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Author(s): Stefano Bellucci and Massimo Zaccaria

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Wage Labor and Mobility in Colonial Eritrea, 1880s to 1920s

Stefano Bellucci

International Institute of Social History and Leiden University, The Netherlands

Massimo Zaccaria

University of Pavia, Italy

Abstract

Mobility and wage labor are two key variables that help to explain some of the complexities of the labor history of colonial Eritrea. Focusing on the initial period of Italian colonization, between the 1880s and 1920s, this article analyzes the relationship between the two above-mentioned variables. Based on previously unexplored archival sources and documents, the authors conclude that wage labor did contribute to the mobility of workers throughout the region (and not vice versa). In the period under consideration, Eritrea did not become a settler colony, despite Italy's initial efforts to import a national labor force. Instead, through a mix of capital investments in construction and transport, and increasing military recruitment, the Italian regime contributed significantly to an increase in free wage labor in the region. Within a year of Italy's 1911 invasion of Libya, it needed to reinforce its colonial army. From 1912 onward, in return for wages, tens of thousands of Eritreans entered the Italian colonial army to fight on the Libyan front. This military employment left voids in the local labor market, which were filled by people from neighboring countries, particularly Ethiopians and Yemenis. A relationship thus developed and continued between mobility and wage labor.

Introduction

Two of the central questions that arise in the history of labor and capitalism in Africa are the following: at what point in time did noncommodified labor relations (i.e., unfree, slave, tributary, or reciprocal types of labor) become commodified in nature (as salaried labor, piecework, and tenant farming/sharecropping), and why did this occur?¹ In Eritrea, it was with the advent of Italian colonialism that free wage labor was further consolidated within the economy and became a fixture in society in general. A characteristic aspect of Italian colonialism was the mobility of the workforce. Initially, the objective had been to attract a large number of Italian migrants to Eritrea for the purpose of transforming the country into a settler colony. This project soon revealed itself to be highly illusory, but the mobility of the native workforce remained a distinctive aspect of Italy's colonial experience in the Horn of Africa. In particular, from 1912 on, as a direct result of Italy's military invasion of Libya, Eritrean society experienced a profound socioeconomic transformation due to fact that Eritrean soldiers joined the Italian army in Libya. Indeed, the pursuit of a steady salary was

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sufficient incentive for many Eritreans to leave behind the fields to enlist in the colonial army or seek work in other sectors of the economy. These developments created a demand for labor that provoked a new type of transregional circulation that brought an influx of working people into the Eritrean colony. Labor scarcity induced the Italian administration to attempt both to attract workers from adjacent regions of the interior and the Arab Peninsula, and to mobilize workers from within the colony. Using preexisting networks, the colonial regime encouraged a flow of labor from neighboring Ethiopia and Yemen.

This article's main hypothesis is that military needs and resources constituted a driving force behind this regional process of economic transformation through the introduction of a wage-based system and the encouragement of labor migration.² The quest for salaried work resulted in the movement and flux of workers from Italy into the colony, throughout the colony, and even beyond colonial borders.

The article is divided into five parts. In the first part, we explore the reasons why the national government did not take further steps to encourage the relocation of a greater number of Italian settlers during the first phase of its colonial interventions in Africa. The second analyzes the ways that the local population was incorporated into the system of capitalist-colonial labor exploitation, particularly through the widespread introduction of wage labor. The capital invested, largely linked to the Italian military, consisted almost exclusively of public funds. The third part focuses on how the army came to represent one of the principal channels for the introduction of wage labor and how enlistment in the army was extended to Ethiopian and Yemeni volunteers. The fourth section explains how employment opportunities in the military stimulated regional migration, which in turn established a multinational workforce for nonmilitary sectors of the Eritrean economy, especially agriculture. The final section explores the long-term involvement of Yemeni workers in colonial Eritrea's transportation sector.

Obstacles to Eritrea Becoming a European Settler Colony

Especially in its early years, from the 1890s to the 1910s, Italy's colonial policy was, at least in part, a means of addressing the country's mass emigration phenomenon, which was becoming a national emergency. Some Italian imperialists thus presented Eritrea as a "promised land" for impoverished Italian workers, including struggling day laborers and sharecroppers. During the first half of the 1890s, Baron Leopoldo Franchetti—a politician and economist who advocated the transfer of surplus peasant labor from Southern Italy to the African colonies—played an especially active role in encouraging the migration of Italian settlers to Eritrea. However, this first attempt at promoting labor mobility met with limited success, mainly due to a lack of government incentives. One of the principal reasons why the state did not make a greater effort to push Italian workers to resettle in Eritrea was the dearth of private investment in the colony. Italy did not have sufficient capital resources to export to Africa; what it did have was an abundant workforce. The result was a contradictory

approach to colonial migration: the government's actual policies were diametrically opposed to its imperialist rhetoric.

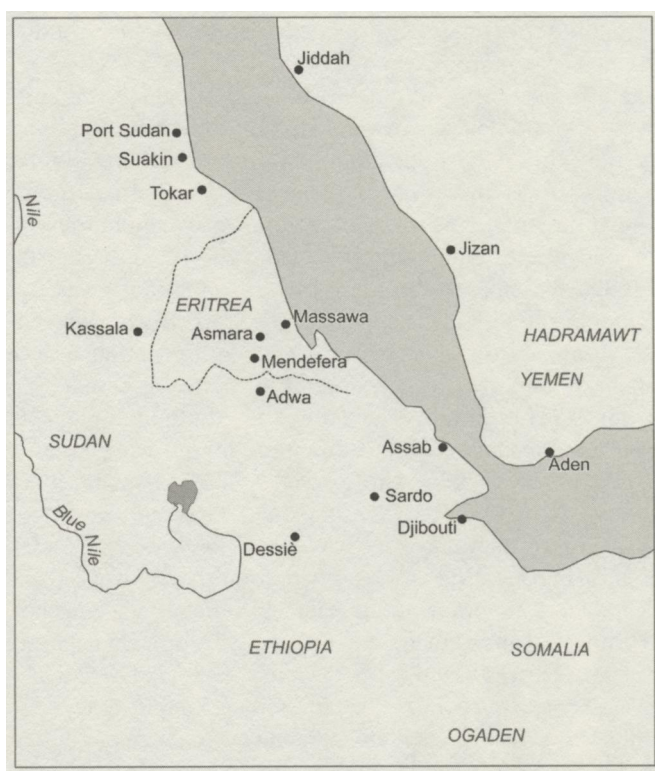
The archives covering the beginning of Italy's colonial period contain extensive evidence that many Italians believed a better life awaited them in Eritrea. They are filled with requests from would-be emigrants for help relocating to the African colony. Many unemployed Italian workers sought to emigrate to Eritrea because of a the largely unfounded rumor that the national government intended to embark upon a series of public works projects that would create many well-paying jobs in railway and road construction. The level of interest was so high by the late 1880s that in September 1889, and again in March 1890, the Ministry of the Interior dispatched a letter to local town councilors and mayors advising them to discourage emigration to the Eritrean port city of Massawa (the colonial capital until 1897) "in the interests ... of the working classes." The letter explained that "the time was not yet right" and that Massawa had already attracted "a good number of emigrants and other people looking for work in vain."³ Among those who had their eyes on Eritrea were Italians who were already living abroad, revealing the existence of a substantial number of Italian colonials ready and willing to move between foreign outposts in their elusive quest for a better life. But many were disappointed by the dearth of opportunities they found once they arrived in their new countries.

For example, in Egypt—home to a large Italian community since the 1820s—it was reported that "there were already a few hundred Italian nationals out of work and without any hope of finding work,"⁴ and that in July 1889, sixty-nine of them were on the verge of departing for Eritrea.⁵ General Oreste Baratieri—governor of Eritrea—made reference to "numerous" requests for agricultural land grants, emanating both from the Italian peninsula and from "overseas Italian colonies" and from Italian immigrants generally.⁶ In July 1895, for example, the Italian consul at Porto Alegre, Brazil referred to "numerous requests received from colonial settlers who, disgruntled with the bad government of this country, wish to emigrate" to Eritrea.⁷ Similar requests were received from Italians in Algeria,⁸ the United States, and Hungary. The Italian consul in Zanzibar reported a continually growing number of Italian bricklayers and other workers who arrived at the consulate, having traveled from "our outposts in the Red Sea and in Aden," and ended up destitute, reduced to asking for handouts.⁹

The political and practical problems that dissatisfied Italian settlers created for the colonial administration were additional factors that weighed against Italian emigration to Eritrea. Italians were lured to the colony by procolonial propaganda that presented Italian Africa as a land of opportunity. Leopoldo Franchetti, who headed the *Ufficio per la colonizzazione* (Office for Settler Affairs), from 1890 to 1895 responded to the concerns of settlers by initiating a campaign of land appropriation for their benefit. Through his initiative, approximately 400,000 hectares of Eritrean land were appropriated by the colonial State, a small portion of which was redistributed among a group of twenty or so Italian families who arrived in the fertile

highlands south of Asmara ready to experience their first taste of colonial life.¹⁰ The local reaction was immediate: in 1894, Bahta Hagos, a military leader and aristocrat who allied with Italy during the initial phase of its expansion, led a revolt against the colonizers which resulted in his death.

On December 1, 1898, shortly after his appointment as *Regio Commissario civile straordinario per l'Eritrea* (Royal Commissioner for Eritrea), Ferdinando Martini issued a letter setting out draconian measures designed to limit emigration to the colony. Notably, in order to avoid the cost of repatriation, which was frequently requested by Italians who found that Eritrea did not live up to their expectations,¹¹ Martini stated that every applicant wishing to emigrate needed to first provide a certificate proving that he had at his disposal the means to ensure his subsistence for an extended period of time. In addition, prospective colonists needed to declare that they were able to cover at least half of their eventual repatriation costs, in case their African adventures should fail to lead to economic success.¹² Local governors and mayors throughout Italy, as well as the nation's embassies, legations, and consulates in Europe, Africa, and Asia, were informed of these new regulations.¹³



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Martini's initiative was an attempt to prevent the situation that did, in fact, develop in January 1900, when it was reported that in various parts of Eritrea "a large number of unemployed workers were milling around ... without any means of subsistence."¹⁴ The presence of destitute white Italians was a threat to "racial honor." To remove the Italians from view of the African population, a small outpost was set up in the town of Saati, which would provide a daily ration of bread and the equivalent of seventy-five cents in Italian lire to more than a hundred unemployed workers and destitute settlers. Once it was clear that there were no employment opportunities in Eritrea, many workers expressed their desire to move southward toward the French port city of Djibouti—"even though they had been repeatedly told that there was no work available there either"¹⁵—or to Suez. In fact, hardly any of the emigrants wished to return to Italy because, they explained, "we came here specifically because of the lack of work there."¹⁶

In 1898 the colonial government began requiring every Italian worker to contribute 10 percent of his salary to a special fund it administered until he had accumulated 250 Italian lire—enough to cover all potential costs of his repatriation should that become necessary.¹⁷ The fact that similar measures had been put in place in Djibouti shows that the French authorities were similarly intent on ensuring compliance with Italy's efforts to contain its somewhat unruly migrant workforce.¹⁸ Contrary to the colonial rhetoric of interventionist politicians, by the 1910s it was clear that Eritrea was not a prime destination offering golden opportunities to Italian workers.¹⁹

Military Recruitment and Salaried Work

Wage labor—a fundamental aspect of the capitalist system—was an inevitable consequence of colonial economic policy. That is not to say that the Italian settlers were engaging in a deliberate strategy to transform Eritrean society, which until that point had been characterized by labor relations that were tributary or reciprocal nature.²⁰ The Italian colonizers were merely bringing with them the more "modern" free labor model, already established in Europe, in which the individual worker sells his labor power to an employer. Whether it was intentional or not, this transformed the largely agricultural, noncommodified system to which native Eritreans were accustomed.

There had been some examples of waged labor in Eritrea earlier, under Ottoman and then Egyptian rule, primarily in the army and the administrative sector. Taking into account, as noted by Stephen Rockel, that "the study of wage labor in precolonial time is still in its infancy,"²¹ it is not unlikely that, in the years prior to Italian domination, there were other working environments where paid labor existed in some shape or form. For example, according to studies of the caravan trade in the Eastern part of the African continent, some types of salaried labor were already in place in that sector in the mid-nineteenth century.²² Although it may be too simplistic to state that the introduction of salaried labor within Eritrea occurred as a direct result of Italian

colonialism, it is fair to say that with the Italian arrival the practice became widespread, leading to the employment of thousands of Eritreans as wage laborers for the first time.

The watershed moment in this process of labor transformation came after the Italian invasion of Libya in 1911. Italy's conquest of Libya represented a second chance for Italian colonialism, and the country did not skimp on the campaign.²³ However, after a few months of combat it became clear that the Italian army lacked the necessary mobility to outwit the Libyan resistance. Thus, beginning in February 1912, Italy started to deploy Eritrean troops on the Libyan front, and they soon demonstrated their military capabilities. The speed of response of the Eritrean battalions, coupled with the fact that they were less costly to deploy than the Italian regulars, encouraged the army to make greater use of them. But given that the colony was small and underpopulated, the main problem became how to find sufficient numbers of Eritrean soldiers to send to Libya.

By 1912 so many of its men joined the military, that the Brussels-based International Colonial Institute (ICI) moved Eritrea from the category of colony with a "sufficient native population" to that of colony "with an insufficient native population" to meet its agricultural production needs.²⁴ In other words, it was now believed that Eritrea lacked a sufficient workforce to sustain even an admittedly weak local economy in a manner favorable to Italian interests. The colonial authorities had to find a way to meet the growing demand for labor and food products arising from its recruitment of local workers into the army.

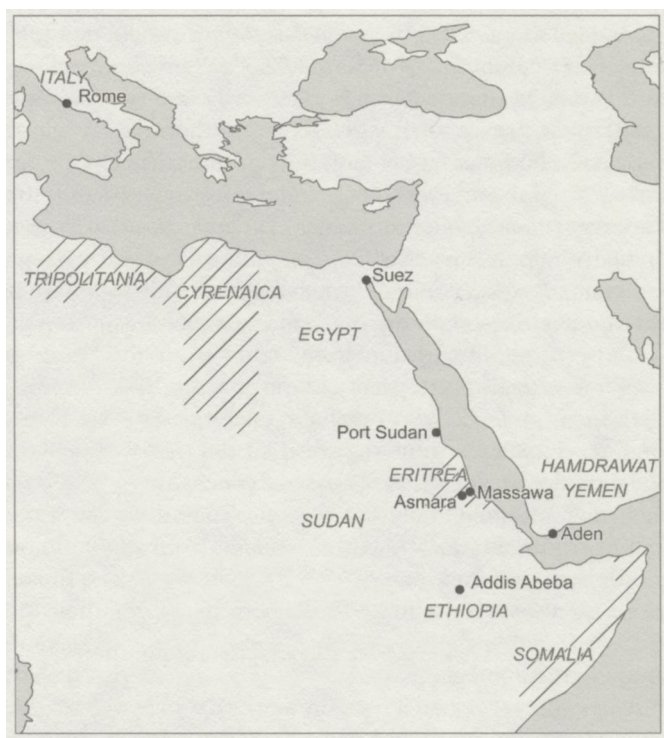
In the late nineteenth century, following Ethiopia's defeat of Italy in the Battle of Adwa at the end of the so-called First Italo-Ethiopian war (1895–1896), the white, Italian presence in the colonial army was progressively reduced in relation to the number of indigenous recruits. The number of Eritrean battalions was raised from four to eight during Italy's campaign in Libya,²⁵ inspiring a radical rethinking of Italian military policy. The Eritrean Royal Corps of Colonial Troops (*Regio Corpo Truppe Coloniali*, or RCTC) created in 1891 were reinforced during the late-1890s. Both before and after Adwa the African natives who fought for Italy included non-Eritreans. In fact, it was standard policy to recruit Ethiopian and Sudanese soldiers; on the eve of the Libyan war, they comprised one-third of the RCTC.²⁶

Even after the signing of the 1912 Treaty of Ouchy between Italy and the Ottoman Empire, which officially ended the Libyan War, Italy continued to rely on Eritrean troops to defend the Italian administration in Libya against guerilla fighters there. Furthermore, Italy's entrance into the First World War in 1915 meant that a good portion of its national troops were recalled to Europe. Thus, the task of defending Italy's position in Libya was increasingly entrusted to colonial troops. Three years after its first foray into Libya, the RCTC had tripled in size. The colonial war in Libya combined with the First World War created a significant demand for laborers in Eritrea and in Italy's African colonies generally, transforming regional labor relations in a manner comparable to

that produced by the introduction of the market economy in Kenya, Ghana, and Cameroon.²⁷

The Eritrean soldiers serving in the colonial army were free-wage workers—that is, salaried employees who chose to enlist in the army for the economic advantages it offered: a daily, weekly or monthly salary paid in Italian lira, which was then a strong currency that could easily be converted to the Maria Theresa Thaler (the official currency of Ethiopia), the British pound sterling (used in British Somaliland), or the French franc (circulated in Djibouti). The importance of having a salary paid in hard currency shows how the monetized market economy was rapidly expanding in the colonies, replacing, at least in the urban context, the tradition of bartering and labor relations of a tributary nature.

A numerical account may help to clarify the extent of the phenomenon. In 1916 there were nine Eritrean battalions and three mixed Ethiopian/Eritrean battalions. The number of men making up these battalions varied considerably, from 600 to a maximum of 800. Thus, it is estimated that there were about 10,000 Eritrean men in the Italian armed forces, a substantial number when compared



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to the population as a whole, which, according to the 1905 census, numbered around 245,000.²⁸ In 1928, the data compiled in an unpublished census set the population at 510,175—more than twice the 1905 figure.²⁹ Three years later, according to what is considered the most trustworthy census available, the Eritrean population reached 596,013.³⁰ The fact that the Libya campaign was failing did not allow for any letup in the number of soldiers needed by the colonial army in Eritrea. In 1920, the RCTC counted 15,000 men in its ranks; the top brass were aware that a similar situation would be “difficult to find in other countries in the world”³¹ Colonial officials had become aware that the recruitment of locals into the Italian military had resulted in a dearth of laborers to work in other sectors of the economy. In the 1920s, out of a population of almost 600,000 people, about 15,000 were soldiers engaged in Eritrea and in Libya.³² Attracted by the opportunity to earn wages, young men were forsaking agricultural labor for military service.

Based on government census data collated by the Italian demographer Gabriele Ciampi,³³ it appears that men comprised about half of the Eritrean population. If one then takes into account that the prime working age was considered to be between fourteen and forty years of age, one can extrapolate that the population of working-age men was around 200,000. Thus, an army made up of 15,000 means that approximately 7 or 8 percent of the male working population was employed in a military capacity. The figure could be rounded down to 5 to 6 percent if one discounts those soldiers coming from Ethiopia. These figures show that military salaried workers (free-wage laborers) comprised a significant proportion of the Eritrean labor force. Furthermore, a salaried soldier was often the head of a large family and, thus, the number of Eritreans dependent on a salary-based income was quite high. However, the loss to the internal labor market of such a sizeable percentage of local workers was compensated for by the influx of migrant workers from neighboring countries.

Another element to keep in mind is the fact that Italy's military operations in Libya did not only involve military personnel. As the transportation of troops and supplies required mules and camels, the military authorities assigned civilians to take charge of logistics. To that end, on July 22, 1912, seventy-one civilians, including nine Yemenis, two “Galla” (today Oromo, of Ethiopia), one Sudanese, and one Somali left from Massawa; Of this group, 21 percent originated from countries other than Eritrea.³⁴ One can conclude that a salaried job paid in a European currency pulled migrant workers from other African nations to the Italian colony. From this data, one can estimate that the number of residents in Eritrea (both Eritreans and immigrants) employed within a European-style wage-based economy was actually 7 to 10 percent higher than the number given above.

In addition to the immediate drain on the local workforce caused by Italy's military campaigns, the local labor problem was exacerbated by the fact that not all colonial army veterans from the Libyan front returned to agricultural work even after they were discharged. As Governor Salvago Raggi observed in 1915, “The colony has sent to Libya thousands and thousands of men, some

of whom have returned with savings and are not inclined to work until the need arises.”³⁵ When they did go back to work, they did so in sectors that would allow them to receive higher incomes.³⁶

Regional Mobility and Wage Labor

From 1912, the RCTC was one of the main employers in Eritrea. The impact on the colonial economy of the transfer of a significant proportion of the workforce to the armed forces and the corresponding increase in the circulation of currency led to a greater demand for consumer goods and spiraling inflation. In 1911, the daily wage of a manual laborer/unskilled worker was between 0.80 and 1 Italian lira; by 1915, this had increased to between 1.10 and 1.50 lira. At the same time, the cost of construction materials, such as lime and cement, increased by at least 30 percent. Thousands of camels and donkeys had been transferred to Libya for the military campaign, and this produced a noticeable increase in the cost of transportation and livestock within Eritrea. There was, thus, a progressive reduction in the investment potential of the Eritrean government, which was unable to support a budget that met the developing needs of the colony.³⁷ The systematic reliance on a regional workforce developed in the context of what Mahmood Mamdani refers to as the dichotomy between indigenous social groups with rights that were more or less guaranteed under the Italian direct rule system, and immigrant groups (Ethiopians, Yemenis, Somalis, etc.) who had fewer legal rights than “native” Eritreans and whose juridical status as workers was manipulated to suit colonial ends (non-natives, always susceptible to expulsion, were cheaper to employ).³⁸

The advantage of the colonial policy of employing local troops is evident: it reduced the cost of Italy’s military campaigns in Libya and Ethiopia. It benefited the local recruits as well: The *askaris* (as local or native soldiers were called) increased their standard of living by becoming salaried workers, thereby creating a further process of social differentiation. They and their families constituted the embryonic stage in the development of a proto-middle class in Eritrea and the surrounding regions. The disadvantages of this transformation were also obvious and were mainly linked, as mentioned above, to the reduction in rural manpower, increasing inflation, and above all, the creation of a two-tier working class, with salaried soldiers on the one hand and farm laborers/servants on the other, followed by a distinction between “immigrant” and “indigenous” salaried workers. In other words, an identity-based class system was being formed: on the one hand Eritrean-indigenous soldiers (including a considerable number of Trigrayan Ethiopians, the same ethnic group than the majority of Eritrean in the army) and peasants with the rights to land possession; and on the other hand, masses of relatively prosperous immigrant skilled workers and merchants as well as immigrant poor serfs mainly from neighboring Ethiopia working in Eritrean households and small farms.

Colonial authorities were fully aware of the drain in manpower from the Eritrean agricultural sector that resulted from Italy’s military campaigns and

recruited workers from neighboring countries into the military. Along Eritrea's borders, the task of recruiting in *askaris* from other countries was entrusted to three commercial agencies in the Ethiopian cities of Gondar, Adwa, and Dessiè.³⁹ Somalia became the recruitment center for men coming from southern Ethiopia and from the Arabic Peninsula, particularly Yemen. Even the enlistment of men from Zanzibar, the Congo, and other parts of East Africa was considered, given that a similar far-flung approach had worked well for the Congo Free State.⁴⁰ Lieutenant Colonel Alessandro Bodrero, regional commissioner for *Alto Uebi-Scebeli* (an administrative division of Italian Somalia), was in charge of coordinating the external recruitment drive. He was the point of reference for local recruitment officers, who would be paid a fee for every man they enlisted. The payment of this fee, together with the involvement of colonial "bosses" in the recruitment campaign, raises questions about the degree to which the men who enlisted did so voluntarily.⁴¹ Be that as it may, this recruitment drive resulted in a large number of Ethiopian men enlisting in the colonial army along with a comparatively smaller, but still significant, number of Yemenis.⁴²

The presence of Yemeni soldiers on the Libyan front did not prove successful and was of short duration. The military authorities criticized them for being undisciplined and for providing a bad example to the other colonial troops. As early as April 1915, a source noted that 100 or so Yemeni soldiers were repatriated early "because they were unsuited to the difficult requirements of war."⁴³ The problem was also political in nature, as it was suspected that these troops were sympathetic to Italy's enemy, Libya. The governor of Cyrenaica, Lieutenant General Ameglio, for example, was convinced that hidden within this community of soldiers were Senussi sympathetic to the Libyan cause.⁴⁴ However, in Somalia, the Italian colonial authorities continued to make extensive use of Yemeni soldiers. In 1912, Somalis represented a modest 10 per cent of the troops, and Governor Giacomo De Martino did not, at that juncture, consider increasing their recruitment, given the various problems that he had experienced with them.⁴⁵

That same year, the Royal Consulate of Aden entered into a contract with the Indian company Kaiky Mucherjee for the recruitment of *askaris*. At times of particular need this channel of recruitment was supplemented by dispatching colonial agents rather than going through an intermediary. This made it possible, in the period between 1912 and 1913, to recruit around 100 new men every four weeks.⁴⁶ Once their obligatory two-year commitment was over, the majority of these recruits tended to remain in the Italian colony, regardless of whether they chose to remain in the army.⁴⁷ In 1922, out of nearly 2,700 men in the Somali RCTC, 67 percent, or 1,674 men, were Yemeni; only in 1924 was it possible, though with some difficulty, to increase the percentage of Somali soldiers to 45 percent.⁴⁸

The migration of workers into Eritrea that the colonial system had sought to encourage was not directed exclusively to the military. The Italian invasion of Libya, as well as Mussolini's subsequent invasion of Ethiopia in the mid-1930s,

had the effect of attracting workers to Eritrea's agricultural and service sectors, as well. As a result, the colony experienced "economic repercussions due to the damaging loss of local laborers engaged in agriculture, sheep farming, industry and commerce,"⁴⁹ and colonial authorities took measures to reboot the local production system.

Nonmilitary Labor Mobility

The records kept by the employment office in Asmara, though incomplete, shed some light on the scale of the cross-border influx of workers from Ethiopia. Eritrea's Gubernatorial Decree No. 2768 of March 7, 1917 provided for the creation of an employment office in Eritrea for "indigenous workers."⁵⁰ This was a response to the Italian government's decision to extend to the colonies the metropolitan system of establishing intermediaries between employers and workers.⁵¹ The first opened on April 1, 1917, in the market area of Asmara.⁵² To publicize it, the colonial administration distributed a promotional message written in Tigrinya, a language spoken in northern Ethiopia and southern Eritrea, to all the commissaries and official residences in the colony.⁵³ The urgency behind the effort to ensure that Italian commercial agencies in Ethiopia received the message shows the extent to which the initiative was intended to include workers from beyond Eritrean borders, Ethiopians in particular.

A review of the correspondence between the Dessiè Agency in Ethiopia and the Secretariat of the Eritrean Colonial Government provides other useful information about the flow of workers between the Italian colony and its neighbors. Giuseppe Brielli, a commercial agent in Dessiè, recommended that the Eritrean colonial administration avoid making their requests for foreign workers in too official a manner for fear that the Ethiopian authorities might deny potential emigrants permission to leave their homeland. In advocating this approach, Brielli was echoing recommendations that had been made back in 1915 by Colli di Felizzano, who had considered it

not ... advisable to immediately make official representations to the Ethiopian Government to obtain authorization for an extensive recruitment drive of *askaris*; it would be more advisable for all the agents of the [Italian] Royal Government, including this Royal legation, acting in Abyssinia, to employ prudence and tact in directing prospective recruits towards employment in Eritrea and Somalia.⁵⁴

Despite a lack of funds to support an "official" recruitment campaign, Brielli expressed confidence that, slowly but surely, thanks to word of mouth, there would be a spontaneous flow of workers to Eritrea. He recalled having observed "in a number of places in Abyssinia that small groups of migrant workers, starting work on a casual basis (in mining, railway construction), in a short space of time form small colonies made up of their co-nationals, who have come from faraway countries at their instigation."⁵⁵

Brielli’s comments point to another aspect of this initiative. He was less interested in finding possible recruits for the RCTC than in attracting workers interested in employment in agriculture. Brielli spoke, in fact, of “farmers” being lured to work in Eritrea, specifying that the ultimate objective was to “encourage” them to “remain in order to engage in farming work.”⁵⁶ The way to attract these workers was the offer of steady and salaried employment that compared favorably to the realities of the Ethiopian labor market, which offered little more than subsistence.

The colonial authorities were well aware of the close relationship between the demand for agricultural manpower and the rise in military enlistment. In 1920, in the Seraè province, a particularly abundant harvest resulted in many workers deciding to look for employment in the fields rather than join the army. That same year, the government in Rome had been expecting a consistently substantial contribution from the *Milizia Mobile* (Reserve Army) for the recruitment of *askaris*, but what it received was the “minimum, almost nothing.”⁵⁷ This was, however, an exception in the history of labor in Eritrea and was due in large part to the above-mentioned agricultural super yield. Meanwhile, the employment office in Asmara prepared a daily report, addressed to the Secretariat General of Colonial Eritrea, which compiled the requests for employment and information about those job seekers who had found work. From the start, the authorities distinguished between data pertaining to local, Eritrean workers and those pertaining to workers from “beyond the frontier” (*oltreconfine*), a generic term used to indicate Ethiopian workers in particular. A series of 147 of these daily reports for the period, although covering only five months of activity, from July 29 to December 31, 1917, show that the services of the employment office were mainly used by workers from outside Eritrea.

Foreign workers turned to the employment office in their search for work in far greater numbers than their Eritrean counterparts during this five-month period. The office registered 318 non-Eritrean workers—61 percent of all applicants—compared to 200 Eritreans—37 percent of the total. During the period under review, 785 non-Eritrean workers found work through the employment office, compared to only 403 Eritreans. The non-Eritrean workers thus represented 66 percent of the total number of job seekers placed in work.

EMPLOYMENT OFFICE OF ASMARA	
NUMBER OF REGISTERED “INDIGENOUS” WORKERS	ANNOTATIONS
318	Non-Eritrean
200	Eritrean
TOTAL: 518	
NUMBER OF “INDIGENOUS” WORKERS PLACED IN WORK	ANNOTATIONS
785	Non-Eritrean
403	Eritrean
TOTAL: 1,188	

Source: Data compiled by the authors, based on the only surviving colonial documents of the employment office in Asmara from July 19 to December 31, 1917.⁵⁸

This extensive use of the employment office suggests that the labor situation had significantly changed, and salaried work had started to spread throughout the Horn of Africa and beyond, creating a regional workforce.⁵⁹ In this regard, Colonel Dusanani's observation from 1920 is particularly apt. He noted that

... the substantial call for workers which many prospective employers, including construction companies based in Eritrea and Sudan, accompanied with offers of substantial returns which, taking into account the debasement of the Italian lira, became extremely high. This workforce was largely made up of Amhara, who in the past had moved from Abyssinia to Eritrea to enlist in the army, but who now, in view of the very attractive salaries on offer, sought employment also in other sectors.⁶⁰

For example, on August 10, 1920, a contingent of 151 Yemeni *askari* discharged from the military in Libya arrived in Massawa. Of this number, twenty-six asked—and were allowed—to remain in Massawa, mainly to work in the salt mines. Another 110 asked to be transferred to Asmara, “some in order to remain and work there and the rest in order to receive a permit from the Honourable Civil Affairs Directorate to travel, over land, to Tokar, Suakin, Port Sudan, Kassala.” It is unclear from the archives whether these permit requests were granted, but it is recorded that fifteen members of the group left Massawa “to travel by sea, some to Djibouti, some to Jedda, and some to Jazan.”⁶¹ This movement of workers through the Horn and Red Sea region is evidence of the important role of Italian military recruitment in creating a regional migrant labor force.

The Yemeni Contribution to Labor in Eritrea

Yemeni workers constituted a fundamental component of the nonmilitary workforce of Eritrea, particularly after the arrival of the Italian colonial regime. The Yemeni community in Eritrea has recently been the subject of study by various scholars, including Jonathan Miran, who has researched the Hadrami people's movements from the Arabic Peninsula across the Red Sea.⁶² It is clear from this research that this community has played a significant role in the economic, social, and cultural life of Eritrea. The exact number of Yemeni workers is hard to determine, but various sources refer to their consistent presence, particularly in the lowlands and in the port of Massawa. This assertion serves to back up the observation of Leif Manger, who underscored how by the end of the nineteenth century one could speak of a veritable “Hadrami labor diaspora” in the Red Sea region.⁶³

Of particular importance, for the purpose of our analysis, is the presence of Yemeni workers in the field of transportation. The record shows a strong Yemeni presence in the caravan, port, and road transport sectors. When not working in caravans,⁶⁴ the Yemenis were predominantly involved in the

loading and unloading of goods. In Asmara, the Yemeni presence was especially prominent among market porters (*hammāl*, or, in Italian, *raffa*) whose traditional four-wheel cart (*‘arabiyya*) was, for many years, a frequent sight throughout the city.⁶⁵ In the port city of Massawa, the Yemeni workers comprised the majority of dockworkers (a situation that continued until the late 1960s).

The colonial system was based on an extended taxonomy covering nearly all aspects of daily life. In the labor context, efforts were made to distinguish the “lazy races,” from the more “active races” – Arabs for example – whose arrival in Eritrea was greatly encouraged. In this racialized discourse, Italy attributed to Yemeni workers physical characteristics suited to hard labor in difficult working environments.⁶⁶ This racial characterization thus became a basis for work assignments.

From the 1890s until the 1920s in the Massawa port, where the working and climate conditions were very tough, the Yemeni made up the largest group of transport and dockworkers. They worked in groups of five (referred to locally as *mano*) and in hourly shifts (referred to locally as *tocca*), although they were paid for services rendered rather than by the hour.⁶⁷ (The shifts were instituted to enhance efficiency; the combination of physically draining work and extremely hot climate meant that workers slowed down and even collapsed under the strain.)⁶⁸ The relations and interests of the porters were managed and overseen in an organized manner, through “a type of trade union,” according to a resident of the area at the time. No doubt, the “union” did not possess much power, and perhaps it only served to recruit workers and maintain order in the workplace, but it is significant that the proponents of the union were immigrant workers.⁶⁹

Finally, road construction was another arena where Yemeni workers played an important role. Here, their employment was especially prevalent in the lowlands, where harsh climate conditions made it difficult for Italian companies to recruit construction workers. It is not known, however, if the employment of Yemeni workers in this sector was compensated with a standard daily or weekly salary. Records show that workers employed in the construction of the Assab-Sardò-Dessiè road,⁷⁰ built between 1936 and 1939, were salaried, but that is after the period under consideration here.⁷¹ This does suggest, however, that the institution of salaried work was already in place.

Conclusion

The study of the economic and labor history of Eritrea cannot be understood without going beyond the borders of the colonial state (which correspond, more or less, to today’s national boundaries). In fact, the impact of Italy’s economic policies on the Eritrean population and on local labor structures extended beyond these boundaries and involved both neighboring states and more distant locales. This article has expanded the discussion of eastern Africa labor history by referencing not only the origins of the relationship between

labor and capital, but also the interconnections among workers originating from different parts of the region.

Colonialist Italy directly involved Eritrea in its war in Libya, through the recruitment of Eritrean soldiers and their engagement in a salaried system of labor, the likes of which had hardly been seen in the colony. The main economic consequence of this policy was a steep decline in the number of local workers available to the agricultural sector (at least in the highlands), a problem that was resolved by an influx of workers recruited from neighboring areas, Ethiopians in particular. Most of these workers were employed as day laborers on the few Italian farms and paid wages. This signaled the beginning of a new type of labor exploitation that transformed both Eritrea and Ethiopia. Some Ethiopians were also enlisted as salaried workers in the army (as had been the case with the Somali and others). The needs of the colonial war machine also attracted workers from the other side of the Red Sea, notably Yemenis, who the Italians were happy to incorporate in their economic system to help resolve the increasing demand for workers, particularly in the transport sectors.

Directly or indirectly, the small, poor, and, at the time, geopolitically insignificant Eritrean colony nonetheless played an important part in the transformation of labor relations in the Horn of Africa, through the introduction of wage labor, a system that was typical of the capitalist model of production. Uldelul Chelati Dirar has observed that Italian colonialism produced a “territorial mobility” and a “governance of mobility” that helped make Eritrean society “more complex and substantially *métisse* [of mixed races, of mixed cultures].”⁷² This territorial mobility acted as a catalyst for the diffusion of a new form of labor relations grounded in free wage labor, the typical form of labor exploitation in capitalist modes of production. The capital in this case was public, drawing on military expenditures. Thus, from the 1880s to 1920s, in the heyday of Italian colonialism, the Horn saw a process of capitalist development and transformation in the nature of work.

NOTES

1. For a taxonomy of labor relations from 1500 to 2000, see the project coordinated by Karin Hofmeester at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. It can be found online at <http://socialhistory.org/en/projects/history-labour-relations-1500-2000>.

2. In this regard, see Jan Lucassen and Erik Jan Zürcher, “Conscription as Military Labour: The Historical Context,” *International Review of Social History* 43 (1998): 405–19; Joshua B. Freeman and Geoffrey Field, “Labor and the Military: Introduction,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 80 (2011): 3–5; Michelle Moyd, “Making the Household, Making the State: Colonial Military Communities and Labor in German East Africa,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 8 (2011): 53–76; Erik Jan Zürcher, *Fighting for a Living: A Comparative Study of Military Labour 1500–2000* (Amsterdam, 2014).

3. Ministero degli Interni to Prefetti, Sotto Prefetti e Sindaci del Regno, March 5, 1890, 16/1, folder 1, Archivio Storico Ministero Affari Esteri, Archivio Storico del Ministero Africa Italiana (hereafter cited as ASMAE, ASMAI).

4. Giacomo Malvano to Vittorio Trombi, October 26, 1899, box 333, folder 38, Archivio Storico Ministero Affari Esteri, Archivio Eritrea (hereafter cited as ASMAE, AE).

5. Italian consul at Suez to Italian consul at Port Said, undated (July–August 1889), box 16/1, folder 1, ASMAE, ASMAI.
6. Government of Eritrea, circular letter on colonization, April 25, 1895, box 31/2, folder 35, ASMAE, ASMAI.
7. A. Legrenzi to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 12, 1895, box 31/2, folder 34, ASMAE, ASMAI.
8. In 1907, a group of around 150 Amalfitan fishermen who had not found gainful employment in Algeria, where they had gone for the annual sardine take, requested permission to settle in Eritrea as fishermen. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Giuseppe Salvago Raggi, June 25, 1907, box 51, folder 3, ASMAE AE.
9. Consulate General of Zanzibar to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, June 20, 1894, box 16/1, folder 3, ASMAE, ASMAI.
10. Stephen C. Bruner, “Leopoldo Franchetti and Italian Settlement in Eritrea: Emigration, Welfare Colonialism and the Southern Question,” *European History Quarterly* 39 (2009): 71–94.
11. Some of these requests can be found in box 333, folder 37, ASMAE, AE.
12. Ferdinando Martini, circular letter of February 22, 1898 and of November 1, 1898, box 16/1, folder 7, ASMAE, ASMAI; see also, Massimo Zaccaria, “‘I dseva donc c’ui era sol de sabiò!’ Il ruolo della Romagna nella colonizzazione dell’Eritrea, 1890–1905,” *I Quaderni del Cardello* 18 (2009): 257–300.
13. Ministero Affari Esteri to Ferdinando Martini, July 21, 1900, box 333, folder 38, ASMAE, AE.
14. Pietro Zanardi to Governo della Colonia, April 1, 1900, box 333, folder 38, ASMAE, AE.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Order of the Colonial Office, no. 19, November 1, 1898, and no. 24, December 1, 1898.
18. Pietro Zanardi to the Asmara Administration, October 21, 1898, box 320, ASMAE, AE.
19. This situation changed dramatically after the Ethiopian War and the creation of Italian East Africa (*Africa Orientale Italiana*) by the Fascist regime between 1935 and 1941, which led to a substantial increase in the number of Italian emigrants settling in Eritrea. Stefano Bellucci, “Italian Transnational Fluxes of Labour and the Changing of Labour Relations in the Horn of Africa, 1935–1939,” *Workers of the World: International Journal on Strikes and Social Conflicts* 1 (2013): 158–74.
20. Cfr. Stefano Bellucci, “Gestione della terra ed evoluzione del mondo contadino nel Corno,” in *L’Africa d’Italia*, ed. Giampaolo Calchi Novati (Rome, Italy, 2011): 265–89; Joseph L. Venosa, “‘Serf’, civics and social action: Islamic identity and grassroots activism during Eritrea’s Tigre emancipation movement, 1941–1946,” *Islamic Africa*, 4 (2013): 165–93; and Jordan Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea: A Critique of Ethiopian Studies* (Trenton, NJ, 1989): 38–54.
21. Stephen J. Rockel, “Relocating Labor: Sources from the Nineteenth Century,” *History in Africa* 22 (1995): 447.
22. Stephen J. Rockel, *Carriers of Culture: Labor on the Road in Nineteenth-Century East Africa* (Portsmouth, NH, 2006) and Stephen J. Rockel, “‘A Nation of Porters’: The Nyamwezi and the Labour Market in Nineteenth-Century Tanzania,” *Journal of African History* 41 (2000): 173–95.
23. Nicola Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia 1911–1931* (Bologna, Italy, 2012).
24. Benoit Daviron, “Mobilizing Labour in African Agriculture: The Role of the International Colonial Institute in the Elaboration of a Standard of Colonial Administration, 1895–1930,” *Journal of Global History* 5 (2010): 482.
25. On the deployment of Eritrean troops in Libya, see Massimo Zaccaria, *Anch’io per la tua bandiera. Il 5 battaglione ascari in missione sul fronte libico (1912)* (Ravenna, Italy, 2012).
26. Massimo Adolfo Vitale, *L’opera dell’esercito (1885–1943). Ordinamento e reclutamento* (Roma, 1960), 133.
27. As observed by Frederick Cooper, Gareth Austin, and Andreas Eckert, respectively.
28. Gabriele Ciampi, “La popolazione dell’Eritrea,” *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana* 11 (1995): 495.
29. Ciampi, “La popolazione dell’Eritrea”, 497.

30. Ibid., 498.
31. Antonio Dusnasi, *Relazione annuale. Anno 1920*, Asmara, 1° marzo 1920. This was a top-secret report on the RCTC; cit. in Alessandro Volterra, *Sudditi coloniali. Ascari eritrei 1935–1941* (Milano, IT, 2005), 43–44.
32. In 1913, the RCTC claimed it could mobilize 35,000 troops. This included battalions deployed in Libya, the reserve army, bands and the *chitet*, an auxiliary formed by men who knew how to use firearms but were not part of the reserve army or the bands. In 1913, it was calculated that 3,500 men were in the *chitet*. See Massimo Adolfo Vitale, *L'opera dell'esercito (1885–1943)*, 200–201, 134.
33. Ciampi, “La popolazione dell'Eritrea,” 1995.
34. Corpo di occupazione della Colonna Camelli [sic], Ruolino dei conducenti cammellieri partenti il 22 luglio per Massaua, box 618, ASMAE, AE.
35. Giuseppe Salvago Raggi to Ferdinando Martini, 1915, box 34/3, folder 69, Report No. 23512, ASMAE, ASMAI.
36. See Stefano Bellucci and Massimo Zaccaria, “Engine of Change: A Social History of the Car-Mechanics Sector in the Horn of Africa,” in *Transforming Innovations in Africa*, eds. Jan-Bart Gewald, André Leliveld, and Iva Pesa (Leiden, NL, 2012), 237–56.
37. Giuseppe Salvago Raggi to Ferdinando Martini, 1915, box 34/3, folder 69, Report No. 23512, ASMAE, ASMAI.
38. Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizens and Subjects: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), 37–61.
39. On these three commercial outposts, see Massimo Zaccaria, “Agenzie commerciali, compagnie di navigazione e naggadras. La definizione dello spazio coloniale nell'Eritrea italiana,” in *Votare con i piedi. La mobilità degli individui nell'Africa coloniale italiana*, ed. Isabella Rosoni e Uoldelul Chelati Dirar (Macerata, IT, 2012), 273–312.
40. Gen. Del Mastro, Report n. 435, March 20, 1914, box 115/2, folder 7, ASMAE, ASMAI.
41. Some indications on the involvement of local authorities in the recruitment of soldiers are present in Governo della Tripolitania, Stato Maggiore to Ministero delle Colonie, Ufficio Libia, March 15, 1915, box 115/2, folder 7, ASMAE, ASMAI.
42. Having fully considered the complex underlying issues, when the authors use the term Yemeni, they intend it to include the Hadrami and the Yemeni Jews.
43. Ivi, note 41.
44. On the relationship between the Senussiyya and Yemen, see Anne K. Bang, *The Idrisi State in 'Asir 1906–1934. Politics, Religion and Personal Prestige as State-building Factors in Early Twentieth-Century Arabia* (Bergen, NO, 1996).
45. Giacomo De Martino, *Relazione sulla Somalia Italiana del Governatore nobile Giacomo De Martino, Senatore del Regno per gli anni 1911 e 1912* (Rome, 1912), 110–12.
46. Comando RCTC della Somalia, Memorie Storiche per gli anni 1912–1913, Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, box D/3/15/5 (hereafter cited as USSME). We would like to thank Gabriele Zorzetto for providing us with this valuable information.
47. Giacomo De Martino, *Relazione sulla Somalia Italiana del Governatore nobile Giacomo De Martino, Senatore del Regno per gli anni 1911 e 1912* (Rome: Tipografia della Camera dei Deputati, 1912), 112; Massimo Adolfo Vitale, *L'opera dell'esercito (1885–1943). Ordinamento e reclutamento* (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1960), 82.
48. Comando RCTC della Somalia, Relazioni Annuali per gli anni 1922, 1923, 1924 in AUSSME D/3/22/1. The authors want to thank Gabriele Zorzetto for this important information.
49. Pietro Maletti, “Ascari abissini sotto insegne italiane,” *La Rassegna Italiana del Mediterraneo* 98 (1926): 193.
50. Governo dell'Eritrea to Commissari Regionale and Agenti Commerciali, March 28, 1917, box 816, ASMAE, AE.
51. G. Cavalli, Bando nr. 8 “Alle popolazioni indigene di Asmara!” March 16, 1917, box 816, ASMAE, AE.
52. The office was established in a private house owned by Blata Barachi Bachit. It was located near the market area, not far from the Coptic Church of Asmara. The service was run by the *carabinieri* of Asmara. This suggests that the labor question was considered by

the authorities to be a security issue; cfr. Compagnia Carabinieri Reali to Segretariato Generale Governo, March 28, 1917, box 816, ASMAE, AE.

53. Camillo De Camillis to G. Cavalli, March 28, 1917, box 816, ASMAE, AE.

54. Giuseppe Colli di Fellizano to Governo Asmara, s.d., box 115/2, folder 7, ASMAE, ASMAI.

55. Domenico Brielli to Governo dell'Eritrea, June 16, 1917, box 816, ASMAE, AE.

56. Ibid.

57. Commissario Regionale Seraè to Direzione Affari Civili, July 17, 1920, box 839, ASMAE, AE.

58. Compagnia Carabinieri Reali to Segretariato Generale Governo, March 28, 1917, box 816, ASMAE, AE.

59. See Bellucci and Zaccaria, "Engine of Change," 237–56.

60. Volterra, *Sudditi coloniali*, 44.

61. Governo dell'Eritrea, Corpo di Polizia a Direzione Affari Civili, August 12, 1920, box 839, ASMAE, AE.

62. Jonathan Miran, "Red Sea Translocals: Hadrami Migration, Entrepreneurship, and Strategies of Integration in Eritrea, 1840s–1970s," *Northeast African Studies* 12 (2012): 131.

63. Leif Manger, *The Hadrami Diaspora. Community-Building on the Indian Ocean Rim* (New York and Oxford, 2010), 1.

64. Miran, "Red Sea," 136.

65. Interview with Michele H. Asmara, August 14, 2013.

66. Even as late as the 1960s, Massimo Adolfo Vitale (a former high-ranking colonial official commissioned by the Italian government in the 1950s to write a volume on the history of the Italian army in Africa) described the Yemenis as follows: "Very different physically from the other Northern Arab races, generally below average in height, they had the decided advantage over Eastern Africans in particular thanks to their muscular chests and build. Standing sturdily on strong legs, generally slightly bow-legged, they were better equipped at facing heavy loads." Vitale, *L'opera dell'esercito (1885–1943). Ordinamento e reclutamento*, 82.

67. The two terms "*mano*" and "*tocca*" are still used in Massawa's port.

68. During the years of the Ethiopian war (1935–1936), the Yemeni dockworkers became essential for the smooth operation of the Italian logistical machine, their wages reaching the sum of ten lira daily—a substantial amount that reflects the lack of alternatives to Yemeni manpower. An attempt to rely on Genovese dockworkers (*camalli*) turned out to be a big failure due to the harsh climate conditions in Massawa.

69. Interview with Dr. Luciano Dalmasso, Asmara, September 1, 2013.

70. Giuseppe Pini, *L'autocamionabile Assab-Addis Ababa* (Roma, 1939); Giuseppe Cobolli Gigli, "La strada Dancala nella rete delle comunicazioni dell'Impero," *Rivista della Colonia* (1939); Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman, "Yemen, Aden and Ethiopia: Jewish Emigration and Italian Colonialism," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* 19 (2009): 419–20.

71. Interview with Abdalla Muhammad Bājiba, Asmara, August 13, 2013.

72. Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, "Trespassing Boundaries. The Challenges for Eritrean Historiography," in *Themes in Modern African History and Culture*, ed. Irma Taddia and Lars Berge (Padova, Italy, 2013), 255.