

Post-Colonial Memories

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I remember with amazement when, just after my first novel *Khadija* was published (2005), Irma Taddia, Professor of “Storia e Istituzioni dell’Africa” at the University of Bologna, told me:

In Italia in ambito letterario le colonie sono passate inosservate. L'Italia ha avuto una quasi inesistente memorialistica ottocentesca. I protagonisti della colonizzazione non hanno lasciato documenti autobiografici di qualità, come quelli di altri Paesi europei. In *Khadija* si mescolano documenti storici, memorie e ricordi familiari in modo ironico e critico con una qualità di scrittura.¹

The book, based on a family story concerning a grandfather who lived and died in Ethiopia at the beginning of the last century and his woman, a Muslim Oromo, tells of the journey of this Italian who, at the end of the 1800s in an little discovered Ethiopia, was to find himself divided between the wonders of discovering another world and the political conquest ambitions of the Europeans.

In that same year, I won the Vigevano prize. I also received many and excellent reviews, but the essence of the subject I dealt with was not fully recognised. ‘Memorialistic’ to me means not so much retrieving family memories, but undertaking a critical historical study in order to put the facts into the right context, first and foremost the city of Harar, a Muslim enclave in a Christian empire, a UNESCO world heritage site, the home of Hailé Selassié and his father, the great Ras Makonnen, the Emperor’s general. The story of my grandmother Khadija, born in Harar between the 1870s and 1880s, had been told to me by my mother and I had always found it steeped in exoticism. In 1948 my mother left Treviso for Eritrea – the former colony was under the protection of the English while awaiting its future destiny – to join my other grandfather Francesco Bellio, an Italian diplomat from Treviso in Veneto (1890-1967), at Asmara, where he had

1 See *Africa. Trimestrale di Studi e Documentazione dell'Istituto per l'Africa e l'Oriente*, settembre-dicembre 2005

'emigrated' in 1935 and where he had organised the distribution of water to Italians, taking out contracts on wells and using horses with barrels and later Fiat trucks. It was there, in that beautiful city built by the Italians (see the photography book *Asmara. Africa's Secret Modernist City* by Denison, Ren and Gebremedhin, Merrell Willcox House 2006), that my mother met my father, Leone Pastacaldi, the son of an Italian diplomat from Livorno and of Khadija, the indigenous woman of Harar. My father lived through the period of the race laws but, as the son of a rich Italian who had not abandoned him, he studied and was educated in refined luxury, which was a rare thing for those times.

1 The Adventures of an Italian Between the 1800s and 1900s. A Duel in Livorno and the Escape to Harar. The Meeting with Khadija

My grandfather Giuseppe Pastacaldi (Livorno 1870-Harar 1921) – who was mentioned numerous times in the books signed by the minister Ferdinando Martini, governor of Eritrea from 1897 to 1907 – lived in Harar, where he carried out diplomatic and commercial duties for the Italian government until his death, and where he is buried in the Catholic cemetery. Around 1890, after killing a fellow student in a duel at the University of Pisa, he fled to Aden where his sister lived, married to the vice-consul, then sometime later moved to Harar, at the time considered somewhat the Rome of Africa. The city was a crossroads for the great ambitions of the Europeans and for commercial interests, as well as the privileged observatory over the world of the Ras, the Menelik Ethiopian governors. The French poet Rimbaud too lived there for one year between 1880 and 1881 as a slave trader.

In Harar my grandfather was a correspondent at the local agency for the Italian Colonial Society of Aden, founder of the agency of Mombasa in 1898 and, as such, director of logistics for the house of Bienenfeld, on behalf of the British, in the area between Mombasa and Lake Victoria (he was also an agent in Addis Ababa). He received the gift of a wife (in recognition of his important role in the city), a young girl from an equally important family of that geographical area, an Oromo of the Darot family, also known as galla (a more derogatory term). The Oromo ethnicity is the main Ethiopian ethnic group still today, mostly made up of families of shepherds and warriors. But this gift was not at once accepted by my grandfather. The very young Khadija, only thirteen years old, fled on horseback, returning to her parents. This was however enough to win the heart of my grandfather who went and brought her back, living with her as his companion for the rest of his life. Despite his countless trips to Italy, my grandfather never left Khadija, being faithful to her right up to his death. My grandmother converted to Catholicism and took the name of Maria.

We know from the stories of the journalist Indro Montanelli how in those times, at the beginning of the 1900s, native women became companions but never wives in the same way as Charmutte, a sort of prostitute, often used for a certain time and then discarded. The colonial history of Eritrea is full of this sort of tale: very few know that in those countries the customary law allows time-limited marriage. For some or perhaps many of these native women, to live with an Italian was seen as a temporary marriage of which they were proud, apart from then having to suffer abandonment and the contempt of everyone, including the natives themselves, as the writer Erminia Dell'Oro has documented so well.

Seven children were born of this union, the last of which was my father. My grandfather died a natural death in Harar in 1921, my father being only two years old at the time. At the suggestion of my grandfather on his deathbed not to go to Italy – he feared the risk of racial marginalisation for his children –, my grandmother left Harar and Ethiopia, and moved to Eritrea to allow her children to attend one of the few schools open to mixed-races, at Asmara, the first-born Italian colony.

Following a conversation with Irma Taddia and Gian Carlo Stella, who created a splendid colonial library at Fusignano (with 3,150 books), I found out that in the diplomatic archives of the Farnesina (the Italian foreign ministry) there was a dossier on my grandfather. In Rome I was able to read the notes on my grandfather and his diplomatic history, also drafted by Federico Ciccodicola (1860-1924), colonel and Plenipotentiary Minister in Ethiopia at the end of the 1800s, and I could also read letters concerning my grandfather signed by the same Minister for the Colonies Ferdinando Martini.

2 The Fascist Stereotype of the Colonies in Photos

Right from the start of my historical research for literary purposes, I looked very carefully for photographic documents both in the Universities and in the archives of certain professors holding specialist chairs, as well as at the ISIAO, the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient (decommissioned in 2011), and at the Italian Geographical Exploration Society headquarters in Villa Celimontana in Rome. Also at the National Diary Archive, in Pieve Santo Stefano.

As far as the photos were concerned, I was able to ascertain that the natives and the local scenes were always photographed according to a stereotype that Colonial/Fascist Italy had constructed by means of powerful documentary material collected by the Istituto Luce (the state-owned company promoting Italian cinema). This was later disseminated according to Fascism's dicta (now digitalised). Among the photographs, there are a large number of erotic photos of native women taken in seductive poses,

covered in leopard skins (clearly by the photographers or lovers involved). Rarer are photos in which the women adopt more natural poses. Blacks, children, monkeys, camels. Local life and custom is almost never depicted in a natural way and, in the very rare cases when it is, one remains fascinated by how much more the photos manage to tell of those lands than some studies.

On this point, I would like to recount an eye-opening fact on how the information was controlled: I had the opportunity of reading the reports of Dino Buzzati, special envoy in Italian East Africa for the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper, collected and studied by Paris Nanterre University at the Centre de Recherches Italiennes. From these studies it emerges that the journalist and writer Dino Buzzati was censored by *Corriere della Sera* that would not publish an interview with Amedeo d'Aosta on the colonies. From that moment onwards, Buzzati's chronicles were seasoned with exclusive local colour.

I was able to see the true face of the Africans in the colonies not remoulded by the colonialist vision in Rome in some collections of photographs belonging to the Geographical Society at Villa Celimontana (now digitalised). I saw others from a few private collections, among which I would like to cite the collection belonging to a former Eritrean chauffeur and kept by his wife, or those of the heir of a wine maker in Eritrea.

3 The Historical Research Basis of my Novels and the Africans Dealing with the Violence of Colonialism and the Current Dictatorship

I discovered the documents useful to reconstruct this period mainly in the Braidense Library in Milan, where I was able to read the books by Enrico Cerulli (1898-1988), the diplomat and linguist, governor of Scioa and Harar, and the bulletins of the Rome Commercial Geographical Society (as well as the historical fund, the Giotto Dainelli Fund, of the anthropologist Cipriani). The bulletins of the Commercial Exploration Society in Milan were extremely interesting carrying articles by Italians resident over there for business reasons.

Giulia Barrera, a historian and archivist at the *Direzione Generale per gli Archivi di Stato* in Rome, cites my grandfather in her study entitled *Patrilinearità, razza e identità. L'educazione degli italo-eritrei, durante il colonialismo italiano* (Patrilineality, race and identity. The education of the Italian-Eritreans, during Italian colonialism) for *Quaderni storici* (April 2002). Giulia Barrera had me read her notes on the letters that my great-grandmother wrote from Livorno, on the death of my grandfather. From these letters (found by the academic in the archive of the Vicariate apos-

toloc of Asmara) it emerges that my grandfather's Italian family was very concerned for the mixed-race grandchildren, so much so that they sent an uncle, my grandfather's brother, to check out the health of the grandchildren and their needs. Giulia Barrera includes my grandfather in the list of Italians that took full responsibility for their children's education, giving them their name and also their heritage.

4 The Denial of the History and Emotions of Colonialism

In the postcolonial memory that has conditioned my life, I feel the need to highlight the existence of a hiatus. There is an ancient memory, written in the history books, then a fascist memory and this too more or less described by historians, a memory which is also very critical, and then a leap to the present day. Over the past thirty years, the massive presence of many Africans in our Italian regions coming from Ethiopia and Eritrea has never been connected to past history. There is on the part of the Italians a stubborn ignorance, in the most literal sense of the word, despite the popularity of the numerous works by the historical journalist Angelo Del Boca. And, yet, in the homes of Italians there are photographic or personal documents (diaries or letters) of which present-day Italians have only a vague and confused memory. Africa is remembered solely for its exotic character or for the dramas of recent years, which have to do with poverty and deaths at sea. But luckily in depth studies on the work and the role of the colonisation Italians are growing. I quote the book by Francesca Locatelli from the Centre of African Studies (formerly, University of Edinburgh), entitled *La comunità italiana di Asmara negli anni Trenta tra propaganda, leggi razziali e realtà sociale* (The Italian Community of Asmara in the 1930s, between propaganda, racial laws and social reality), appearing in Riccardo Bottoni's *Impero Fascista* (Fascist Empire) in 2005. The very well-documented recent books of Nicholas Lucchetti, a historical researcher, entitled *Italico ingegno all'ombra dell'Union Jack* (Italian ingenuity in the shade of the Union Jack) and *Italiani d'Eritrea 1941-1951* (Italians of Eritrea 1941-1951), published by Cinque Terre. Also the lovely documentary made in 2007 by the director Caterina Borrelli on "Asmara, Eritrea" (Anonymous Production 2007), providing a concise history of colonial and pre-colonial Eritrea, up to the time of its terrible dictatorship. This red line of violence between past colonialism and the current African dictatorships, of which the Nobel prize-winner for literature Wole Soyinka has often spoken in Italy too, is not easy to unravel.

I published my last novel entitled *L'Africa non è nera* (Africa is not black) - I quote the title of an article by Curzio Malaparte written for the *Corriere* in 1939 - on the Italians in Asmara, the first colony in absolute, for the publisher Mursia. It is a laborious work of historical investigation, which

starts in 1935, continues with Fascism and the race laws, the Ethiopian war and the end of the colony with the invasion of the British, the fleeing of the Italians - many of whom were deported as prisoners - and the ten years of British administration.

This is a history of colonisation that has never been tackled in depth before, namely a history that, if it were better known, could help the modern day integration and make sense of the escape of those Africans who come to die on our coasts, at Lampedusa, dreaming of only one thing, freedom.