civil and religious marriage are merged in the same ceremony, as in her country. The white man knows that religious marriage does not have any value in Italian law. The white man can cheat, the native woman can be cheated, the latter will believe that the union is indissoluble, when it is certainly not the case. When the husband leaves her, she will address the government and the Courts, that will answer her that they cannot do anything about it. Our inability to help will damage our ultimate authority; and this situation will not serve the Catholic missionaries' propaganda either.⁹²

Martini's words attest to the ambiguous nature of the madamato. He did not equate the madamato with marriage, although he referred to the man as the madama's "husband" (*marito*). Certainly, a marked power inequality between the man and the woman was inherent in the kind of relationship he described. Nevertheless, the simple fact that a man could resort to using religious marriage to gain access to a woman suggests that she was not in a totally subordinate position, unlike orphaned girls. Unfortunately, we do not know who was the first to raise the issue of Catholic marriage: Eritrean women? Their families? Italian

⁹⁰ G. M., 13 August 1996.

⁹¹ Astuto edited Martini's diary (Martini, *Diario eritreo*, 1:262 n. 2).

⁹² *Ibid.*, 145.

men? Or perhaps the missionaries? An answer to this question would help to illuminate the madamato's complex dynamics.

Martini's great concern was that such behavior by Italians created a negative impression among the locals:

Natives laugh when they see officers who act the fool for a prostitute. A sort of refrain is popular in the colony; apparently it is praise, but I deem it rather sarcastic. It says: the Italian government is good, good, good. Thanks to it every *askari* has his wage, every poor person has work, every woman her Thaler.⁹³

In Keren, Martini wrote, it was not uncommon to find officers' madame living in officers' quarters, "while in a building outside Keren [lived] non-commissioned officers' madame, this way lodged at state expense!"⁹⁴ Thereafter the governor took the first measure to limit the madamato and forbade officers to keep their madame in state buildings.⁹⁵

In general, military personnel seem to have tolerated—even accommodated—the madamato. Since strict rules governed the marriages of Italian servicemen,⁹⁶ the madamato appeared to some men to be an appealing alternative to regulated wedlock. One might also suppose that men serving in the colony adopted a sort of code of silence regarding their sexual liaisons: what happened in the colony did not have to become public in Italy, and the madamato did not have to put an officer's ordinary family life in danger.

Sometimes, however, the madamato did not remain an easily overlooked side note. This was especially true when children were born.

4 • Mixed-race marriages and métissage before racial legislation (1890–1933)

To understand how Italians perceived the madamato, it is helpful to analyze the Italian legislation of the time and Italian attitudes toward mixed-race marriages and *métis* (i.e.,

⁹³ Ibid., 220.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 86–87.

⁹⁵ The following governor, Salvago Raggi, also forbade colonial officials to live with native women (r.d. 18 December 1911, [art. 12]).

⁹⁶ In particular, to obtain a marriage authorization, officers and their spouses had to meet certain economic requirements (Buono, "Il matrimonio"; Minniti, "Primi orientamenti").

mixed-race) children.⁹⁷ Such an analysis should also help to illuminate the character of Italian colonial racism before the imposition of the racial laws.

Since Italian law did not stipulate special requirements for them, mixed-race marriages were always possible, like any other marriage between an Italian citizen and a foreigner. In Eritrea the Italian civil code was in force, and no special ordinance concerning interracial marriage was on the books.⁹⁸

There was one 1914 law that stated that any colonial official who married a native woman automatically lost his post.⁹⁹ The existence of this law indirectly confirms that mixed-race marriages were allowed but certainly not encouraged; in fact, reportedly they were extremely rare. A study published in 1916 by Judge Adelgiso Ravizza reveals that the only mixed-race marriage to take place in accord with Italian law involved an Italian woman and an African professor at the Istituto Universitario Orientale of Naples.¹⁰⁰ According to Astuto, mixed-race marriages, “very rare in any case, were always only religious, and for Italians they almost always represented a disguised concubinage.”¹⁰¹ My own preliminary search of the marriage records preserved in Asmara’s Catholic Cathedral disclosed only a handful of mixed-race marriages.

Why did an overwhelming majority of Italian men choose not to marry the African women in their lives—women with whom they shared their homes and, in many cases, fathered children? One answer could be that since they were in the colony only temporarily these men imputed little value to the transient unions they formed there. But this was by no means the only reason. “The difference of civilization and education between the European man and the native woman,” argued Alberto Pollera, “is too great and there cannot be, therefore, that perfect unity of sentiments that is necessary to give a happy and energetic life

⁹⁷ For a discussion of Italian legislation concerning interracial sexual relations in Eritrea with a special focus on the analysis of juridical discourse, see Sörgoni, *Parole e corpi*.

⁹⁸ Actually, a special civil code for the Eritrean colony had been approved by the Italian parliament in 1909, but it was never enforced for lack of an Arabic and an Amharic translation, compulsory for its application. On the tormented vicissitudes of the Eritrean civil code, see Sagù, “Sui tentativi di codificazione,” 567–616.

⁹⁹ R.d. 10 December 1914, no. 1510, art. 42.

¹⁰⁰ Ravizza, “Matrimoni misti,” 336. The man at issue, defined by Ravizza simply as “a native,” was Afä-Wärq Gäbrä-Iyäsus. See Rouaud, *Afä-Wärq*.

¹⁰¹ Martini, *Diario eritreo*, 171 n. 1.

to a family.”¹⁰² However, Pollera himself, just prior to his death in 1939, arranged for his cohabitation with an Eritrean woman to be formalized in a religious ceremony.¹⁰³ Another colonial official, Ravizza, not only emphasized the inferiority of Abyssinian civilization but further suggested that Eritrean women, who

had run into the arms of Italians, attracted by the prospect of a material reward, ... had proved, except for very few cases, that they could be nothing more than instruments of pleasure for Italian men, and that they were not able to become, if not their wives, at least their loyal companions and the tender and caring mothers of their children.¹⁰⁴

African women, as already suggested, were for sex, not for love. But of course having sex was the one prerequisite to producing children. For Italians at that time, *coitus interruptus* was essentially the only form of contraception; in the colony even this most basic contraceptive measure was probably rare.

So mixed-race offspring—*métis*—were an inevitability; but how were these children to be viewed? There were different answers to this question. *Métis* had a very bad name among Italians in Eritrea. Many held the belief that mixed-race girls tended to become prostitutes while mixed-race boys easily became criminals. Some authors took such racist opinions as proof of an innate degeneracy in biracial offspring. Others, like Pollera and Ravizza, vehemently disputed popular theories about the racial inferiority of *métis* or their natural inclination toward crime; they suggested instead that the high rate of criminality among *métis* had social origins.

Eritrean customary law, Pollera explained, authorized mothers to attribute paternity while Italian law did not. As a consequence, “many Italian men, taking advantage of Eritrean women’s ignorance in this regard, easily convinc[ed] them to become their concubines, and abandon[ed] them when they [had] a baby.”¹⁰⁵ Abandoned by their fathers, these children, Pollera continued, were likely to be shunned by their mothers’ families, who felt no responsibility to provide for them. Hence mother and child quickly sank into the deepest poverty. He claimed that indigence, coupled with resentment toward those who had

¹⁰² Pollera, *La donna in Etiopia*, 78.

¹⁰³ Pollera’s marriage was particularly remarkable given that Italian law at the time prohibited both mixed-race marriages and concubinage. Alberto Pollera’s marriage to Ghidam Menelich [*sic*] is registered as #35 (3 August 1939) in the “Liber Matrimoniorum privati” preserved in Asmara’s Catholic Cathedral.

¹⁰⁴ Ravizza, “Matrimoni misti,” 345.

¹⁰⁵ Pollera, *La donna in Etiopia*, 79.

abandoned them, pushed métis toward delinquency. (Incidentally, Pollera himself was the father of métis children; he recognized them and provided for their education.)

Rosalia Pianavia Vivaldi also disputed popular assertions about the innate inferiority of métis. While living in Eritrea in 1893–96 she organized the first orphanage for métis infants and youth. Recognizing that mixed-race children were neither more nor less naturally clever and healthy than other children, she argued that they grew sick and dull only as a result of the poor care they received.¹⁰⁶ Gradually, some Italians came to believe that métis became sources of social dysfunction mainly because as very young children they had been the victims of severe circumstances beyond their control—circumstances which included abandonment by their fathers who, by their actions, had discredited Italians. But others, like Lombroso, insisted that métissage was a problem in and of itself which gave rise to a racially inferior subpopulation that was inherently inclined toward crime.¹⁰⁷ He was not alone in his discomfort with the recognition that métis violated the clear division between the colonizer and the colonized; therefore they were an element of social disorder. This attitude prevailed during Fascism and was ultimately sanctioned by the racial legislation.

In contrast, some authors, like Ravizza, preached that the intermediate position of métis (i.e., between whites and blacks, colonizer and colonized) could prove advantageous: white enough to absorb white society's values but not white enough to join and claim rights within it, métis were in an ideal position to serve the colonizers' ends. As they seemed to represent, somehow, a more domesticated black, métis could easily provide the ideal labor pool for the colony. Interestingly, Ravizza tried to justify his position by fusing patriarchal and racial ideologies. He made a clear distinction between the offspring of a white man and a black woman and vice versa. The child of an Italian man and an Eritrean woman was a combination of the best qualities of both parents, he argued, because the child inherits the superior intelligence of his or her father and the physical strength of his or her mother—whose endowments included not only sensual passion but also endurance and resistance to harsh African climates.¹⁰⁸

Eugenics was quite popular when Ravizza wrote in 1916 and concern over the “decadence” of the white race was widespread.¹⁰⁹ Thus, the social climate was conducive to

¹⁰⁶ Pianavia Vivaldi, *Tre anni in Eritrea*, 310.

¹⁰⁷ Ravizza, “Matrimoni misti,” 338.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 339.

¹⁰⁹ Pogliano, “Scienza e stirpe.”

his opinion that mixed-race children were, in effect, “born to be useful” because they had been fortified by the “blood” of their mothers. There was no danger of white racial degeneration in mixed-race unions because, he explained, “in unions between a savage and a civilized person, the features of the civilized one produce for the major part the moral temperament of the children.”¹¹⁰

Similar opinions were receiving widespread public support at the time¹¹¹ and are now a source of insight into the racial and gender ideologies of Italian men during the first period of Italian colonialism. Some believed that mixed-race children bore the special imprint of the twin superiorities (i.e., sexual and racial) of their white fathers. Add to this the belief that what really mattered in a person’s makeup—the “moral character”—was always inherited from the father. Biological and social reproduction equally respected predetermined natural hierarchies. Needless to say, Ravizza absolutely condemned a union between a white woman and a black man for the same reasons: the children of such a pairing, he argued, would be raised according to the father’s customs; they would grow up as natives. Ravizza could not accept that an individual who was actually 50% white could “go native” (ironically, at this point he was referring to the effects of nurture rather than biology).¹¹² He took it for granted that male supremacy (i.e., the gender hierarchy) prevailed over black inferiority (i.e., the racial hierarchy); in other words, Ravizza could not imagine any woman, even a white one, dominating a man, even an African. Such widely unchallenged ideology prompted colonial authorities to expel from the colony two Italian women who had entered into irregular unions with African men, asserting that the colony did not need their bad example.¹¹³

How many Italians, if not good husbands, were at least good fathers? Not very many, one can infer, given their propensity to abandon their children. A first clue to the paternal attitudes of Italian men is found by determining how many recognized their children. A mixed-race child who was recognized by his or her Italian father automatically became an Italian citizen. According to the 1931 census, there were 515 mixed-race Italian citizens in

¹¹⁰ Ravizza, “Matrimoni misti,” 339.

¹¹¹ Pollera, for instance, wrote in 1937: “As everybody knows, the features of the male parent prevail over those of the mother” (Goglia, “Una diversa politica razziale,” 1077).

¹¹² Ravizza, “Matrimoni misti,” 341.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 336.

Eritrea (among a total Italian population of 4,188).¹¹⁴ Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing how many métis children were not recognized by their fathers.

Sometimes métis were materially supported by their fathers; in fact Martini wrote that it became increasingly common for Italian fathers to provide for their children.¹¹⁵ Pianavia Vivaldi acknowledged that some fathers had given her money to support the orphanage. In the colonial literature one can also find mention of métis children being brought to Italy where they went to school, but apparently they were rare exceptions. A 1914 Italian law addressed métis for the first time, stating that a métis could not become a colonial official.¹¹⁶ This is an indirect clue that some métis had risen to a position to apply for such offices.

The 1933 legislation on Eritrea and Somalia (*Ordinamento organico per l'Eritrea e la Somalia*)¹¹⁷ dealt more extensively with métissage. The law confirmed that métis children who were recognized by their Italian fathers automatically gained Italian citizenship. It also introduced a special regulation for children of unknown parents. Those whose “physical characteristics ... give rise to the belief that both parents were of white race” automatically obtained Italian citizenship. Those who appeared to be biracial could gain Italian citizenship only if a judge deemed them worthy.¹¹⁸ Three years later the new law for the Africa Orientale Italiana¹¹⁹ effaced this possibility. The notion that an individual’s “physical characteristics” determined personal status, however, persisted and subsequently led to dreadful consequences.

Alberto Pollera’s mixed-race son Giorgio might be considered an emblematic figure of the transition to Fascist racial legislation. Giorgio Pollera’s case is tragically ironic: he was near to completing his university degree in economics when he volunteered to serve on the Italian side in the Italo-Ethiopian war. He died fighting in Ethiopia in December 1937, and the

¹¹⁴ Only six métis were over 40 years old (i.e., born before 1891), while 172 métis were born between 1892 and 1911, 160 between 1912 and 1921, and 177 between 1922 and 1931 (Castellano, “La popolazione italiana,” 536).

¹¹⁵ Martini, *Diario eritreo*, 4:48.

¹¹⁶ R.d. 10 December 1914, no. 1510, art. 3.

¹¹⁷ L. 6 July 1933, no. 999.

¹¹⁸ They had to prove that they had “a perfectly Italian education,” that they were not polygamists and had no record of major crimes, and that they had successfully attended the third class of elementary school (art. 18).

¹¹⁹ R.d.l. 1 June 1936, no. 1019.

same Italian government which had already started to issue its strict racial laws awarded him a gold medal.¹²⁰

5 The *madamato* becomes a crime: Fascist racial policy after the Ethiopian invasion

The Italo-Ethiopian war marked a fundamental shift in Fascist colonial policy. In the span of a few months in 1935–36 the Italian army conquered Ethiopia, helped by its vast technological supremacy and massive use of mustard gas.¹²¹ Mussolini was now faced with the problem of ruling a large and hostile territory. He adopted as key instruments in colonial governance a new racial policy and a focus on expanding Italian settlement.

“Empires are conquered with arms, but held with prestige,” Mussolini maintained.¹²² Thus inspired, the Fascist government tried to preserve the “prestige” of the Italian “race” by establishing and enforcing clear boundaries between the colonizer and the colonized. Between 1937 and 1940 the Fascist regime deployed a comprehensive body of racial laws aimed, for different reasons, against Jews in Italy and against Africans in the colonies. It is important to realize that it was not only its alliance with Nazi Germany that drove Fascism to its racial policies: “the African problem,” historian Luigi Goglia argues, “had a significant influence on the general racist turn of the Fascist regime.”¹²³ Actually, the impact of the Fascist racial policy was felt first in Africa.

In a written article at the beginning of 1937, the minister of colonies, Alessandro Lessona, spelled out the provisions of the racial policy in the “new” Africa Orientale Italiana (hereafter AOI):

- 1) absolute clear separation of the two races;
- 2) collaboration without promiscuity;
- 3) humanity in consideration of past mistakes;

¹²⁰ Goglia, “Una diversa politica razziale,” 1075; idem, “Note sul razzismo,” 1223.

¹²¹ Rochat, “L’impiego dei gas.”

¹²² Pankhurst, “Fascist Racial Policies in Ethiopia,” 279.

¹²³ Goglia, “Note sul razzismo,” 1223.

4) implacable severity for future mistakes.¹²⁴

The first effect of the new segregation policy was the criminalization of the madamato. The law's only article read:

The Italian citizen who, in the territory of the Kingdom or the colonies, has a relation of a conjugal nature with a colonial subject of the Africa Orientale Italiana, or with a foreigner belonging to a people which has traditions, customs, social and juridical concepts analogous to those of the subjects of the Africa Orientale Italiana, will be punished with imprisonment from one to five years.¹²⁵

Soon thereafter certain colonial ordinances put into practice the guidelines enumerated by Lessona. One ordinance forbade whites to live in black districts; another ordered absolute separation of the races at sites of public entertainment; and a third imposed a regime of segregation on transportation.¹²⁶ At the same time, Fascism launched a massive campaign of racist propaganda. A group of scholars published, with full governmental support, *"Il Manifesto della razza"* ("The Race's Manifesto"), elaborating a ten-point "scientific" justification for Fascist racism.¹²⁷ Soon afterward the fundamental law of Italian racist policy was issued: the "Measures for the defense of the Italian race"¹²⁸ incited the persecution of Jews in Italy and forbade marriages of "an Italian citizen of Aryan race with a person of another race" (art. 1).

Italian racial policy in AOI particularly targeted mixed-race unions and métis—two conspicuous bridges between Italians and Africans which put into question the

¹²⁴ Alessandro Lessona, "Gli Italiani nell'Impero: Politica di razza," *La Stampa*, 9 January 1937, quoted in Goglia, "Note sul razzismo," 1239.

¹²⁵ "Il cittadino italiano che nel territorio del Regno o delle Colonie tiene relazione d' indole coniugale con persona suddita dell'Africa Orientale Italiana o straniera appartenente a popolazione che abbia tradizioni, costumi, e concetti giuridici e sociali analoghi a quelle dei sudditi dell'Africa Orientale Italiana, è punito con la reclusione da uno a cinque anni" (r.d.l. 19 April 1937, no. 880, turned into l. 30 December 1937, no. 2590).

¹²⁶ Goglia, "Note sul razzismo," 1249–50; and Pankhurst, "Fascist Racial Policies in Ethiopia," 277.

¹²⁷ Also known as "the manifesto of racist scientists," it appeared on page two of the first issue of *La Difesa della razza* (1938) and in other periodicals. It declared that distinct human races existed and had a purely biological basis; that there was a "pure Italian race" whose physical and psychological features had to be preserved at all costs; and that any union with individuals of the non-European races would have endangered the purity and preservation of the Italian race. For a recent republication of the manifesto, see *Il Ponte* 34, nos. 11–12 (1978): 1507–9.

¹²⁸ R.d.l. 17 November 1938, no. 1728.

incommensurableness of the two “races.” It was intended to limit sexual contact between Italian men and African women. In a circular letter to all Italian residents of Shoa, Governor Guglielmo Nasi wrote: “*Aut imperium aut voluptas!*” (“Either empire or pleasure!”) He went on to say that “intimacy with the female element” damages “our prestige.”¹²⁹ It was no easy task, however, to impress this new doctrine upon an army of men who had sailed to Ethiopia singing “Faccetta nera.”¹³⁰ In fact that very song, soon after the conquest of Ethiopia, was violently attacked in the press as a sign of mental corruption, thoroughly incompatible with the building of an empire.¹³¹

The new racist sexual policy did not, however, forbid any and all forms of “intimacy” with African women; occasional sexual relations were still allowed, and prostitution was legal and under state control. Actually, the Fascist government tried to pursue its policy of racial separation even in this domain. The ideal solution in the Fascist scheme of things would have been to reserve white prostitutes for Italians and leave the black ones to Africans. At the same time, the idea of populating the colony with Italian prostitutes seemed at odds with notions of “Italian prestige.” The Italian government thus found itself in contradictory circumstances and even made an unsuccessful attempt to import prostitutes from France.¹³² Once it reluctantly decided to supply prostitutes from Italy, colonial authorities incessantly clamored for more, but the number imported was never enough to meet the demand. Consequently, licenses were increasingly issued to African prostitutes and clandestine prostitution continued to flourish.

After so much boasting about Italian virility, the Fascist powers found it difficult to implement a strict policy of racial segregation. Instead, Fascism focused on the struggle to suppress the living consequences of Italo-Eritrean sexual liaisons—the mixed-race children. *Métissage* became the subject of a massive propaganda campaign during which innumerable articles—in both the scholarly and the popular press—singled out *métis* as a major cause of social disorder. *Métis* denoted degeneration. “Everybody knows,” wrote a judge in his

¹²⁹ Circular letter of 4 January 1938 in Goglia and Grassi, *Il colonialismo italiano*, 394.

¹³⁰ See n. 26 above.

¹³¹ See for instance Paolo Monelli, “Donne e buoi dei paesi tuoi,” *La Gazzetta del Popolo*, 13 June 1936, reprinted in Rochat, *Il colonialismo italiano*, 191-93.

¹³² Pankhurst, “History of Prostitution,” 177.

decision, “that the mixed-race combines the vices and faults of his parents’ races, and does not inherit their qualities.”¹³³

The aim of the Fascists’ virulent campaign against *métissage* was well elucidated by Renzo Salis, one of the participants in the Third Conference of Colonial Studies in Florence in 1937. Salis explained that it was “necessary to avoid all hybridism which would, so to speak, mark a gray zone between the function of command and the function of obedience.”¹³⁴ *Métissage*, declared an aforementioned judge, caused a “deleterious social promiscuity, which mixed and put at the same level the conqueror and the conquered people.”¹³⁵ In other words, it undermined the conceptual tools Fascism relied upon to legitimize its recent bloody and internationally condemned African conquest.

In 1939 Fascism reorganized its segregation laws. The very title of the new rules—“Penal sanctions for the defense of racial prestige against the natives of Italian Africa”¹³⁶—exposes the intent of the Fascist racial policy: to create a regime of segregation and infuse Italians with notions of their “racial” superiority. The law itself is a clear indication that boundaries between “superior and inferior races” were hazardously unclear and that many Italians were not adequately aware of their “prestige.”

The reach of the new laws was bidirectional in that it simultaneously threatened both Italians whose behavior tarnished the Africans’ “conception of the moral figure of the Italian,” as well as “natives” who offended “the citizen in his quality of belonging to the Italian race.”¹³⁷ The law comprehensively banned for the first time “acts prejudicial to the prestige of the Italian race” as it reinforced segregation norms already in place, forbade Italians to engage in manual work of the same type performed by Africans, and renewed the prohibition against “relations of a conjugal nature.” Furthermore, it regarded *métis* infants as potential

¹³³ TRIBUNALE DI ADDIS ABEBA, 13 January 1938, defendants Pulcinelli and Ascalè. The journal did not publish the name of the judge.

¹³⁴ Quoted in Pankhurst, “Fascist Racial Policies in Ethiopia,” 276.

¹³⁵ TRIBUNALE DI ADDIS ABEBA, 13 January 1938. [The same defendants as in n. 133.]

¹³⁶ L. 29 June 1939, no. 1004, “Sanzioni penali per il prestigio di razza di fronte ai nativi dell’Africa Italiana.”

¹³⁷ The first article read: “Agli effetti della presente legge s’intende lesivo del prestigio di razza l’atto commesso dal cittadino abusando della sua qualità di appartenente alla razza italiana o venendo meno ai doveri che da tale appartenenza gli derivano di fronte ai nativi, così da sminuire nel loro concetto la figura morale dell’italiano. Agli effetti della stessa legge s’intende lesivo del prestigio della razza italiana l’atto del nativo diretto ad offendere il cittadino nella sua qualità di appartenente alla razza italiana, o, comunque in odio alla razza italiana.”

criminal evidence. Public prosecutors, when informed of métis born after April 1937, were required to determine whether a “relation of a conjugal nature” had produced these offspring.

An additional step was taken one year later. Since it could not physically eradicate them, the Fascist government decided to categorize métis as full-fledged Africans. In so doing, the Fascists empowered a law to control métis identity—an issue both deeply political and personal which daily social practice had failed to solve. The “Norms about Métis” of 1940¹³⁸ simply stated that métis were natives. Thus, they could no longer be recognized by their Italian fathers and thereby gain Italian citizenship. Moreover, the law stated that only the native parent was obligated to support mixed-race offspring, and it outlawed special schools and institutions for métis. Finally, Italians were forbidden to adopt métis or any African children. (Some Italian couples had tried to adopt Ethiopian children after the Ethiopian war.)¹³⁹ I should emphasize at this point that this law was diametrically opposed to the indigenous customary norms that considered the father fully responsible for his children, even for those born within a temporary marriage.

Though its aims were clear, there were serious contradictions in this forced “nativization” of métis. Issuing from Lessona’s advocacy of “humanity in consideration of past mistakes,” the law stated that métis who already had Italian citizenship should be allowed to retain it along with their Aryan identity (or Jewish, depending on the identity of the father). Additionally, métis of at least 13 years of age were eligible to gain Italian citizenship provided they had received an Italian education (through the third grade, at least) and displayed good civil, moral, and political conduct. Thus, according to the Fascist reading of biology and race, the same combination (i.e., an African woman + an Italian man) could produce two different outcomes: if not an African—which was most often the case—then an Aryan, especially if he or she was a model of good behavior.

The long-term objective of Fascist racial and sexual policy in AOI was to populate the colony with Italians. Actually, the so-called “demographic colonization” was simultaneously an aim and an instrument of government. Mussolini’s major justification for Italian expansionist colonial policy was that Italy deserved more land for its vigorous population. Italian colonialism, he maintained, was different from the French or the British version: not a “plutocratic,” exploitative colonization, but a “demographic” colonization. “Prolific peoples

¹³⁸ L. 13 May 1940, no. 822.

¹³⁹ Goglia, “Note sul razzismo,” 1240.

have a right to an Empire,” Mussolini asserted.¹⁴⁰ Italy, the “proletarian nation,” would have effortlessly filled its colonies.¹⁴¹ Indeed, since the 1920s the Fascist regime had been energetically promoting demographic development in Italy.¹⁴² The whole philosophy of the Fascist demographic policy was elegantly synthesized in Mussolini’s motto: “Nations’ fortunes are bound to their demographic power.”¹⁴³

Even a cursory review of its history shows that the success of the settlement policy fell far short of expectations and bore little resemblance to its depiction in the propaganda. To be sure, its failure was partly due to the outbreak of war. Nonetheless, the number of Italians in Eritrea grew enormously in comparison to the pre-Ethiopian-war period, thanks to the military effort and a vast program of public works. No proper census took place after 1931, but the Italian population was estimated to be around 75,000 in 1940 versus 4,188 in 1931.¹⁴⁴ As already mentioned, women were less than a quarter of the total population; evidently in Asmara in 1939 there were 41,263 Italian men and 11,177 women, while in other towns of AOI the sex ratio was even more imbalanced.¹⁴⁵ The paucity of Italian women in the colonies was of special concern to the Fascist authorities. “It is clear,” one could read in a pamphlet of the *Istituto Fascista dell’Africa italiana*, “that the race’s defense policy will really be successful only when the problem of the women in the colony finds a solution.” The desired solution, the booklet explained, would identify and enable a proper “social function” for Italian women in Ethiopia; the satisfaction of “man’s sexual instincts” was not the point.¹⁴⁶ So the regime created special mass organizations to train Italian women for colonial life while the popular press emphasized the fundamental role of Italian women in building the empire. Someone even suggested that Italian orphaned girls could be “exported” to the colonies and

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Rossetti, “La donna e l’Impero,” 1.

¹⁴¹ To promote the population of AOI, Fascism created some official bodies, like the Ente Puglia d’Etiopia or the Ente Romagna d’Etiopia (after the name of two Italian regions); also the organization for veterans’ assistance, the Opera nazionale combattenti, had a special program for peasant settlement in AOI.

¹⁴² On Fascist demographic policies, see De Grazia, *Le donne nel regime fascista*, 69–111.

¹⁴³ Rossetti, “La donna e l’Impero,” 1.

¹⁴⁴ Castellano, “La popolazione italiana,” 539.

¹⁴⁵ Rossetti, “La donna e l’Impero,” 2.

¹⁴⁶ Istituto Fascista dell’Africa italiana, *Nozioni coloniali per gli iscritti alle organizzazioni del PNF* (Trento: 1939), appearing in Goglia and Grassi, *Il colonialismo italiano*, 323.

placed in special institutions designed to serve as “nurseries for the raising of wives for settlers and lower-rank officials.”¹⁴⁷

Despite the regime’s investments of energy and creativity, it became clear that populating AOI with Italian families would simply take time; however, repressive measures designed to serve the same end could be implemented right away. The *carabinieri*—the Italian military police—began conducting surprise inspections of private homes to monitor and control the sexual arrangements of individual Italians. Beginning in September 1937 colonial courts started reviewing cases of madamato. We do not know how many cases of madamato were brought to court or how many men were convicted of such a crime, but we do know that the new measures failed to halt the phenomenon. Oral testimony suggests the law was only partially enforced. One of the so-called “insabbiati” (Italians who “went native”) in Ethiopia told his interviewer: “Who respected the racial laws? Not even the carabinieri! The carabinieri were worse than the others! Carabinieri and officers!”¹⁴⁸ Moreover, according to the Italo-Eritrean Association, the number of Eritrean women living with Italians climbed from 1,150 in 1935 to 10,000 in 1937, on to 13,000 in 1939, and finally reached 15,000 by 1940.¹⁴⁹

The accuracy of these figures is questionable, but certainly they signify that Italo-Eritrean concubinage was ongoing.¹⁵⁰ The impact of the racial legislation should not be underestimated, however. One can wonder, for instance, whether the Italians who bravely violated the law against the madamato were equally brave in defying the law that forbade them to provide for their mixed-race children’s living expenses. Furthermore, it is beyond question that even if it did not eliminate the madamato, the racial legislation promoted racist behavior; colonial racial attitudes became more brutal and more absolute; and the Fascist laws also served to legitimize the exploitation of African women. During the liberal period it was

¹⁴⁷ A. M. Galli, “Le donne italiane in colonia,” *L’Azione coloniale*, 4 February 1937, quoted in Goglia, “Note sul razzismo,” 1242. Galli’s proposal was also supported by the Italian Society of Genetics and Eugenics (Del Monte, “Genesi e sviluppo del meticciato in Eritrea,” 844).

¹⁴⁸ Le Houérou, *L’épopée*, 97. Also the oral testimonies collected by Taddia confirm the non-observance of the law (Taddia, *La memoria*,” 90, 96, 98).

¹⁴⁹ Four Power Commission of Investigation for the Former Italian Colonies, *Report on Eritrea*, London, 22 June 1948, app. 111, memorandum.

¹⁵⁰ Also, the procreation of mixed-race children did not stop. In the municipality of Asmara alone, the official birth registry indicated that 2,594 métis children were born between 1937 and 1940 (Cerbella, *Eritrea*, 9). It is impossible to know how many more mixed-race children were born but not officially registered.

morally objectionable for an Italian man to abandon an African woman and his mixed-race dependents; during Fascism, it was his duty to do so. The laws did make a difference.



• PLATE 7. AN OFFICER WITH HIS MADAM.
Photograph



• PLATE 8. A MADAMA WITH HER CHIEF
Photograph

6 @ The *madamato* in the court decisions

Between 1937 and 1941, scholarly journals specializing in legal, racial, and colonial matters published a few dozen court cases relating to the crime of “a relation of a conjugal nature” between an Italian citizen and a subject of AOI (read: *madamato*).¹⁵¹ The editors, concerned less with describing such relations than with discussing the juridical problems the law raised, published only excerpts—a few lines to a few pages—from the court decisions so as to offer readers insights into the law’s interpretations.

Although the wording of the law was short and simple, it was far from easy to interpret, as some jurists complained. Judges and jurists agreed that the law had “a double aim: the defense of the Italian race’s prestige in front of natives, and elimination, or at least strong limitation, of *métissage*.”¹⁵² Judge Nigro suggested in this regard that during occasional sexual relations “the Italian usually takes protective measures for fear of contagion, and so he rarely generates.”¹⁵³ The key problem, however, was distinguishing between “a relation of a conjugal nature” and a merely sexual relation, given that the latter was legal and the former was not. Numerous examples of contorted reasoning from the bench suggest to me that most judges unwittingly found themselves party to a paradoxical enterprise: on the one hand they were seeking to deny the possibility of meaningful, affective relationships between colonizers and colonized, while on the other hand they were trying to repress relationships bearing these very features.

A conjugal relation like the *madamato*, explained a judge, is indicated by the presence of both a material element (i.e., the sexual contact) and a moral element (i.e., “unity and community of life”). Community of life, he further explained, does not only mean cohabitation but also “the existence between the man and the woman of that special bond known as *affectio maritalis* (i.e., conjugal love).”¹⁵⁴ Other judges contested this notion, arguing that such standards may be valid in Italy, where they described a conjugal relation

¹⁵¹ Most of the published cases were discussed by the Court of Appeals of Addis Ababa, which had jurisdiction over the whole of AOI. We cannot know, in most cases, in which part of AOI the “crime” took place. I believe that cases originating outside Eritrea are also meaningful for the present study.

¹⁵² Rosso, “Definizione,” 681.

¹⁵³ CORTE D’APPELLO D’ADDIS ABEBA, 13 December 1938, Pres. Carnaroli, drafter Nigro; defendant Augello.

¹⁵⁴ TRIBUNALE DI ADDIS ABEBA, 13 January 1938, defendants Pulcinelli and Ascalè. The journal did not publish the name of the judge in this case.

between whites, but they could not pertain to mixed-race unions. Judge Patroni, for instance, stressed that the law did not speak of “conjugal” relations but of “relations of a conjugal nature”—two intrinsically different sets of circumstances. There was no need, according to this reasoning, for evidence of a “superior sentiment” such as the *affectio maritalis* to establish the commission of the crime; the material element alone was sufficient. In fact criminal charges against participants in mixed-race unions never alleged the existence of a relationship *more uxorio* (i.e., a conjugal relationship) because the madamato, Patroni argued, is always the product of an economic transaction in which “the native female gives in for material rewards and money.” The man is almost never moved by superior sentiments, the judge continued, “because the idea of family is so different between Italian citizens and natives that any relation with aims other than sexual can hardly exist.”¹⁵⁵ “The legislator,” echoed Giovanni Rosso, who annotated the decision, “did not require a sentiment” to qualify the madamato as a crime.¹⁵⁶ In other words, these judges believed that the racial inferiority of Africans excluded the possibility that a mixed-race union could ever constitute a full-fledged conjugal relation. Unabashed racists like Somalia’s Governor Maurizio Rava could be heard explaining that any feelings a madama might have were, at best, akin to the sensitivities of a house pet.¹⁵⁷ Similar beliefs and opinions of an equally brutal nature appear to have been epidemic among the ranks of the judiciary.

Thus, judges routinely scrutinized the private lives of defendants, searching for material evidence of the crime. I should add here that the law on madamato punished only the Italian citizen;¹⁵⁸ as a result, judges were required to clarify only the man’s behavior. For this reason court decisions are of little help in reconstructing the madama’s agency in each case. To judges and defendants, the role of the women involved was irrelevant.

Predictably, the defendants—all of whom were male, as already indicated—typically pleaded not guilty, often claiming that the African woman involved was either a prostitute or a servant who was occasionally required to perform sexual services. If judges found their claims credible, these men were free to go. Such was the fate of a certain Mr. Russo in 1939.

¹⁵⁵ GIUDICE DELLA COLONIA DI HARAR, 13 September 1939, est. Patroni, defendant Zucotti.

¹⁵⁶ Rosso, “Definizione,” 683.

¹⁵⁷ M. Rava, “Per la dignità del bianco,” *L’Azione coloniale* 7 (1937): 1, quoted in Campassi, “Il madamato in Africa Orientale,” 256.

¹⁵⁸ As Giovanni Leone explained, “The juridical good defended by the law (purity and superiority of our race, our prestige in front of the subjects) belongs to citizens’ moral patrimony” (Leone, “La non punibilità,” 88).

The Appeals Court of Addis Ababa made it clear that Russo considered the African woman who lived with him to be just “a humble servant.” It simply happened that being her boss, he sometimes “released his lustfulness on her.”¹⁵⁹ Circumstances like these were by no means unique. An Eritrean woman, Hiwet Ogba Georgis, recently recalled:

All domestic workers were afraid of being sexually attacked—that is why we always preferred houses with old people or with a lot of children. Italian men would rape domestic workers and if they got pregnant they would kick them out and deny any connection with them.¹⁶⁰

“Community of meals” was considered incriminating evidence of madamato. Beyond a simple “community of bed,” which signified a sexual relationship but nothing more, the jurist Rosso explained, “it is a relationship on an equal basis between a national and a native, together with a long-lasting and continuing sexual community” that forms the crime of madamato.¹⁶¹

This is a very important point. The law was not designed to punish the sexual exploitation of African women; on the contrary, it targeted sentiments and any manifestation of community of life “on an equal basis.” For instance, the Appeals Court of Addis Ababa condemned a man because his relationship with an African woman was shown to be not just “a physiological sexual outlet”; to the man’s discredit, it was also characterized by intimacy and feelings.¹⁶² Conversely, the same court discharged another man when he was able to prove that there was no “community of life” in his relationship with an African woman; apparently he persuasively assured the court that there had been only “repeated embraces between a male and a woman” as “a passing outlet.”¹⁶³

The fact that men could find themselves in court for involvement in a relationship with a madama that went beyond sexual exploitation—at least by the standards of Italian men at the time—confirms that such relationships existed. The following analysis of the indices of the crime provides useful information about these standards as well as significant details of the multiform nature of madamato.

¹⁵⁹ CORTE D’APPELLO DI ADDIS ABEBA, 7 March 1939, Pres. Rosso, drafter Guerrazzi; defendant Russo.

¹⁶⁰ Wilson, *Women and the Eritrean Revolution*, 16.

¹⁶¹ Rosso, “Definizione,” 683.

¹⁶² CORTE D’APPELLO DI ADDIS ABEBA, 6 January 1939, Pres. and drafter Carnaroli, defendant Avidano.

¹⁶³ CORTE D’APPELLO DI ADDIS ABEBA, 13 June 1939, Pres. Guerrazzi, drafter Ferri, defendant Del Chiappo.

Gift giving, for instance, was deemed a sure sign of madamato if the defendant could not show that his presents were a form of payment to his madama. Quite often jealousy was viewed as evidence of the crime. For an illustration, take the history of a certain Giovanni Spano, condemned for the crime of madamato in 1938. His madama, a young woman called Destà Agos, told their story to the judge. She had come to Gondar four months before with a group of askari. When Spano asked her to stay with him “as a wife,” she agreed. He paid all their living expenses while she did the housework and prepared the meals they ate together. “I was like a wife,” she explained, emphasizing that they shared the same bed and had frequent sexual intercourse. She also showed to the court a dress she had received as a present from Spano, adding that he was “extremely jealous.” He did not want her to talk with other people—especially whites—and forbade her even to appear on the street. After three months of living together, Spano was hospitalized for treatment of a venereal disease. He welcomed her visits and requested that she bring him cigarettes. But during his illness “she was left without means of subsistence,” the judge explained, “and therefore she had to ‘sell herself’ to other whites.” Aware of her behavior, Spano used to escape from the hospital and go to her *tukul* (hut) to beat her; the beatings continued until she called the carabinieri to stop him. Spano defended himself by claiming that Destà Agos was nothing but a prostitute. Indeed she was, the judge agreed, before he met her and during his hospitalization, but not in between. It was indisputable, in the estimation of the court, that throughout those three intervening months Spano and Destà Agos definitely had a conjugal relation.¹⁶⁴

Their story is quite puzzling. Giovanni Spano and Destà Agos—what did they mean to each other? Maybe Spano’s wife or fiancée in Italy would have met with the same jealousy and violence from him? If this were true one must take at face value his request to Destà Agos to go live with him “as a wife.” It could be that he felt free to consider Destà Agos as his property simply because he thought of himself as her racial superior, a conqueror in a conquered country. Each hypothesis is plausible, and both could be true. After all, mutual respect and equality are not guaranteed accompaniments to a marriage, and violence continues to be a “normal” component in many marriages today.

For her part Destà Agos probably saw in Spano some assurance of ongoing economic support. At the time of their meeting she was living off her relationships with men—askari at first, then Italians. Curiously, however, her claim to have been “like a wife” to Spano suggests that she may have viewed marriage as an economic transaction that included no

¹⁶⁴TRIBUNALE DI GONDAR, 19 November 1938, Pres. and drafter Maisto, defendant Spano.

promise of longevity; were this her view, she may have had *dämòz* marriage in mind. As I noted before, such an idea of marriage would not have excluded affection, nor did an exchange of money necessarily signify prostitution. Possibly, to save face, Destà Agos may have felt compelled to stress the difference between her sexual liaisons with “clients” before she began living with Spano and during his absence, and the kind of relationship she maintained with Spano for three months—a relationship she probably considered more prestigious. Following this line of thinking one would have to agree with the judge’s ruling that Destà Agos and Spano did in fact have a relation “of a conjugal nature.”

It is also interesting that Destà Agos turned to the Italian police for help. Even if the law on *madamato* was not intended to protect African women, women could manipulate it to secure protection against Italian men who behaved like masters. Often court decisions reflected that a man was convicted because of the incriminating testimony given by his madama. Unfortunately, it is difficult to tell whether the madame in these cases were intentionally incriminating their partners. We will never know, for instance, if Destà Agos was deliberately using her testimony about her “relation of a conjugal nature” as a means to take revenge on Spano for beating her.

Jealousy and thrashings were not uncommon in *madamato*, and the court cases I reviewed include several stories of violence. The Appeals Court of Addis Ababa once released a man who was able to show that “to possess a native woman he had had, each time, to use force ... He had hit and also beaten her ... until the woman, to avoid such a calamity, called the police.”¹⁶⁵ The police hauled him to court not for violence against the woman but rather on suspicion that he was having an affair with her. This case is symptomatic of the mentality of the Italian police, who regarded violence as a normal component of conjugal relations; however, violence could not be all there was to it. The man was let go not because he used violence—which could just as easily have been taken as a sign of jealousy and thus have served as evidence of his amorous feelings toward her—but because he had been forced to resort to it “each time” to get her to comply. If, on the contrary, his abusive behavior had been shown to be jealous rage, the law against the *madamato* would have worked to the advantage of the madama. Thus it was possible for a woman to invoke the law in her own defense (but alas, not always with success).

Other sources confirm that colonialism largely encouraged violence against women. Italian men often behaved as absolute masters. In a recent interview an Eritrean woman

¹⁶⁵CORTE D’APPELLO DI ADDIS ABEBA, 27 September 1939, Pres. and drafter Guerrazzi, defendant Cerullo.

recalled: “There were many instances of rapes of Eritrean women by Italian men.”¹⁶⁶ A Hungarian physician who served in Addis Ababa during the Italian invasion wrote in 1940: “Several times I witnessed the deportation of women to such houses [brothels] with revolting violence, one girl being attacked by three or four armed soldiers of civilization!”¹⁶⁷ Maria Messina, an Italo-Eritrean born in Asmara in 1917, stressed that the situation dramatically worsened after the Italo-Ethiopian war: “Mussolini,” she recently recalled, “sent to Eritrea scores of ‘black shirts.’ They were vulgar guys, scoundrels, jailbirds, and they raped women. We girls could no longer get out at night. There was a big difference,” she avowed, “between this rabble and old colonists.”¹⁶⁸

I found an interesting case from Mogadishu, which—though set far from Eritrea—merits attention as an illustration of attitudes common among Italian men in the colonial setting. Incidentally it also proves that the madamato was not limited to Christians. A particular colonial official who could no longer live with his madama—she had been expelled from the town and was living in a nearby village—was still paying all her expenses and sending gifts not only to her but also to her sister. According to the judge in this case, the official in question spent many nights with his madama and they often shared meals together. When he ran into financial trouble, she offered to return the jewels he had given her. The judge added (apparently in shock) that this official had even had pictures taken of himself with his madama. However, because he was full of jealousy he often beat her.¹⁶⁹ From this account the persistent ambiguity of the madamato emerges again quite clearly. Economic transactions, displays of masculine authority and possessiveness, violence—all these were present in this particular incarnation of the madamato, but they intermingled with other more subtle components, including feelings difficult to identify. Their story is unremarkable inasmuch as it includes the chief ingredients common to most accounts of abuse and subjugation in male-female relationships; an ordinary Italian couple—even in a non-colonial setting—might have painted a similar picture of their lives.

The photograph of this official and his madama, if we had it, would be likely to communicate valuable information. Was it like a picture of a hunter proudly displaying his

¹⁶⁶ Wilson, *Women and the Eritrean Revolution*, 13.

¹⁶⁷ Sava, “Ethiopia under Mussolini’s Rule.”

¹⁶⁸ Maria Messina, 28 December 1995.

¹⁶⁹ CORTE D’APPELLO DI ADDIS ABEBA, 13 December 1938, Pres. Carnaroli, drafter Nigro, defendant Augello.

trophy? Did he use the photo to boast about his conquest to his friends? As a rule, colonial photographs were yet another instrument to “objectify” African people; images of naked women (see plates 1 and 2) were constantly paraded before the European male gaze.¹⁷⁰ But some of the pictures, like certain court cases, reveal that madamato relationships were not always exclusive of affection or respect. The mother and child depicted in plate 8, for instance, could be representative of ordinary family life just about anywhere at the time.

We know very little, unfortunately, of a certain Mr. Fenzi, convicted of madamato in 1939. Since his guilt was immediately obvious to the judge, no detailed description of his crime was recorded. We do learn that Fenzi lived in a tukul with his madama, and his Italian family knew about it. His sister, in fact, had written him: “Tell me frankly if I can come and visit you and Hasce”; and in another letter, “I am very sorry to hear that the dear Hasce is no longer with you; you know, maybe it is better, because when one falls in love, one suffers so much. ... Anyway, when you see her, say hello to her for me, and tell her that I love her as a real sister would.”¹⁷¹ These letters indicate—more persuasively than most other evidence ever could—that Fenzi considered his relationship with Hasce a conjugal one, even by Italian standards. Few men were like Fenzi, to be sure; but he was not unique. A certain Mr. Seneca, for instance, acknowledged that

he had taken with him a native woman; he had brought her with him during his transfers; he loved her; he had always shared bed and meals with her; he had spent all his money on her; he had given presents to her and to her mother; he had paid for a medical treatment for her ovaries, in order to have a baby with her; he had hired a native as a servant for her; and he had prepared a letter to H. M. the King and Emperor to ask for an authorization to marry the native woman.¹⁷²

The judge’s pronouncement on Seneca’s behavior was unequivocal: obviously, Seneca was a serious case of *insabbiamento*. “Here it is not only a white who sexually desires the black Venus and keeps her isolated in order to have safe and comfortable encounters,” explained the judge; “the soul of the Italian is disturbed.” A prison term of one year and one month, wrote the judge, should be “enough to clear the mind of the Italian, and to dissipate the female in one hundred new encounters, that will make her less appealing for the national, and

¹⁷⁰ Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*.

¹⁷¹ TRIBUNALE DI HARAR, 23 August 1939, Pres. Ricci, defendant Fenzi.

¹⁷² CORTE D’APPELLO DI ADDIS ABEBA, 31 January 1939, Pres. Guerrazi, drafter Nigro, defendant Seneca.

will bond her to new interests and maybe to new cupboard loves.”¹⁷³ We will never know if Seneca’s devotion lasted beyond the duration of his imprisonment.

Another Italian man by the name of Fagà, who was also on trial in 1939, seems to have regarded his madama as a live-in, full-time prostitute who, because he paid for her, belonged to him. He had hired her as a servant for £150 a month—relatively good pay, given that the average monthly earnings for a servant seemed to be £100¹⁷⁴ and an askari’s pay was £200.¹⁷⁵ She and Fagà slept and sometimes ate together, and he presented her with perfume. But “the girl ran away to marry a person of her own race. He went to look for her, and, with the excuse he had already paid her a month’s salary, got her back. ... He was so sexually taken by her, that he boasted of her qualities with his acquaintances.”¹⁷⁶ Apparently, a woman’s experience of the madamato sometimes took the form of a forced economic transaction. It would be extremely valuable to know who convinced or forced the madama to go back to Fagà. The police? This is unlikely since he had tried to conceal his relationship from the police. Her family? If they had been benefitting from her £150 monthly pay, her family probably would have urged her to return to Fagà. In fact if their union had been deemed a marriage for *dämòz*, from the Eritrean point of view it was her duty to respect the agreements.

7 @ Eritreans and *madame*

The court case just described tells us that there was at least one Eritrean man who was willing to marry a madama (although it appears he did not succeed). This important information helps us to understand how Eritreans perceived the madamato. Regrettably, we have very little information on this issue—just a few scattered clues that point to the complexity of the matter.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Servants’ wages are sometimes mentioned in the court decisions.

¹⁷⁵ Le Houérou, *L’épopée*, 109.

¹⁷⁶ CORTE D’APPELLO DI ADDIS ABEBA, 5 September 1939, Pres. and drafter Carnaroli, defendant Fagà.

Some evidence suggests that Eritreans in general ostracized and marginalized madame. When I asked Letenkiel Tewolde, “Who were the madame?” she answered, “*Bedame*,¹⁷⁷ you mean,” clarifying that “they were the domestic servants of the Italians. They often had affairs with them. That is why nobody would have married a *bedama*. They said: ‘Oh, she has been a *bedama*!’” Letenkiel recalls that they used to sing a little song to women who had born children with Italian soldiers: “Beautiful dark girl, you have disgraced your people; when you pass by me, you have to turn down your head.”¹⁷⁸ Evidently, crossing ethnic boundaries could be socially perilous for Eritreans.

The Eritrean mothers of mixed-race children led very hard lives. Recognizing this, several women chose abortion and did not survive, reported Aster Gebremariam Demoz.¹⁷⁹ “Once you had a child with an Italian,” Letenkiel told me, “nobody would marry you.” When possible these women went back to their parents; otherwise they often went to work as housemaids¹⁸⁰ or in drinking houses.” However, B., a former madama whom I interviewed, told me that even though she had been deserted by her Italian partner with their three-year-old child, she received several offers of marriage from Eritrean men.¹⁸¹

Métis children, too, were made to suffer hardship and marginalization. In 1949 Giovanni Pollera, one of Alberto Pollera’s children, reported that of 6,000 fatherless and impoverished mixed-race children, 1,000 urgently needed shelter and treatment in orphanages.¹⁸² Also, the British Senior Civil Affairs Officer for Asmara and the Hamasien reported in 1948 that 1,000 métis children were “in serious want.”¹⁸³ As we have already seen,

¹⁷⁷ *Bedama* was the Eritrean vulgarization of the Italian term “madame” (Araia Tseggai, “Eritrean Women and Italian Soldiers,” 9).

¹⁷⁸ Letenkiel Tewolde et al., 13 May 1995. According to Araia Tseggai, Eritrean women who served as madame “were considered equivalent to plain prostitutes by the general populace.” However, he further suggests that their status improved over time, as Italians elevated “such ‘prostitutes’ [to] socially important positions in the Eritrean community” (Araia Tseggai, “Eritrean Women and Italian Soldiers,” 9–11).

¹⁷⁹ Letenkiel Tewolde et al. [The same interview as in the preceding note.]

¹⁸⁰ Similarly, in Ermina Dell’Oro’s fictional story of an Eritrean madama abandoned by her Italian man, the protagonist earns her living working like a servant (Dell’Oro, *L’abbandono*).

¹⁸¹ B., 15 August 1996.

¹⁸² Pollera, “Un grave e spinoso problema.”

¹⁸³ Letter of the Senior Civil Affairs Officer for Asmara and Hamasien to the Chief Secretary, 19 August 1949. Research and Documentation Center (Asmara). *British Military Administration*, box 288, f. 19/J/1, “Relief. Native

Rosalia Pianavia Vivaldi had set up orphanages for mixed-race children as early as the 1890s. In the 1940s the Catholic Church, the Eritrean Children's Welfare Society, and other charitable organizations intensified their efforts to meet the basic human needs of the growing multitude of métis children. But the hardships facing these children were not only economic. A métis woman who had migrated to Italy recently recalled that "in Eritrea the Italians called us 'bastards' and the Eritreans 'white asses'; we were neither fish, nor flesh, nor fowl."¹⁸⁴ For the most part, métis considered themselves Italians—at least when they were in Eritrea; when they emigrated to Italy, the reverse was true.¹⁸⁵

Evidently an exception to the rule, Maria Messina (mentioned earlier) recounted her story of successful integration into the Italian community despite her status as a métis. Recognized by her Italian father, a skilled workman who lived with her mother until his death in the 1930s, Messina was able to attend Italian schools and felt comfortable with her Italian schoolmates. Later on she married an Italian lawyer, and one of her mixed-race sisters married an Italo-Eritrean land owner who had studied in Italy with his brothers. A mixed-race friend of hers married an Italian engineer, and she knew of others with similar life stories.¹⁸⁶ Messina's account offers an interesting glimpse of a middle-class Italo-Eritrean milieu that resisted marginalization by the Fascists, but the Messinas seem to have been unusually fortunate.

In the 1940s an Eritrean man published a booklet denouncing the abuses perpetrated by Italians during the British occupation. He wrote that "Italians, if they get children from Eritrean women, do not look after them; they do not even want to see them; for they consider it a disgrace to have children by Eritrean women although they *run after our women like dogs*."¹⁸⁷ His excoriation of Italian abuses mixes in this passage with the sexist notion of "our women," which also appears in a rare document originally produced by Ethiopian anti-Italian resistance leaders. Shoa patriots wrote that the Italians were "appropriating our cattle, our

poor relief. Orphanage," #72.

¹⁸⁴ V. Costa, *L'etnia eritrea di Frosinone*, Tesi di laurea in etnologia, Università degli studi di Roma "La Sapienza," (A. A. 1986–87), 83.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ Maria Messina, 28 December 1994.

¹⁸⁷ Alazar Tesfa Michael, *Eritrea To-day*, 15. Emphasis added.

sons and have even begun selecting from *our women* to make them into their wives.”¹⁸⁸ In this document the anti-colonial stance is intermingled with signs of offended male pride. The marginalization of the madame could also be rooted in similar discourse. In fact, ironically, while the “our women” paradigm denied women’s personal agency, it simultaneously stigmatized and assigned fault to women who stayed with the enemy.¹⁸⁹ Another index of Eritrean resentment toward Italians for their mistreatment of Eritrean women—and perhaps for mixed-race unions *tout court*—is the popular reinterpretation given to Báhta Hagos’ 1894 revolt against (ostensibly) the Italian colonial policy of land alienation. Some Eritrean men, with a view to setting the record straight, informed me that Báhta Hagos took on the colonial authorities because “they had ordered him to give them the nicest women of his tribe.”¹⁹⁰

Eritrean society, however, was by no means monolithic in its judgment of madame, and not only for the obvious reason—namely, that the madame and métis numbered in the thousands. As we saw earlier, some Eritrean men were willing to marry former madame. Furthermore, mixed-race unions did not concern the madame alone; a madama’s family could be involved as well. For instance, G. M., whose grandmother helped her negotiate the terms of the relationship she would have with an Italian partner, explained to me that once she started living with “the engineer,” she was able to channel some economic support to her family.¹⁹¹ Another woman, K. S., whose lengthy relationship with a tailor from Sardinia ended only upon his death in the 1960s, told me that her mother lived with them.¹⁹² It seems unlikely that the families of these two women would have viewed mixed-race unions with the same resentment and scorn reported by other sources.

¹⁸⁸ Tekeste Negash, *No medicine*, 61. Emphasis added.

¹⁸⁹ It is ironic that such ideas were quite congruent with Fascist ideas about women. In a 1938 speech to the Consiglio nazionale of the PNF (National Fascist Party), Mussolini said that when the Amhara “saw that the Italians went around in rags worse than their own, that they lived in tukuls like their own, and that they *kidnapped their women*, etc., they said ‘This is not a race that brings civilization!’ and they rebelled. This is the reason, Mussolini continued, for the racial laws (Goglia, “Note sul razzismo,” 1260. Emphasis added).

¹⁹⁰ This interpretation of Báhta Hagos’ revolt came up in several informal interviews; here I have quoted from my interview with M. Mahri et al., 30 July 1996.

¹⁹¹ G. M., 13 August 1996.

¹⁹² K. S., 26 August 1996.

Final Considerations

It would be unwise of me to finalize a set of conclusions at this stage. As I acknowledged in the introduction, this is a work in progress which is ending where, ideally, further fieldwork and archival research will begin. Conclusions and closure are beyond the aims of the present work. Rather, I hoped to suggest some working hypothesis to take to the next stage of my future research.

At nearly every turn in my inquiry, the madamato stubbornly eluded any clear-cut definition. Diversity—in its actors and likewise in the kinds of relationships they developed—seems to have been its hallmark. As we have seen, the form and content of the relationships categorized as madamato varied widely: from heinous forms of child abuse and cases of the sexual exploitation of domestic servants, to genuine love stories (like those of Seneca and Fenzi) and dynamic multiracial families (like Maria Messina's). Clearly, the complexity of the madamato warrants a finer, more nuanced analysis that will address the plurality of the colonial experience.

The diversity of the relationships in question was in part an outgrowth of the widely differing power relations between the partners. G. M., the woman whose relationship with an Italian man was shaped by her grandmother's mediation, apparently had the backing of her family, and as a result she was in a stronger position relative to her partner than, say, the orphaned girls described by Martini, who seemed defenseless against the predation of unscrupulous Italian officers. G. M.'s position allowed her to decide whether or not she accepted the engineer's offer to live with him, and she could take steps to safeguard her respectability and the quality of her domestic life. For her, as she put it, it was not "just a matter of money;" it was "a matter of truth."¹⁹³ The assurance of income motivated many Eritrean women to work as domestic servants for Italian men, and then to live with them as madame, but the economic needs of these women can be counted as only one of a multiplicity of forces in the dynamics of the madamato. The fact that an Eritrean woman was in financial need before becoming a madama does not negate the possibility that she might have been seeking, in her life with an Italian partner, to assure for herself a particular quality of life and domestic stability.

Unfortunately, our fact-finding (and our speculation, for that matter) are constrained by the dearth of information about Eritrean women's experience under colonialism. For the

¹⁹³ G. M., 13 August, 1995.

most part, educated guesswork is our only guide to the trajectories of the lives of individual women before and after becoming madame and to the ways they conceptualized their relationships with their Italian partners. Occasionally, useful clues to the wills of individual women come from reports of madame calling police for protection from abusive partners, successfully escaping from bad relationships, or offering urgent economic help to their partners or remaining at their side through successive transfers. Despite its spareness of detail, information like this seems to support Cooper's assertion of "the importance of African agency in determining the shape the [colonial] encounter took."¹⁹⁴

To be sure, some of the contrasts marking certain articulations of the madamato were due to differences in the makeup of the colonizers. Dissimilarities in the socioeconomic backgrounds of the Italian colonists help to explain their behavioral differences, but it seems dubious to suggest that a linear causality existed between the class of the colonist and the kind of interracial relations he had. For instance, unlike their middle-class counterparts, working-class colonists were often unable to incur the expense of bringing their spouses (or fiancées) from Italy to Africa; therefore, these men were likely to be more inclined to form relationships with local women. As well, the duration of migratory projects—which could dictate a short- or a long-term stay in the colonies—may have affected the decision-making of some Italian men regarding the form of their interaction with local women. E. O., a tailor from Sardinia and the partner of a woman I interviewed, and Maria Messina's father both decided to settle permanently in Eritrea after they finished their military service in Africa. It is reasonable to expect that they conceptualized their relationships with the African women in their lives differently from, say, an officer who was serving in Eritrea for a limited time only, just to garner a promotion or a shorter tour of duty. It would seem that the colonial official Alberto Pollera, who chose to adopt Eritrea as his new homeland, was more like the former than the latter. Years of uninterrupted "community of bed and meals" (as the Fascist judges would have put it) and of shared parenting may not have produced the "perfect union of sentiments" Pollera sought,¹⁹⁵ but nevertheless may have given rise to important emotional investments.

Social stratification among Italians was particularly marked from 1935 on—a time when the government was intensifying efforts to swell the ranks of the colonists. Contemporary research on Italian working-class colonists has just begun to suggest how and

¹⁹⁴ Cooper, "Conflict and Connection," 1529.

¹⁹⁵ Pollera, *La donna in Etiopia*, 78.

to what extent Italian subalterns participated in the dominant colonial and racist ideology; further research is still needed. But certainly racism was not exclusive to middle-class colonists, and, it should be observed, the conquest of Ethiopia and the establishment of the Italian empire in east Africa received overwhelming popular support from Italians of all walks of life.¹⁹⁶

It is safe to say that most of the colonists in Eritrea believed in Fascist colonialism; thus, it ironic that so many of them violated governmental directives regarding mixed unions—directives which, as we have seen, were a key part of Fascist colonial policy. In the eyes of the government these men were directly challenging the ideological basis of Fascist colonialism. We have no evidence, however, suggesting that the 1937 law against the madamato was ever publicly challenged, except for the isolated voice of Alberto Pollera.¹⁹⁷ The Fascists' attempts to ban the madamato seem to have failed not under the pressure of a self-conscious and active opposition, but because such a prohibition conflicted with some of the colonists' primary material and emotional needs.

The Fascist government campaigned vigorously to enshrine marriage to an Italian woman as the ideal for colonists; in practice, however, the colonists' only available alternative to the madamato was not marriage but prostitution of a particularly commercialized and depersonalized nature. Prostitution seemed a poor substitute for the madamato, which was for the colonists not only a steady source of sex but also a complete package of domestic services combined with the kind of nurture and emotional support many colonists thought they had left behind in Italy.

The Fascist government was trying to impose a model of sexuality in colonial Eritrea that many men clearly found unsatisfactory. The terminology used by Fascist judges is itself an easy hint to the government's broader ideological project of promoting a concept of sexuality that reduced it to a physiological function. Whenever we encounter judges speaking of "males" needing to "release their lustfulness" and about sex as a "passing outlet," we not only witness the depersonalization of African women into "females" (which was nothing new for colonial Africa), but in the same discourse we also see Italian men similarly reduced to and lumped together as undifferentiated "males."

¹⁹⁶ See Dore, "Guerra d'Etiochia"; Tassis Torriani, "'A te caro libro'"; Taddia, *La memoria*; Labanca, "Coscritti in colonia"; Guerrini, "Esotismo"; and Le Hou  rou, *L'  pop  e*.

¹⁹⁷ Goglia has found in the Italian Foreign Offices archives a memo by Alberto Pollera dated 28 March 1937, wherein he petitions the government not to issue the law against the madamato (Goglia, "Una diversa politica").

Thousands of miles away from home, alone, and in a foreign country, some of the colonists were after something more than sex as a “passing outlet”; some wished to reconstruct a “home” for themselves and thus needed all that only a madama—and not a prostitute—could provide. Bearing this in mind, we see how the experience of the madamato could serve as an index to the decision-making of individual men and women who were striving, within the overall structure of colonial domination, to create meaningful domestic lives for themselves.

At the same time we should consider Stoler’s warning that “miscegenation signaled neither the presence nor absence of racial discrimination; hierarchies of privilege and power were written into the *condoning* of interracial unions, as well as into their condemnation.”¹⁹⁸ Indeed, to “condone” the madamato was not to ignore race; furthermore I wish to emphasize that the madamato itself was not free of racism. The court cases provide ample evidence of how violence and affective bonds, sex and racism frequently intermingled in these relationships.

Violence in the context of the madamato was often the product of racism and colonial domination; however, violence against madame was a manifestation of an attitude toward women which predated the Italian penetration of Eritrea and was common elsewhere (outside the colonies). The attitude to which I refer is, of course, sexism. Recall the jurist Rosso’s claim that the law against the madamato was designed to suppress “relationships on an *equal basis*.”¹⁹⁹ What judges construed to be an “equal basis” was hardly so, but gender inequality in conjugal relations—and its occasional display in violence toward women—was not an anomaly by most Italian standards. Thus, sexism—along with racism and colonial domination—shaped the madamato, and the madame’s subjection to sexist violence was just one of the “natural” characteristics of conjugal life no matter how disputed, site-specific, or improvised its form. In other words, some of the unions considered to be madamato were indeed marked by exploitation and abuse, but these same relationships could also bear emotional significance and be viewed by both their participants and external observers as “relations of a conjugal nature.”

¹⁹⁸ Stoler, “Carnal Knowledge,” 86. Emphasis in the original. Sòrgoni has also confirmed Stoler’s analysis in reference to the Eritrean case (Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi*, 215-16).

¹⁹⁹ Rosso, “Definizione,” 683. Emphasis added.

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Adhanet Adgoy and Hareg Nega also contributed during part of the interview. I am deeply grateful to Aster Gebremariam Demoz, who arranged for the interview to take place, served as interpreter, and was herself a source of valuable information.

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²⁰⁰ Criminal court cases in Italy are usually identified by the court, the name of the presiding judge, the name of the judge who wrote the decision (here identified as "drafter") and the name of the defendant(s); sometimes the name of the Public Prosecutor is also given. All the court decisions I examined were published; therefore I furnish the reference for the relevant publication(s).

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