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Source: *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Summer 2012), pp. 155-172

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/reseafrilite.43.2.155

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The Color of Love: *Madamismo* and Interracial Relationships in the Italian Colonies

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on "*madamas*," colonized women who provided "the comforts of home" to male Italian settlers in East Africa. While the madamas represented only a small fraction of colonized women in the Horn of Africa, they emerged as a key feature of the Italo-African encounter and dominated colonial discourses on and representations of native women. Native women were stereotypically represented as Black Venuses, voyeuristically gazed at and petrified in atemporal settings without any sociocultural specificity and dismissed as "victims" of Italian colonialism, or as dangerous and mysterious objects. Even early colonial narratives that expressed some sympathy for the violated indigenous people were unanimous in portraying the madamas who consorted with Italian men as sorceresses, femmes fatales, spies, witches, or manipulators. The madamas were often blamed for Italian military incompetence and for turning many Italian men into "insabbiati," literally "covered with sand" and figuratively "gone native." Historians, ethnographers, and writers have inevitably tended to concentrate on the colonizers rather than on the colonized, and on the sexuality of white males in nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonialism. Based on emerging studies on the historical nature of *madamismo* in Eritrea, and its cultural implications, this article attempts to bring a gender corrective to the dominant discourses surrounding madamismo and to account for the experiences, legacies, and voices on the color of love in colonial times from the colonized perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

As amply debated and theorized in postcolonial critique, colonial authority and racial distinction were fundamentally structured in gendered terms. The black female body became not only an icon of sexualized beauty but also the site of interaction, or even better, struggle, between the colonizers and the colonized, a position apparently of objectification and silencing that requires further exploration and articulation in order to retrieve the position and agency of those doubly-inscribed female subjects.

The conquest of Africa was meant to offer not only a reward in territorial and ideological terms but also in personal terms, through unlimited access to local African women. These women were portrayed in the sexualized propaganda as Black Venuses, closer to nature and highly desirable for their enhanced sensuality and exoticism. These Black Venuses were voyeuristically gazed at and petrified in an atemporal setting without any sociocultural specificity. They were also seen as a welcome alternative to European middle- and upperclass women, who were obliged to uphold the stricter sexual and moral codes of the time at home, despite the emergence of the first feminist movement.

The liaisons between the white man and the African woman took different forms and labels. In the Italian case, the interracial sexual relationships were confused around the lines of prostitution, concubinage, and *madamato*. This article concentrates on the figure of the "madamas," colonized women who provided, as Ruth Iyob writes, "the comforts of home" to male Italian settlers in the Horn of Africa (233–44). Contrary to general opinion, the madamas represented only a small percentage of colonized women in the Horn of Africa. Yet they emerged as crucial figures in the Italo-African encounter and dominated colonial discourses on the representations of native women. Opinions on the madamas were contradictory, and symbolic of the contested reasons for the Italian presence in Africa: on the one hand the madamas were considered to be powerful as they served as cultural filters between the colonizer and the colonized, functioning as a contact zone in the transmission of values, bias, and myths of a colonized ethnography; on the other hand they were perceived as the double victims of a patriarchal system at home, and of the imported exploitative colonial regime.

These double standards concerning the position of madamas in the colonies led to a very ambivalent relation towards them from both the side of the rulers as of the colonized: they attracted sympathy for being the victims of empire, violated indigenous people, but also anxiety as they were considered potentially subversive to the colonial rule by being sorceresses, femmes fatales, spies, witches, or manipulators. The madamas were often blamed for Italian military incompetence and for turning many Italian men into "insabbiati," literally "covered with sand," and figuratively "gone native."

The commodification and objectification of these women in the colonial and postcolonial eras poses the question of the identity of these women. Historians and anthropologists have inevitably tended to concentrate on the colonizers rather than on the colonized, and on the sexuality of white males in nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonialism. Even the few works on the children born of interracial sexual relations in the colonies have emphasized the perspective of the

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AT THE POSTOFFICE: "I wish to send this souvenir of East Africa to a friend of mine." Enrico De Seta, series of humoristic postcards *Africa Orientale*. Roma, Edizioni d'arte V. E. Boeri 1935–1936, cartolina, colori, 10.5 × 15 cm. CRSB. A series of these postcards were reprinted in A. Mignemi, ed., *Immagine Coordinata per un Impero. Etiopia 1935–36* (Turin: Gruppo Editoriale Forma, 1984), p. 162.

colonizers, focusing on their discourses and policies relative to the mixed-race population rather than on the accounts of the Italo-Eritrean people themselves.

It is therefore important to address the other side of the historical account and of these dominant representations that often continue unchanged into the postcolonial era, and attempt to investigate who these women were and what they wanted: what were the reasons for their becoming madamas? Was it out of choice in the hope of a better future, for economic reasons, or the result of coercion? Was it perhaps motivated by their need to enter the male realm of power, and how did they expect this to improve their lifelong strategies? How were they seen by their communities: as useful intermediaries and providers of information, job opportunities, and high-positioned contacts, or as traitors? How did they construct their relationship with the Italian males, and in what way did they acquire agency through it?

This article attempts to offer a glimpse, whenever possible, of the experiences, legacies, and voices on the color of love in colonial times from the colonized perspective. Interracial relations were linked to debates on racial theory, concerning the fearful discourse of racial mixing and miscegenation. In this article the term interracial relations will be conveyed and enforced as a postcolonial term that refers to the ambivalences produced by the colonial discourse in its interlocution

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with the colonized. These ambivalences created visible and invisible disruptions of colonial authority, and opened the space for the location of subaltern agency.

These women were in fact not simply the "victims" of the violence of empire, but thanks to the hybrid location they inhabited, they were also agents in an ambivalent regime of domination and submission. Their being close to power, or to the so-called colonial masters, allowed them to create a vast zone in which they at times undermined colonial authority or enhanced their own personal position.

Based on emerging studies on the historical nature of madamismo in Eritrea and its cultural implications, this paper attempts to bring a gender corrective to the dominant discourses surrounding madamismo as doomed and exploitative interracial relationships, and to recover some of the complex dynamics of power and racial bias that characterized it.

THE COLOR OF LOVE: *MADAMISMO* AND COLONIAL SEXUAL POLITICS

At the height of the Italian empire, many recruitment campaigns appealed to the virility and superiority of Italian men to encourage them to become soldiers, workers, teachers, and entrepreneurs in the far territories of the AOI (Africa Orientale Italiana).[1] One of the seductive notes was therefore not only the rhetoric of expansion, of venturing into uncharted and virgin soil, but the prospect of encountering exotic native women who were depicted through photographs, advertisements and literary accounts as Veneri Neri—Black Venuses: beautiful, docile, and, above all, sexually available. These images worked as one of the most effective propaganda tools, as the sexual metaphor managed to fuse the public discourse with the private one.

Even though Italian men were not supposed to assume that colonial expansion entitled them to sexual rewards, the conquest of women was not only a "metaphor for colonial domination," as Ann Laura Stoler suggests, but also "part of its substance" ("Carnal Knowledge" 54–55). At the beginning of the Italian colonial expansion,[2] sexual encounters between the white colonizers and local women were considered not only normal but desirable, as it facilitated regulation of the sexual politics in the far-flung territories of the motherland, where almost no white women were present, unless as wives of important dignitaries and officials. Similar practices were also widespread in other parts of European empires, as Stoler amply documented for the practice of concubinage in the French and Dutch empires. She writes that these customs were considered to have a stabilizing effect on the social order and colonial health as it "kept men in their barracks and bungalows, out of brothels and less inclined to perverse liaisons with one another." ("Making Empire Respectable" 40).

When the Italians arrived in Africa they introduced and imposed their own categorizations of sexual relationships, often transforming local ones. Generally speaking, Italian men classified their Eritrean sexual partners either as *sciarmutte* or *madame*.[3] *Sciarmutta* was an Italianized version of the Arabic term *sharm ta*, which means prostitute; *madama* was instead used for the indigenous woman, called *madame*, who cohabited with the Italian colonizers. The same term *madama* testifies to the little respect held for the black woman, as the term is a distorted

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These series of postcards of "donne bilene" (women from Eritrea) were part of the edizioni Baratti, Asmara, and were reprinted in A. Mignemi, ed., *Immagine Coordinata per un Impero. Etiopia 1935–36* (Turin: Gruppo Editoriale Forma, 1984), p. 106, p. 109.

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version of a word only used in Piedmont, in the north of Italy, to indicate a woman of high rank; it is an expression that undoubtedly had a denigrating connotation in its colonial application.

In the literary productions of the period, comprising ethnographic accounts, journalistic reportage, travelogues, diaries, accounts by missionaries, explorers, or politicians, along with novels and memoirs, *madamato* is described as a folkloristic phenomenon, something used to entertain the Italian residents and soldiers to distract them from their boredom and, in the worst cases, from the colonial spleen, that sense of nostalgic alienation from the motherland.

Madamato was amply accepted because it was practiced outside the community of origin, in the colony, where a different morality applied. However, to have a madama was a luxury that was not always possible for lower-ranking soldiers who had to make do with the many prostitutes who were often pushed by misery and poverty towards the Italian camps. Therefore, prostitution, characterized by racial contempt, constituted the lowest level of interaction between the white male and the local black woman.[4]

Madamato is to be intended as a reality of fact, and refers to a sexual relationship, for a shorter or longer period, between a European male, or generally someone of white race, with an indigenous woman: the relationship does not undergo any form of legitimation under Italian law. Madamato was therefore not only motivated by the abusive theories of the loose moral conduct of the women in the colonies,[5] but also by the wrong interpretation of local matrimonial customs, such as the *demoz*. Unlike the more solemn and religious marriage, the demoz was also a local form of marriage characterized by a temporary union sealed by payment. These unions were recognized by local customary law, which protected the rights of women and of any children born of those relationships. As Giulia Barrera writes, based on the writings of Conti Rossini, the demoz union was regulated by a comprehensive set of rules. 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 household, and be loyal to him. Children of such marriages were considered fully legitimate and their fathers had to pay for their upbringing. Once the union was disbanded, the father was given custody of the children. Even if the father refused custody, he was required to continue to provide support. It was possible for a demoz to end in solemn marriage. Guarantees to respect the agreements and customary law were also provided (20).

It is no coincidence that many local women considered themselves the legitimate wives of the Italian men. However, this was certainly not the case for the Italian men, who definitely did not consider the madama anywhere close to the definition of a wife, but mostly just as a "comfort wife" as Iyob describes them. In most cases, they saw the madamas as servants or concubines, in a form of relationship based on domination, which meant that the madamas and the children they produced could easily be abandoned without further complications once the return to the home country was possible or necessary. The madama had no legal protection should her children be taken away by the colonizers, to be, for example, raised as full Italians, often by the colonizer's Italian wife back home.

Several historians and anthropologists[6] of the time considered madamato an Italian adaptation and appropriation of the local practice of demoz. The Italian anthropologist Barbara Sorgoni speculates whether madamato could be seen

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as the interracial version of demoz. Her answer is definitely negative. Madamati existed throughout the colony, whereas demoz was a union contracted by Tigrinyan women in particular.

As Gabriella Campassi writes, the quick spread of madamato relationships and simple prostitution was brought about by the sudden increase in numbers of Italian men enrolled in Africa for the war in Ethiopia, but also by the new pervading ideological climate that promoted the superiority of the Italian race. This quickly became an instrument for social and political destabilization. The resultant problems can be listed along the following lines: disorder and social tension was caused by the occupying troops; the phenomenon of "métissage" was assuming serious and alarming proportions; the intimate and sexual promiscuity between conquerors and colonial subjects, also caused by housing problems and the nonexistence of separate areas, compromised the superiority of the white race. According to the new racial theories promulgated by Mussolini, these "fraternal relationships" with black people had to be vehemently discouraged. This meant a total political inversion operated by the regime with respect to the native female subjects.

The condemnation of cohabitation with a woman from the AOI evolves in various stages: from penalization in 1937, to the exclusion of any relationship as a violation of the prestige of the white race as expressed in "La Carta sulla Razza" (1938), and to the abrogation of the legislation that allowed métis children to acquire Italian citizenship (1940). In a circular letter to all Italian residents, Governor Guglielmo Nasi wrote: "Aut Imperium aut Voluptas" 'Either Empire or Pleasure.' All new legislation discredited sexual contact between Italian men and African women as deleterious to Italian prestige.

Following the introduction of the new racial laws, and the sanction (imprisonment of up to five years) imposed for sexual relations with an indigenous woman, a new problem emerged, namely, the scarcity of sexually available women in the colonies. The solution to send white Italian prostitutes seemed to conflict with the ideology of a nation superior both in racial and moral terms. This solution blatantly confronted the fascist regime with its double moral standards concerning matters of sexual policy. At the beginning of the empire, the display of the exotic love affair between local women and Italian soldiers was encouraged and stimulated to promulgate Italian virility and audacity. However, after the introduction of the apartheid laws, the racial eugenics inhibited any sexual fantasy as the result of the imposed color bar. Italian women were sent to the colonies in order to restore the moral standards and idea of superiority of the white nation upon the degenerate sexual habits of the natives. However, to send Italian women as prostitutes to the colonies in order to cater to the sexual desires of the Italian soldiers (and avoid the continuation of their interracial relations) clearly signified a backlash of the initially promulgated virility model and of the morality code attached to Italian women. What is interesting here is that the colonial novel dies out in this period, as all ideological instances that motivated amorous relationships with a colored woman cease to exist, or at least it was forbidden to refer to them.

At this stage, madamato is linked to considerable social peril and becomes highly stigmatized and relegated to the realm of the nonrepresented. Whoever defied apartheid ran the risk of "indigenamento," i.e., going native, of moral degeneracy and racial perversion. Until racial legislation was further developed,

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the inferiority of the métis was ideologically mitigated by the biological input of the white man. Under legislation, it was possible for a métis child to acquire Italian citizenship if recognized by the Italian father. However, on the introduction of new legislation on 1 May, 1940, n. 822:

> The métis child assumes the status of the native parent and he/she is considered native to all intents and purposes: he/she can no longer be recognized by the parent citizen, nor can he/she use the name of the parent. He/she must be maintained, educated, and instructed at the exclusive cost of the native parent. Institutes, schools, colleges, special boarding houses for métis children, even if of a conventional nature, are forbidden.[7]

To prevent Italy from becoming "un popolo di meticci" 'a country of métis children,' the regime intervenes with a series of programs aimed at recomposing the family structure in order to create social equilibrium. The adventurous character of Italian sexual masculinity, which was one of the motors of colonial expansion, is now considered an obstacle to ruling the colony in a racially superior manner. Attention is focused on the Italian woman who is once again counterposed to the black woman: the colony, once the realm of bachelors, becomes a realm for married men.[8]

A series of new initiatives attempted to increase the number of young single white women to send to Africa. However, these measures were often vulgar and offended Italian morality, as they almost openly put forward a form of female prostitution to counterpose the black one. The first courses to prepare fascist women for their role in the empire were introduced in 1938, but very few women were willing to leave for a place like Ethiopia, a country that was still not particularly civilized, and where unrest was still rife. The number of women in AOI was never to exceed ten thousand. The government even resorted to the expedient of sending French prostitutes to circumvent the morale impasse, but this solution was short lived.

Though declared illegal, madamato certainly did not disappear. It might have changed in nature or practice, but there is much evidence to suggest that the number of cases of madamato actually increased following the ban, generally because more Italians were living in Eritrea in the late 1930s than ever before. This reminds us that the gap between government policies and actual behavior can be considerable.

AFRICAN WOMEN AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

The black woman becomes the domain of dispute, but never the subject. In the latter phase of fascist rule she comes to be seen as culpable for weakening the prestige of the superior race, by meddling with Italian men who had come obey the new strict regulations of the fatherland. For that reasons, madamas were banned from the male public and political spheres, in order to guarantee the clear-cut divide between rulers and ruled. Madamas thereby lost their public role, but also their symbolic one as exotic and seductive incentive to imperial rule.

The reasons for women to enter into a madamato relationship can only be speculated upon due to the lack of information about how the practice was perceived in the eyes of the local population, and about how local women also

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perceived it. It is very difficult to establish the identity of those "madamas," as far as their ethnic background, age, and social position are concerned. The reasons for becoming a madama are obscure since there are not many records of the madama's stories and she does not have a voice, apart from accounts in the legal reports of the court trials of the time.

Both in the literature of the time and in legal reports from 1937, there is no space for the reality of the madamas, or for the colonized woman—they are always described through white eyes, and eventually disappear from written records. Some of the scarce testimonies recorded in court were meant to corroborate accusations against the Italian male (proof of his jealousy, for example, which would have motivated his emotional involvement and therefore lead to stronger sanctions) and not to assess the position of the woman. This testifies to the difficulty of retrieving the "voice," to use a Spivak term, of those indigenous women who had a stake in their decision to consort with an Italian man and often had children (the fruit of miscegenation) by them.

What we have instead is a wide-ranging set of representations through photographs compiled for official and private collections, which offers a glimpse of the *madamas,* or comfort wives.[9] As I argued in "Beyond the Black Venus," the advent of photography was a powerful medium that gave visual form to colonial culture and helped forge a link between the empire and the domestic imagination. Most of these representations involved the Black Venuses, local women from different ethnic backgrounds often photographed bedecked in an astonishing array of jewels, and with a naked upper torso. These images conveyed the very ambivalent territory between the artistic portrayals of the aestheticized exotic female body and the pornographic look. The claim of ethnographic reportage as opposed to voyeuristic gaze distinguished professional photography from amateur photography. However, even the so-called "serious ethnographic" photographic studies are constructed from a particular Eurocentric perspective, despite the claim of conveying the reality of the image. These women were often portrayed out of context, often in a studio, with props and ethnically unspecified jewels and hairdos that were only intended to reinforce the image of these women as being closer to nature and petrified in time, but most of all as sensual and sexually available (Ponzanesi, "Beyond the Black Venus"; Bini). It is therefore difficult to extract the subjective position of the madamas from this visual rhetorical apparatus, even when represented in official photography beside their Italian companions.

In her important study on interracial relationships in Eritrea, Barrera writes that "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" (6). However, the recognition of the superior position of the European man vis-à-vis the colonial encounter does not mean that there is no space for African agency, or for the position of local women in determining the shape these encounters took. As Barrera further writes: "[T]he madamato was a set of relationships grounded in the material basis of colonialism and shaped by colonial discourse, 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" (6).

Italian opinion of the time was that many Eritrean women united themselves with an Italian man in madamato out of pure avidity. The Italian imagined that

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once abandoned, these women would find new lovers and a new, easy source of income (Pollera, 49). But we can only speculate that some women were forced to become the "madama" of an Italian, or that they were not in a position to protect themselves against the will of the colonizers. We can detect from the testimony of Ferdinando Martini that there were cases of extreme coercion involving young girls taken in by Italians as domestic servants and then forced into madamato. Others could have been girls who were abandoned and taken home by any man who had a mind to. However, the case of forced sexual violence, and rape, especially of underage girls, was still seen as a punishable crime, but a minor sanction was imposed if the girl was considered to have been abandoned.

Other women had no alternatives. To a significant degree, the living conditions of Eritrean women during the period of widespread diffusion of madamato (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 (for example, its settlement policy and its exploitation of Eritrea as a source of raw materials and as a market for Italian products), it was very successful as a source of colonial soldiers, or *ascari.* Italy recruited ascari for its colonial wars in Somalia, Libya, and to a greater extent for Ethiopia. Over 60,000 ascari were deployed for the Italo-Ethiopian war, which meant depriving the Eritrean economy of 40% of its male labor force. According to Tekeste Negash, "[F]rom 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" (51).

As Barrera remarks, Tekeste Negash did not articulate his analysis in gendered terms, but we can infer that the drain of men from the countryside and the subsequent collapse of the agricultural system might have had a detrimental effect on women's lives. We can assume that some of the Eritrean women were forced to find alternative means of self-support and unwillingly found themselves in a position to meet the Italian demand for prostitutes, domestic servants and madamas.

Another reason for an Eritrean woman to enter a situation of madamato was the impossibility of entering a proper marriage. Among the Tigrinya, the bride brought a dowry, but Muslims required the groom to pay a bride-price. This difference might possibly account for the high percentage of Christians among the madamas, for madamato might have been an appealing alternative for a young Tigrinya woman, especially if her family could not afford a dowry.

Sorgoni also indicates a series of situations in which, according to local custom in cases of divorce or illegitimate pregnancy, women, particularly those belonging to aristocratic groups, had to be moved away from their social environment. These women, and also those who left behind them a life of poverty, semislavery, or no dowry, or those women who belonged to categories traditionally discriminated against such as blacksmiths and vase makers, were forced to move towards the centers inhabited by Italians, in search of a job that was a necessity, but also a way of escaping from repressive situations.

Therefore, to become the madama of an Italian often meant improving one's financial position and also one's social position, beyond the restrictions imposed by the society of origin. In this sense many madamas could even promote their social position and reach the point of playing a very influential role in colonial society, becoming crucial intermediaries between the colonizers and the local

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population who counted on them for access to jobs and favors from the Italians (Sorgoni, *Parole e Corpi* 136).

Barrera maintains that women with the best negotiating power were women who negotiated 100 thalers as the price for their virginity, women who managed to get servants for their own personal care or who were presented with pride by Italians to their superiors. In this sense, the literature refers to the influence that some of the madamas exerted on the decisions of Italian citizens. This would later become a cause for concern, and fascist propaganda would use the theme of the dangerousness of the madamas who could possibly be spies for the indigenous resistance forces.

In this connection, Iyob writes that the madamas created a network of patron-client relations, based on their relationship of intimacy with those in power, using their material gains as a passport to achieving acceptance in traditional society: "The maintenance of this permeable entrée into indigenous society was not without peril, however. Depending on the perspective of the narrative, these women led multiple lives as concubines, spies, whores, and heroines" (239).

INTO THE POSTCOLONIAL CONDITION

The lack of direct sources to the lives of these women makes it indispensable to look more closely not only at the anthropological, legal, and memorialistic accounts of the time, but also at the literary representations published in recent decades that attempt to fill these gaps, silences and ambivalences, as I explore in more detail in my work on Italian postcolonialism, *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture*. An interesting account is Erminia Dell'Oro's first novel, *The Abandonment: An Eritrean Story* (*L'Abbandono. Una Storia Eritrea* (Torino: Einaudi, 1991), which has been translated into French and Dutch. The author is an Italian Jew who grew up in the Eritrean colony as a child and decided to revisit her "colonial memory" with this interesting novel whose central theme is a madamato relationship that ended with the madama being abandoned. The novel shifts the centre of the narrative voice from the Italian colonizer Carlo to the Eritrean madama Sellas, to their daughter Marianna, thereby presenting different ideological perspectives on the impact of colonization. In this way Dell'Oro attempts to convey both the perspective of the colonizer and the colonized, but she also creates a generational shift, with Marianna who bridges the two worlds through her mixed ethnicity, as well as through her age, which positions her as a daughter of the empire who manages to find a belated answer once the mother has died, to the reason for their abandonment. She is the embodiment of the postcolonial citizen, divided between languages, nationalities, and races, who yet refuses to assume the position of the passive victim scarred by history.

The story's plot develops as follows: after a brief period of emigration to America, which failed because of the Great Depression, the father, Carlo Cinzi, a Lombard fleeing poverty, ends up in the colony to work for the railways. This dual emigration embodies the mixed fate of the Italian national identity in the 1930s that is built on contemporary migration to the Americas and colonization in Africa. In Massawa, Carlo meets Sellass, who at the age of twelve had also left home, Adi Ugri in the Eritrean highlands, to escape drought and famine and to seek a better future. Sellass does not consider herself to be "the servant of a white

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man but his woman" (43). They have two children and live happily until the change of mentality and the growing apartheid imposed on the colonies leads Carlo to become aware of the difficulties of a future family life. He is often warned by the judicial authorities, before they proceed with a legal trial against him. As a consequence, Carlo plans to flee and prepares Sellass and the children for his departure, promising them that he will return. This is the last moment between Sellass and Carlo. In reality, he leaves his Eritrean family at the outbreak of World War II, never to return.

A life of bitterness and resentment then starts for Sellas, who finds it hard to make ends meet, in a society quickly changing from Italian to British domination, to Ethiopian usurpation, which causes her to lose the only possession and memory of her happy life with Carlo, their house in Massawa at the hand of *sciftas,* Ethiopian bandits. Her disbelief at having been abandoned will hound her for the rest of her life, making her persona slowly become a passing shadow through the streets of the city. Marianna refuses to be defeated and a victim, and decides to fight to reclaim her Italian side, by applying for Italian citizenship using the document that her father had left them before his departure, in which he recognizes Marianna and Gianfranco as his children. However, the mother refuses to give her the documents, as Carlo must be considered dead and forgotten. Marianna is forced to resort to borrowing another Italian man's name, that of Gianfranco's employer, and carrying the shame of not having been entitled to her own rightful Italian lineage. The story ends with Marianna, who in the meantime has emigrated to Italy, finally receiving the information about her lost father. In fact, the boat on which he fled was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine, and Carlo, one of the few survivors, was rescued by the British and incarcerated in a prisoner of war camp in South Africa. At the end of the war, he had married a white South African woman and had two children, one of whom died at the age of twenty. From her half-sister Oriel Douglas, Marianna receives the news that her father is already dead. The reasons for her father's abandonment can no longer be fully retrieved.

This brief summary corroborates, in fictional terms, all the theories on the motivation behind Italian colonial expansion: the apparently harmonious encounter between the colonizers and the local women, but one obviously marked by unequal power relationships that, in the practice of madamato, had advantages for the Italians but no guarantees for local women and their offspring; the brusque and unwelcome imposition of the apartheid laws that destabilized the colonial order that had been achieved; the damaging effects of the role of Italy in World War II on the decolonization process in Eritrea; and the hardship the many metis children, the real postcolonial subjects, had to endure in order to claim their right to Italian citizenship; and also the possibility of migration and integration in a country that had successfully repressed and removed its colonial past.

These narratives facilitate a transition from the colonial past to the contemporary postcolonial contexts and render palpable the consequences of those racialized and sexualized politics that use the colonial female subject as a site of conflict and domination, but also as a cultural and intimate mediator. Despite their subjugated positions, many of these madamas reached a position close to power, and their access to colonial intelligence, tactics, and strategies proved crucial for the indigenous liberation movements and for the better location of their métis children, some of whom managed to acquire Italian citizenship before the legislation of 1940.

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Struggle Characterized by Optimism and Confidence

Female Eritrean fighter. (Government of Eritrea, Department of Culture and Information. Published in 1993 by the Government of Eritrea, Department of External Affairs, PO Box 190, Asmara) source: http://www.dehai.org/conflict/history/birth_of_a_nation.htm

However, many of the voyeuristic and stereotypical representations of the black female as both "primitive and sexually available" and "menacing and dangerous" continued, almost unchanged, into the postcolonial era, showing that racist thinking is still widespread, though it resonates differently in contemporary perceptions of the other. It is therefore important to recode those outdated colonial images with less biased representations that re-narrate the colonial encounter from new standpoints and through diverse representational practices.

Iyob, for example, explores how postcolonial narratives of Eritrea produced guerrillas, heroines of the war of independence, who after their victory in 1991 receded into the background of patriarchal society:

> While pre-independence posters of Kalashnikov-toting women combatants became less visible, the ubiquitous colonial postcards of half-naked women continued to be proudly displayed as commercial items in shops. Women combatants, who had entered the public arena as agents of change, were no longer accorded the public space they had carved out through their participation in the war. (234)

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Rashaida woman, Danakil coast, Eritrea. © Eric Lafforgue.
www.ericlafforgue.com. With permission of the photographer.

The author writes that 1991 was not only a historic date that marked the liberation of Eritrea from Ethiopian occupation, but also the centenary of the consolidation of Italian rule. At this time in history, which marks the coming together of colonial and postcolonial histories, the most popular poster in Eritrea depicted a bare-breasted adolescent girl. Another poster accompanying the narrative of postwar narrative depicted exotic women from the Rashaida community. These two posters circulated internationally, and the Rashaida women, either dancing or in indolent postures, became the most common representations of the New Eritrea. The official narrative history extolled the *tegadelti* (female combatants) who constituted 30% of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) that liberated the country in 1991. A decade after liberation, the heroine of the maquis–in particular, combatants from rural areas, who learned only the skills of war–were abandoned to the vagaries of the free market society and rejected by traditional, patriarchal society.

Iyob argues that in the new Eritrean constitution drafted between 1994 and 1997, there is no place for the rights of women in the new nation. Female ex-warriors suddenly find themselves concubines or the "comfort wives" of the male dignitaries in the new regimes, who, not unlike their nineteenth-century predecessors, are blamed for causing the moral degradation of the new leading élite.

I think there is no better conclusion to the reflections summarized above than this final note by Iyob, who sees in the madamas not only the paradigm of colonial sexual relations but of gender imbalances in postcolonial societies at large. In her interpretation, madamismo is not just a social practice that pertains to the

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archive of the past, but a constantly resurgent phenomenon, which, in a new guise, continues to put women in an ambivalent position:

> Peeling off the images of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provides us with a more realistic sense of the contemporary era, and enables us to understand and explain the effects of power relations of the past on those of the present. In so doing, the silence of the images of the past may be broken, and the promise of future redress of gendered inequalities and injustices may become possible in the twenty-first century [. . .] attention needs to be paid to how the past continues to shape the present, if women are to be freed from new forms of patriarchal bondage in the twenty-first century. (241)

We can therefore conclude that the position of in-betweenness and ambivalence embodied by the madamas—at the borderline between controversial eugenics and affirmative self-narrative—re-emerges in the everyday reality of postcolonial women, both those who migrated and those who stayed put in their home countries. This complexity can be attributed to the double binding role that women have to the emancipatory agenda of feminism and to the localized policies of nationalist discourses, by which they often feel betrayed. However, it would be incorrect to position these post-freedom fighters as victims of a new political and social order and as incapable of imprinting their leadership upon the new national model. It is nonetheless important to account for the many paradoxes, complicities, and inequalities that are present in postcolonial Eritrea as much as at the height of the colonial empire, showing that the intersections between gender, ethnicity, religion, age, and caste do continue to shape in different ways the grammar of inclusion and exclusion in contemporary Eritrea that resonate with global patterns of feminist emancipation and neocolonial formations.

NOTES

1. Italy's imperial enterprises have so far received little attention in comparative colonial studies. Indeed, until recently, Italian colonialism was hardly accounted for in Italian national history. This positions the historical studies on Italian colonialism into a dual form of marginalization, with respect to its role in modern Europe and for the construction of the Italian national consciousness. However, though more limited in time and restricted geographically than the French and British empires, Italian colonialism had a significant impact on the development of metropolitan conceptions of race, national identity, and the subsequent postcolonial aftermath.

2. With the outbreak of World War II, Italy lost its colonial territories to the British (1941). The Italian empire ended therefore not as a consequence of nationalist revolts by colonized people (as was the case in France and Britain) but by military defeat and diplomatic sanctions. This collapse of the Italian empire in the context of wider military and political defeat meant that Italy did not undergo a real process of decolonization, and this has had long term repercussions on how colonial history has been written and remembered. In the Italian case, it is not only colonialism's considerable violence that was removed and repressed but also the shame of its defeat. See Rochat, del Boca, Nicola Labanca, Ben Ghiat and Fuller, and Goglia and Grassi.

3. Gabriella Campassi also points out the term *mabruchismo*, referring to a relationship with a Libyan woman. This practice was much less diffused than *madamismo* also because the influence of the Islamic religion prohibited the union between a Muslim and a non-Muslim. Islam was also widely practiced in Eastern Africa. There

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are three main religions in Eritrea: Coptic, Catholic, and Muslim. Indeed, Italian men mostly consorted with Tigrinyan girls, from Keren and Asmara, mostly Christians ("Il Madamato in Africa Orientale" 221).

4. As Richard Pankhurst shows, Italian colonialism led to the progressive commercialization of prostitution in the African colonies ("The History of Prostitution").

5. Except for religious marriages, divorce in Eritrea was possible and quite common, whereas in Italy it did not exist, which might have made the Italian inclined to exaggerate its frequency, but it also stimulated the idea of loose moral conduct in the colonies with divorced women able to remarry quite easily.

6. The practice of *demoz* was already explained at the turn of the century by Conti Rossini, one of the prominent ethnographers of Eritrea, who distinguished two forms of marriage among the Tigrinya people (people of Christian faith living in the highlands in the region surrounding Asmara and Keren): "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" (189).

7. See various authors, "Cittadini, Stranieri e native dell'Africa Italiana. Rassegna di diritto colonial, in *Gli Annali dell'Africa Italiana*.

8. It is interesting to report that women in the colonies were allowed to assert a model of femininity which was not tolerated in the motherland, where any form of feminism and female emancipation was struck down by the misogynist fascist regime. See the account by Cristina Lombardi Diop in which she analyzes how the colonial propaganda made an effort to send a message of modernity and emancipation that could attract Italian women to the colonies in order to reconstruct a domestic environment on African soil based on an unconventional position. During fascism, colonial and feminine reviews celebrated the actions of the Italian female colonial pioneers, women who, besides being brave nurses, founded agricultural firms and schools, and distinguished themselves by their adaptability and courage as exemplary mothers and patriots.

9. Many of these photographs can be found in the Istituto Italo-Africano in Rome. Various studies have focused on the colonial representations of black women in photography, postcards, and advertisements. Some of the most important texts include Mignemi, Palma (*L'Italia Coloniale* and *L'Africa nella Collezione fotografica dell'Isiao*), del Boca, Labanca (*L'Impero Africano del fascismo*), and Alessandro Secciani.

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