

ASSAJOS I ESTUDIS

The *Meticci*¹ in the framework of school
separation between the colonizers and the
colonized in Italian Eritrea
*Els Meticci*² en el marc de la separació escolar
entre colonitzadors i colonitzats a l'Eritrea
italiana

Valentino Minuto
University of Macerata

Data de recepció de l'original: 12 desembre de 2022

Data d'acceptació: 15 gener de 2023

ABSTRACT

School organization was bipartite in Eritrea throughout the Italian colonial period: schools for Italians and schools for natives. The separatist structure of colonial social life was threatened by the presence of Italian Eritreans. The *Meticci* created ambiguity because they were partly Italian partly African. What schools could

¹ «Meticcio» (singular for «meticci») is the colonial term used to indicate the son of an Italian father and an African mother. This appellation is perceived by Italian Africans as offensive due to its negative semantic character. Nonetheless, the word «meticcio» is historiographically unavoidable because it gives the idea of the low status of these people in Italian colonial society.

² «Meticcio» (singular de «meticci») és el terme colonial utilitzat per indicar el fill de pare italià i mare africana. Els italoafricans perceben aquesta denominació com a ofensiva a causa del seu caràcter semàntic negatiu. Tanmateix, la paraula «meticcio» és historiogràficament inevitable perquè dona una idea del baix estatus d'aquestes persones en la societat colonial italiana.

Italian Eritreans go to? To those for Italians? To those for natives? Until 1939, the few *meticci* acknowledged by the Italian father had the right to attend schools for Italians. Italian Eritreans could also receive an Italian education in boarding schools run by catholic missionaries. These facilities were also open to unacknowledged *meticci*. During the second half of the 1930s colonial policy towards Italian Eritreans assumed a segregational character. This change took place under the influence of fascist biological racism: *meticci* were considered the manifestation of biological degradation since they had African blood in their veins. They therefore could not be treated as Italian: they were African. Consequently, law no. 822 of 13 May 1940 denied Italian Eritreans access to schools for Italians and banned missionary boarding schools specifically designed for outcasts. Mixed «race» people were allowed only to attend schools for natives.

KEYWORDS: Eritrea; colonialism; racism; educational policy; discrimination in education

RESUM

L'organització escolar a Eritrea va ser bipartida durant tot el període colonial italià: escoles per a italians i escoles per a nadius. L'estructura separatista de la vida social colonial estava amenaçada pels italo-eritreus. Els *meticci* creaven ambigüïtat perquè eren en part italians, en part africans. A quines escoles podrien anar els italo-eritreus? A les per a italians? A les per a nadius? Fins a 1939 pocs *meticci*, reconeguts pel seu pare italià, tenien dret a assistir a escoles per a italians. Els italoeritreus també podrien rebre una educació italiana en internats dirigits per missioners catòlics. Aquests serveis educatius també estaven oberts als *meticci* no reconeguts. Durant la segona meitat dels anys trenta, la política colonial cap als italo-eritreus va adquirir un caràcter segregacionista. Aquest canvi es va produir sota la influència del racisme biològic feixista: els *meticci* eren considerats la manifestació de la degradació biològica ja que tenien sang africana a les venes. Per tant, no podien ser tractats com a italians: eren africans. En conseqüència, la llei núm. 822 del 13 de maig de 1940 va negar als italo-eritreus l'accés a les escoles per a italians i va prohibir els instituts educatius missioners destinats específicament als *meticci*. Les persones de «raça» mixta només eren admeses a les escoles per a nadius.

PARAULES CLAU: Eritrea; colonialisme; racisme; política educativa; discriminació en l'educació

RESUMEN

La organización escolar en Eritrea fue bipartita durante todo el período colonial italiano: escuelas para italianos y escuelas para nativos. La estructura separatista de la vida social colonial se vio amenazada por los italo-eritreos. Los *meticci* creaban ambigüedad porque eran en parte italianos, en parte africanos. ¿A qué escuelas podrían ir los italo-eritreos? ¿A las para italianos? ¿A las para nativos? Hasta 1939 pocos *meticci*, reconocidos por su padre italiano, tenían derecho a asistir a escuelas para italianos. Los italo-eritreos también podrían recibir una educación italiana en internados dirigidos por misioneros católicos. Estos servicios educativos también estaban abiertos a los *meticci* no reconocidos. Durante la segunda mitad de los años treinta, la política colonial hacia los italo-eritreos adquirió un carácter segregacionista. Este cambio se produjo bajo la influencia del racismo biológico fascista: los *meticci* eran considerados la manifestación de la degradación biológica ya que tenían sangre africana en sus venas. Por lo tanto, no podían ser tratados como italianos: eran africanos. En consecuencia, la ley núm. 822 del 13 de mayo de 1940 negó a los italo-eritreos el acceso a las escuelas para italianos y prohibió los institutos educativos misioneros destinados específicamente a los *meticci*. Las personas de «raza» mixta solo eran admitidas en las escuelas para nativos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Eritrea; colonialismo; racismo; política educativa; discriminación en la enseñanza

I. INTRODUCTION

Italian colonial domination in Eritrea has two chronological extremities: 1890 and 1941. Italian possessions on the Red Sea were aggregated into what was called the Eritrean Colony with Royal Decree no. 6592 of 1 January 1890.³ On April 8th, 1941, after Mussolini had decided to support Hitler in World War II, the Eritrean territory came under British occupation. The Italian colonial course in Eritrea ended after 51 years.

³ *Regio decreto che istituisce una amministrazione civile nei possedimenti italiani nel mar Rosso con la denominazione di «Colonia Eritrea».* In *Raccolta ufficiale delle leggi e dei decreti del Regno d'Italia. Parte Principale. Volume novantaseesimo, Rome, Stamperia Reale, 1890, p. 1-4.*

Looking at Italian Eritrea as a whole, educational services had as a structural feature bipartition into two channels: one for Italians, the other for natives. The Eritreans' educational segregation did not only imply their interdiction from schools for Italians, but the educational opportunities offered to natives were also extremely poor.

In the face of the racial division of the education system in Eritrea, those who were born from an Italian father and an indigenous mother were an anomaly to be managed due to their dual belonging. What kind of education could the *meticci* have access to? To the one which was dictated by national curricular lines? Or did they have to be relegated to schools for natives? Or was it necessary to formulate other educational solutions that suited the specific situation of these young people of mixed «race»?⁴

By reviewing the scientific literature produced, the two most important studies on the school organization of the Eritrean Colony are foreign and are not translated into Italian: the Eritrean historian Tekeste Negash, with his *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882-1941: Policies, Praxis and Impact*, illuminated the link between education and power in the context of a broader reconstruction of the history of Italian colonialism in Eritrea;⁵ the Norwegian historian Christine Smith-Simonsen, with her «...all'Ombra della Nostra Bandiera.» *A Study on Italian Educational Activities in Colonial Eritrea, 1890-1941*, offered substantial research on the colonial school in Italian Eritrea.⁶ Adane Taye devoted an essay to education in Eritrea from the pre-colonial period to the 1980s, making the links between educational achievements and political advantages clear⁷. Berhane Teklehaimanot deserves a mention for having investigated educational policy in Eritrea for the period

⁴ Given the unscientific nature of racist doctrines, I use the term «race» in its historical-ideological meaning.

⁵ NEGASH, Tekeste. *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882-1941: Policies, Praxis and Impact*, Uppsala, Uppsala University Press, 1987. Tekeste Negash produced an elegantly argued study about Eritrean colonial history. Negash's contribution to understanding the political value of education in the context of Italian colonial rule is the most remarkable in the historiographical panorama. The chapter «The Ideology of Colonialism: Educational Policy and Praxis», devoted to colonial educational policy in Italian Eritrea, is partly re-proposed in Id., *The Ideology of Colonialism: Educational Policy and Praxis in Eritrea*, in BENGHIAT, Ruth, FULLER, Mía (eds.), *Italian Colonialism*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 109-119.

⁶ SMITH-SIMONSEN, Christine. «...all'Ombra della Nostra Bandiera.» *A Study on Italian Educational Activities in Colonial Eritrea, 1890-1941*, unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Tromsø, 1997. I am grateful to Christine Smith-Simonsen for making her doctoral thesis available to me. A compendium of this doctoral study was presented in Ead., *The Beginnings of Western Education in Eritrea*, «Eritrean Studies Review», V, 1, 2007, p. 259-309.

⁷ TAYE, Adane. *A Historical Survey of State Education in Eritrea*, Asmara, EMPDA, 1991.

from the Italian occupation to the British military administration.⁸ Jonathan Miran's brief historiographical foray into missionary educational activities⁹ is interesting as is the one by Asgedet Stefanos into women's education.¹⁰ In the face of these research stimuli generated abroad, in Italy there is a lack of wide-ranging historiographic projects on the topic of education in the Eritrean Colony. Since the mid-1980s, a group of scholars has placed sectorial sources, limited periods, or parcelled aspects of educational phenomenology in the Eritrean Colony under the research lens, without reading what happened in a multidimensional and inclusive way at the same time. Massimo Romandini dealt with the school administration in Eritrea during Ferdinando Martini's ten-year governorship.¹¹ Gabriella Ciampi's historiographical attention focused on the attitude taken by Italian government forces regarding the problem of education in Eritrea from the first settlement on the Red Sea coast to Giuseppe Salvago Raggi's Governorship.¹² As we will see, Giulia Barrera is the only historian to have looked at the question of the *meticci* – the stone of scandal for Italian colonialism, and not only from the point of view of education.¹³ Laura Ricci is a linguist; nevertheless, she showed historiographical sensitivity in applying her scientific skills to the study of the spread of the Italian language in the colonial context and to the formal and content analysis of school manuals for natives.¹⁴ In addition to an examination of educational policy in

⁸ TEKLEHAIMANOT, Berhane. «Education in Eritrea during the European Colonial Period». *Eritrean Studies Review*, I, 1, 1996, p. 1-22.

⁹ MIRAN, Jonathan. «Missionaries, Education & the State in the Italian Colony of Eritrea, in HANSEN», Holger Bernt; TWADDLE, Michael (eds.), *Christian Missionaries & the State in the Third World*, Athens (OH), Ohio University Press, 2002, p. 121-135.

¹⁰ STEFANOS, Asgedet. «Women and Education in Eritrea: a Historical and Contemporary Analysis». *Harvard Educational Review*, LXVII, 4, December 1997, p. 658-689.

¹¹ ROMANDINI, Massimo. «Il problema scolastico nella Colonia Eritrea: gli anni 1898-1907». *Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente*, XXXIX, 3, September 1984, p. 494-502.

¹² CIAMPI, Gabriella. *La scuola nelle colonie*, in GHEZZI, Carla (ed.), *Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana. Atti del convegno, Taormina-Messina, 23-29 ottobre 1989*, 2 vols., Rome, Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali – Ufficio centrale per i beni archivistici, 1996, vol. 2, p. 669-690.

¹³ BARRERA, Giulia. «Patrilinarietà, razza e identità: l'educazione degli italo-eritrei durante il colonialismo italiano (1885-1934)». *Quaderni storici*, XXXVII, 1, April 2002, p. 21-54.

¹⁴ RICCI, Laura. *La lingua dell'impero. Comunicazione, letteratura e propaganda nell'età del colonialismo italiano*, Rome, Carocci, 2005 (in particular, the chapter «Il contatto: scuole, istituzioni, strumenti», p. 154-188); Ead. «Politiche culturali e didattica dell'italiano nelle colonie africane». In GENTILI, Sonia; FOÀ, Simona (eds.), *Cultura della razza e cultura letteraria nell'Italia del Novecento*, Rome, Carocci, 2010, p. 191-209; Ead. «La debole "italificazione" delle ex colonie italiane. Sulla manualistica didattica in Libia e nel Corno d'Africa». *Testi e Linguaggi*, 11, 2017, p. 87-100.

Italian Eritrea during the fascist period, Alessandro Volterra focused on the educational opportunities offered to Eritrean askaris and the military training given by the organization called «Pre-askari» in schools for natives.¹⁵ Besides a panoramic treatise of the stages of the educational policy in the Eritrean Colony, Silvana Palma analysed textbooks for natives and was a pioneer in the exploration of class registers compiled at Roma School in Adi Keyh and Vittorio Emanuele III School in Asmara.¹⁶ Finally, I would like to point out my contribution on Eritreans' memories of the colonial school past.¹⁷

Within the historiographical panorama, only Giulia Barrera dealt with the position of Italian government forces on the education of *meticci*; the period, which the scholar considered, goes from 1885 to 1934, that is, from the taking of Massawa¹⁸ to before the promulgation of the colonial racial laws. Furthermore, as we will see, Barrera examined the variations in the legal status of Italian Eritreans over time, starting from the controversial tendency to their assimilation because of their paternal Italian descent, up to the segregationist position, which was regulated by the fascist state on the basis of biological racism.

This paper – written owing to the research interest that reading Barrera's contribution aroused in me – intends to reconstruct the history of the education of Italian Eritreans in its essential lines until the package of colonial racial legislation was fully implemented in 1940. Regarding the collocation of Italian Eritreans within the dual educational system, the turning point took place when fascist ideology incorporated racist prejudices during the 1930s, receiving a pseudoscientific *imprimatur*. In this work, which I am about to propose, analytical attention is mainly addressed to explain the political

¹⁵ VOLTERRA, Alessandro. «Le politiche educative fasciste per gli indigeni in Eritrea (1931-1941)». *Mondo contemporaneo*, 1, 2007, p. 5-42; Id., *Sudditi coloniali. Ascari eritrei 1935-1941*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2010 (in particular, p. 125-139).

¹⁶ PALMA, Silvana. «Educare alla subalternità. Prassi e politiche scolastiche nella Colonia Eritrea». In CARCANGIU, Bianca Maria, NEGASH, Tekeste (eds.), *L'Africa orientale italiana nel dibattito storico contemporaneo*, Rome, Carocci, 2007, p. 211-238; Ead., *L'oro e la scrittura. La formazione della gioventù eritrea nelle scuole elementari dei primi anni Trenta*, in CHELATI DIRAR, Uoldelul, PALMA, Silvana, TRIULZI, Alessandro, VOLTERRA, Alessandro (eds.), *Colonia e postcolonia come spazi diasporici*, Rome, Carocci, 2011, p. 113-143; Ead., «L'istruzione in colonia. La scuola governativa per indigeni di Asmara». In BAUSI, Alessandro, BRITA, Antonella, MANZO, Andrea (eds.), *Aethiopia et Orientalia. Studi in onore di Yaqob Beyene*, 2 vols., Naples, University "l'Orientale", 2012, vol. II, p. 443-458.

¹⁷ MINUTO, Valentino, «School memories from the Eritrean Colony. The Eritreans' oral testimonies». *History of Education & Children's Literature*, XVII, 2, 2022, p. 293-310.

¹⁸ The taking of Massawa, which occurred in 1885, was the first one of the military actions for the conquest of the territory which was given the name of Eritrea.

reasons for placing the *meticci* on one of the two sides of the racial boundary, first on the Italian side and then on the African one.

2. EDUCATIONAL APARTHEID IN THE ERITREAN COLONY

Before dealing with the topic of the education of Italian Eritreans,¹⁹ a brief survey of the school organization in Colonial Eritrea is necessary. Taking stock of the achievements of education policy in the Eritrean overseas territory, Adane Taye underlines the meanness of the colonial government initiative in creating schools for natives:

«During the Italian colonial period, Eritrea had been educationally a desert. There were few poor schools. Trained teachers were non-existent and nor were there suitable textbooks available. Education in Eritrea remained at an elementary level. Within a span of fifty years, there were only few elementary schools.»²⁰

Although partly caused by the lack of financial resources available to Italian government forces, the limited scope of educational initiatives in the Colony reflected the political determination to keep the natives' educational level low. Educational deficiencies alienated from the Eritreans the feeling of equality with the Italians or, rather, imprinted a mark of inferiority on their conscience; once internalized by new generations, this stigma significantly contributed to the perpetuation of the colonial order.

Not exposing natives to «too» intellectually fruitful inputs meant denying them the educational opportunities made available to Italian young people. This is why the education system in Eritrea was dual: schools for Italians and schools for natives. Although definitively corroborated by fascist state racism, educational apartheid was the norm throughout the period of the Italian occupation. In addition to exclusion from schools for Italians, known

¹⁹ As regards the Italian population in the Eritrean Colony, *sex ratio* was disproportionate: the number of males was significantly higher than females. Therefore, it is not surprising that a lot of Italian men kept indigenous women with them from whom they received not only domestic services. In the coexistence *more uxorio* with these women, following a practice known as «*madamato*», the male part easily accessed sexual services without being required to correspond with the duties associated with marital unions. Progeny, whose extent is difficult to quantify, were born from these concubinage relationships. In 1931, the total number of people registered in the Italian civil registries amounted to 4,188, where there were 515 *meticci*; it can be deduced that about one in eight Italians was born from an Eritrean mother. See BARRERA' Giulia. *Patrilinearità, razza e identità*, *op cit.* p. 23-24.

²⁰ TAYE, Adane. *A Historical Survey of State Education in Eritrea*, *op cit.*, p. 32.

as «metropolitan schools», educational separatism implied the limitation of education given to the Eritreans to four years and the impoverishment of the curriculum which was addressed to them: «Dual system of education, always of lower quality for Eritreans, was to persist not only in government schools, but to a larger extent in missionary schools as well».²¹

Although the principle of racial separation was the foundation of the educational policy towards natives, Silvana Palma refers to some exceptions to this rule in real school life. The historian examines the case of Roma School in Adi Keyh, which was officially listed among metropolitan schools; however, it emerges from the statistical data in the *Annuario delle scuole coloniali dell'Africa Orientale* that there were 5 Italians, 11 *meticci*, 6 Greeks, and 133 Eritreans on January 1st, 1935.²² The prohibition of racial coexistence in classrooms was probably overcome in the light of a factual observation: the low number of European pupils did not make it possible to open a racially reserved school. So, the pragmatic solution of a mixed school prevailed over the imperative of educational apartheid.²³

Nonetheless, exceptions to the separatist canon were not unlimited, as Palma points out:

«In its reality of being a mixed school, the one in Adi Keyh appears at least formally indifferent to the racial criteria [...] which sustain the hierarchization of fascist colonial society. However, the same indifference does not guide the programs followed by the school. In this respect, the colonial administration bears in mind the goals of the natives' education to the point of evading the curriculum of «metropolitan» schools (like the school in Adi Keyh is actually), practically adopting the program planned in schools for natives, without worrying about heavily penalizing the education (and «the rights») of the small Italian white minority who attends that school.»²⁴

The justifications for the separation of educational channels were specious: an intellectually demanding education of natives was not in keeping with the

²¹ WAGAW, Teshome G. *Education in Ethiopia. Prospect and retrospect*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1979, p. 43. If missionary educational services pre-existed the foundation of the Eritrean Colony, the government school system saw the light at the turn of the twentieth century: the first metropolitan schools opened in the early years of the century; the first schools for natives arose in the early 1910s.

²² *Annuario delle scuole coloniali dell'Africa Orientale*, Rome, Angelo Signorelli, 1935, p.33.

²³ See PALMA, Silvana. *Loro e la scrittura, op cit.*, p. 117-122 and 142

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

strictly practical needs of agricultural and pastoral tradition in Eritrea;²⁵ it was not suited to natives' «nature», which was more inclined to manual labour;²⁶ it was beyond the mental capacity of the black race.²⁷

The function of the separatist structure of the school organization in Italian Eritrea was enunciated by Ferdinando Martini with no ideological masking. Governor in Eritrea in the decade 1897-1907, he foreshadowed the possibility that Eritrean pupils might outperform Italian ones in mixed schools; this would have undermined that feeling of colonizer superiority which is necessary to instil into colonized people. In his *Diario Eritreo*, the Governor wrote – «That mixture of whites and blacks is not good at school»; the white man's prestigiousness «on which every colonial regime is founded» risked being «disproved»²⁸ in mixed schools; in order for it to be preserved, comparisons between Italian and Eritrean pupils had to be «therefore avoided».²⁹

What was the purpose of the separation between colonizers and colonized? It was to psychologically bend a population who had already been subjected with weapons. The colonial regime could last over time only through a psychological artifice: making natives believe that colonization was right because it was led by a superior population. White supremacy in Africa would have held out as long as blacks had been intimately persuaded that

²⁵ Mattia Mininni Caracciolo, a jurist who had risen to the role of colonial education expert, argued that the educational services intended for Eritreans had to be convenient to the socio-economic peculiarities of the local *milieu*, without any regard for the natives' intellectual training. See MININNI CARACCILO, Mattia. «La scuola nelle colonie italiane di dominio diretto». *Rivista pedagogica*, XXIII, 3, 1930, p. 183-207.

²⁶ Reading the preface of the textbook *Industrie, arti, mestieri. Manuale ad uso degli indigeni nelle due lingue italiano-tigrignà* written in 1914, we learn that the colonial government was careful to give «indigenous young people the opportunity to perfect themselves in that manual art, which is more suited to their taste and their innate qualities». The concern to adapt the didactic material to the Eritreans' presumed natural inclination to manual activities had nothing pedagogical; it was due to the fact that the Italians skimmed on theoretical teachings by concentrating on the natives' professional training in order to have cheap Eritrean labour. MISSIONE CATTOLICA (ed.). *Industrie, arti, mestieri. Manuale ad uso degli indigeni nelle due lingue italiano-tigrignà. Vol. II*, Asmara, Tipografia Francescana, 1914, preface with no numbered pagination.

²⁷ On the basis of the fascist racist ideology, Italian colonialism legitimized itself through pseudoscientific speculations on the irremediable intellectual insufficiency of African populations. Thus, the anthropologist Lidio Cipriani wrote: «A biological law makes African races less and less able not only to assimilate a bit elevated foreign civilization, but even to maintain their own one. [...] Therefore, it is unfounded to expect the evolutionary rise of people, who are dragged [...] by invincible congenital causes to decay». CIPRIANI, Lidio. «Razzismo e Possessi Coloniali». *La Difesa della Razza*, I, 3, 5 September 1938, p. 16.

²⁸ MARTINI, Ferdinando. *Il Diario Eritreo*, 4 vols., Florence, Vallecchi Editore, [1946], vol. I, p. 38.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 472.

they were inferior; colonial institutions would have been safe as long as African populations had been deeply convinced that they deserved a subject social status. Therefore, the subjection of natives depended on the myth of unattainability to white men. The feeling of superiority of the white man – and complementarily the feeling of inferiority of the «black» – was instilled in African populations through segregationist praxis in all the fields of colonial social life, including education. As Adane Taye writes,

«through well planned policy and instruction, natives were reminded of race purity and white supremacy. The members of the white race had the best education, the best homes, the best jobs, and public services. As a result, their beliefs of superiority were strengthened, while the natives were reminded from time to time and everywhere of their inferiority. In fact, the natives had no social benefit, such as those enjoyed by the white people. The colour bar was enforced. They were segregated from school, areas of residence, dining and sleeping houses, employment and other public facilities. Even in regard to items such as clothing and footwear the natives were limited to only locally made clothes, products, etc.»³⁰

Blacks introjected an image of themselves as being deficient through racial segregation. Therefore, segregationist praxis, with its inferiorizing effects, was functional to construct and maintain inequality between colonizers and colonized.

3. WHICH SCHOOLS FOR THE *METICCI* ?

In relation to the described political plan of social division, the *meticci* were a reason for ambiguity, as they were partly Italian and partly African.³¹ In 1908, the journalist Renato Paoli wrote:

³⁰ TAYE, Adane. *A Historical Survey of State Education in Eritrea*, op cit., p. 33.

³¹ I recall the definitions provided by Nicola Marchitto, one of the members of *Manifesto of racist scientists: the meticcio* was an object of social contempt because he was the «fruit of a fault», having been born from a non-marital union; in addition, this «hybrid», or worse, this «bastard», made the application of racial categorization standards problematic. MARCHITTO, Nicola. *La difesa della razza nell'Impero: il problema dei meticci*, Naples, G.U.F. «Mussolini», 1939, p. 21-28.

«We are multiplying madame³² and *cioccolatini*³³. But this is the Achille's heel of the matter. What will the fate of *meticci* be? How will the children from an Italian man and a black woman be considered, once they were recognized by their father, apart from the rights conferred by law?»³⁴

The ambivalence of «children from an Italian man and a black woman» undermined the separatist structure of the colonial system. How were the *meticci* supposed to be considered? As Italians? As Africans? Which schools should they attend? Metropolitan ones? The ones for natives?

Colonial policy towards the Italian Eritreans was assimilationist on the basis of patrilineal criteria for cultural identification until 1935 – that is, for most of the Italian colonization in Eritrea; in other words, the concept that the cultural identity of *meticci* descended from their paternal side prevailed, even if it aroused controversies: the son of an Italian father and an indigenous mother was to be considered Italian.

Few Italians, especially those who had permanently settled in the Colony, acknowledged and brought up the children they had from indigenous women³⁵.

The few acknowledged *meticci* had the right to Italian citizenship and the privileges it implied, including attending metropolitan schools.³⁶ In addition, Catholic missionaries ran boarding schools, which were specifically established to ensure *meticci* an Italian education.

However, most Italians, especially the ones whose stay in the Colony was temporary, did not acknowledge the offspring they had from indigenous women.

What was the fate of unacknowledged Italian Eritreans? Even the *meticci* without paternal acknowledgement experienced a process of Italianization; starting from 1917, after the necessary investigations, they could be registered

³² The term «madama» to designate the indigenous woman cohabiting with an Italian man was contemptuous; in Italy, it was used to indicate the brothel manager.

³³ The reference to Italian Eritreans as «cioccolatini» – chocolates in English – testifies the mortifying consideration to which they were subjected.

³⁴ PAOLI, Renato. *Nella Colonia Eritrea: studi e viaggi*. Milan, Fratelli Treves, 1908, p. 299.

³⁵ The best-known man is Alberto Pollera, an ethnographer and colonial official in Eritrea, who had six children from two indigenous women. He was the protagonist of a personal battle against the colonial racial laws which prohibited marital relationships between Italian men and African women and acknowledgment of the mixed «race» offspring.

³⁶ See TERLEHAIMANOT. *Education in Eritrea during the European Colonial Period*, op cit., p. 6.

in the Italian civil registries as children of an unknown Italian father;³⁷ then, law no. 999 of 6 July 1933³⁸, in Article 18, granted Italian Eritreans the possibility of obtaining Italian citizenship on the basis of the following requirements: 1) passing a medical assessment of «the physical features and other clues [which] indicate with a good reason that one of the parents is white» (this exam was called «race test») and 2) having «a perfectly Italian education».³⁹

Most of the Tigrinya⁴⁰ indigenous women promoted the assimilation of their *meticci* children into Italian culture. For these mothers, in accordance with the Tigrinya social norm, the cultural identity of their offspring was patrilineal; the fact that the children's culture followed «the paternal line of descent played a fundamental role in the construction of the identity of Italian Eritreans»;⁴¹ therefore, indigenous women encouraged their offspring to identify with Italian culture, even in the case of paternal abandonment. Consequently, «the Italianization of the Italian Eritreans was more an Eritrean achievement than an Italian one».⁴²

Indigenous women entrusted their children not acknowledged by their Italian father to missionary boarding schools. Italian Eritreans, who entered these facilities as children, «were kept up to the age of 17, subjected to severe discipline and in complete isolation from the surrounding society».⁴³ While missionaries took custody of these young people, their mothers lost control of them. These women

«could not get their children back before the age of 17; besides, children were never allowed to go home, not even for holidays. [...] They were forbidden to speak their mother tongue, so that the children came out of the institute knowing only Italian, being entered when they were too young. The education given was purely Italian.»⁴⁴

³⁷ See BARRERA, Giulia. *Patrilinearità, razza e identità*, *op cit.*, p. 39-40.

³⁸ *Legge 6 luglio 1933, n. 999. Ordinamento organico per l'Eritrea e la Somalia*, «Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia», LXXIV, 89, 16 August 1933, p. 3674-3679.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3676. See: BARRERA, Giulia. *Patrilinearità, razza e identità*, *op cit.*, p. 42-43; STRAZZA, Michele. «Faccetta nera dell'Abissinia. Madame e meticci dopo la conquista dell'Etiopia». *Humanities*, I, 2, June 2012, p. 118-119.

⁴⁰ The Tigrinya ethnic group is numerically the largest one in Eritrea.

⁴¹ BARRERA, Giulia. *Patrilinearità, razza e identità*, *op cit.*, p. 46.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36-41.

The mothers of unacknowledged *meticci* were often needy. For this reason, the colonial government took charge of placing these young people in the residential educational establishments managed by Catholic missionaries.

This government initiative was not aimed at protecting Italian Eritreans. In reality, the Italianization policy towards *meticci* served to clear the colonial field of every form of ambiguity. As a result of racial combination, the *meticci* were a confusing element that disturbed separatism in colonial social life. In order to perpetuate the existence of two separate communities, Italian Eritreans had been assimilated until 1935, even if that caused protests. Thus, the distinction between colonizers and colonized could remain clear.

1936 was the year of the turning point: the policy towards Italian Eritreans changed from an assimilationist one to a segregationist one; the political strategy was oriented to Africanization and no longer to Italianization. Italian Eritreans were forcibly placed on the African side of racial categorization with the intention of removing their duplicity, so that the apartheid lines could be indubitable.

What was the cause of this change? The large turnout of Italians in the Horn of Africa – due to military mobilization for the Ethiopian campaign between 1935 and 1936 – caused concern regarding the uncontrolled spread of *meticci* and, with this, the distance between rulers and ruled would be dangerously shortened. So, starting from 1936, the day after the conquest of Ethiopia, there was an ideological campaign against the «burden of bastards in the colonies».⁴⁵ This operation ended in establishing the colonial racial laws with which the segregationist praxis that had already existed for some time acquired a legal form.⁴⁶ Following the institutionalization of racism,

«the living conditions for the local population were continuously deteriorating in every way. Still, there was one group, namely the half-castes,⁴⁷ which probably suffered the greatest loss, due to a harshening of racial prejudice within fascist policies. Up till now, they had enjoyed certain privileges, thus the depriving of these not only lowered their status, but left them in a kind of social void; “not quite/not white”».⁴⁸

⁴⁵ CIPRIANI, Lidio. «Razzismo». *La Difesa della Razza*, I, 1, 5 August 1938, p. 12.

⁴⁶ «This sort of institutionalised racism was a peculiarity of Italian Fascism: under pre-Fascist Italy, [...] racism was embedded in everyday life rather than made explicit with written norms». PRETELLI, Matteo. «Education in the Italian colonies during the interwar period». *Modern Italy*, 16, 3, 2011, p. 276.

⁴⁷ «Half-caste» is the word to translate «meticcio» into English.

⁴⁸ SMITH-SIMONSEN, Christine. «...all'Ombra della Nostra Bandiera.», *op cit.*, p. 152. With the formula

The most adopted ideological argument in support of the fight against the «plague» of *meticci* was the defence of the white race, of which the Italians were distinguished members. This thesis stemmed from the pseudoscientific claims of fascist biological racism. On this regard, Lidio Cipriani, an anthropologist who had signed the *Manifesto of racist scientists*, wrote:

«It was time [...] that we also began to look ambitiously at the qualities which were biologically inherent in our people and promoted a movement to convince all the citizens of the very noble reasons why it is necessary to hand down these qualities as unaltered or, if possible, improved. [...] I repeat, it is time [...] to see that our work and our success in the world are favoured by a particular biological substrate; and it is time to understand that this success would be lacking if we altered this precious substrate [...]. In the eyes of an anthropologist [...], the increasingly serious dangers of unregulated interracial contacts appear so clear [...]. The crusade for the biological defence of our race is sacrosanct. Indeed, it is necessary to right now say «woe to transgressors!» because they compromise the Italy of tomorrow, even if their shady dealings consisted in leaving to posterity the unshakable, heavy and dangerous burden of bastards in the colonies⁴⁹ – and this is no small thing! –.»

According to the racist doctrine of the fascist regime, combination with inferior races – the black one was the lowest – caused the decay of the superior «qualities which were biologically inherent in our people». The *meticci*, since they were born from the contamination of Italian blood with African, were an expression of biological degradation of the white race. Because of this blood impurity, Italian Eritreans were biologically inferior, and, with this, they could not be classified as Italians: they were African. The Africanization policy of *meticci* found legitimacy in this idea of corruption of the superior white race.

The package of colonial racial legislation, which preceded and accompanied the well-known anti-Semitic racial laws passed in 1938, is a page of fascist state racism which is still largely unknown.

«not quite/not white», the scholar means that the mixed racial attributes of the *meticci* – *not quite (white)* – made it impossible for them to be assimilated to whites – *not white*.

⁴⁹ CIPRIANI, Lidio. «Razzismo». *op cit.*, p. 12.

Royal decree-law no. 1019 of 1 June 1936⁵⁰ repealed the 1933 provision which allowed unacknowledged *meticci* to obtain Italian citizenship (Article 28), as we have seen.

Royal decree-law no. 880 of 19 April 1937⁵¹ made interracial cohabitation liable to prosecution: an Italian man was at risk of imprisonment from one to five years if he had a relationship *more uxorio* with an indigenous woman. Criminalization of interracial sexual contacts was intended to reaffirm that distance between Italians and Africans, which was essential to the preservation of colonial order.

In the name of defending the superiority of the white man, law no. 1004 of 29 June, 1939⁵² further strengthened the separation between Italians and Africans. The circumstances under which an Italian citizen was charged with «injury to the prestige of the race» could, for example, be the usual frequentation of places intended for the indigenous population (Article 12) and the acceptance of subordinate employment from colonial subjects (Article 13). Committing these acts had the effect of «diminishing the moral figure of an Italian man»⁵³ – in the natives' eyes.

Law no. 822 of 13 May, 1940⁵⁴ was the decisive act of racial segregation for Italian Eritreans: the *meticcio* «cannot be acknowledged by the citizen parent» (Article 3); he «assumes the legal status of the native parent and is considered native to all intents and purposes» (Article 2).⁵⁵ In other words, Italian Eritreans were equated with natives, without any regard for their paternal Italian descent.

In the field of education, the normative provisions were the following:

Support, upbringing, and education of *meticci* are totally and exclusively borne by the native parent [Article 5].

⁵⁰ *Regio Decreto-Legge 1° giugno 1936-XIV, n. 1019*. «Ordinamento e amministrazione dell'Africa Orientale Italiana». Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia, LXXVII, 136, 13 June 1936, p. 1912-1917.

⁵¹ *Regio Decreto-Legge 19 aprile 1937-XV, n. 880*. «Sanzioni per i rapporti d'indole coniugale tra cittadini e sudditi, Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia, LXXVIII, 145, 24 June 1937, 145, p. 2351-2352.

⁵² *Legge 29 giugno 1939-XVII, n. 1004*. «Sanzioni penali per la difesa del prestigio di razza di fronte ai nativi dell'Africa italiana». Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia, LXXX, 169, 21 July 1939, p. 3299-3301.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 3299.

⁵⁴ *Legge 13 maggio 1940-XVIII, n. 822*. «Norme relative ai meticci». Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia, LXXXI, 166, 17 July 1940, p. 2626-2627.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2627.

Institutes, schools, colleges, students' hostels and special boarding schools for *meticci*, even if they are confessional, are prohibited. Institutes for nationals must not welcome *meticci*, who can be welcomed in institutes, schools, colleges, students' hostels and boarding schools for natives. Violators are punished with a fine of up to three thousand lire; furthermore, the institutes involved can be closed [Article 6].⁵⁶

So, Italian Eritreans «were prohibited from accessing schools and other socio-educational institutes which had historically served the community with a mixed background».⁵⁷

The forced Africanization of Italian Eritreans was aimed at averting the threat that the *meticci* acted as a «link among different races», an «amalgam between colonizers and colonized people».⁵⁸ In the words of Tekeste Negash,

«from 1940 the Italian East African Empire was inhabited by the Italians and the natives with positions clearly defined and without any in-between groups such as half-castes and educated natives. [...] By forbidding inter-racial cohabitation and by closing the possibility for [half-castes] to acquire Italian citizenship, Italy created two polarized communities, namely the rulers and the ruled. This polarization made the implementation of native policy along «apartheid» lines considerably easier to handle.»⁵⁹

4. CONCLUSIONS

Colonial power in Eritrea had the purpose to rule as cheaply as possible through establishing a separation between the Italian colonizing master and the African colonized subject. Since a distinction had to be drawn between the colonizer and the colonized, the situation of the *meticci* had to be clarified: being neither all Italian nor all African, they made it problematic to maintain separatism in colonial social life. Italian Eritrea had a two-channel education system: schools for Italians were set apart from those for natives. How did the colonial government go about regulating the position of Italian Eritreans in

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ CALCHI NOVATI, Gian Paolo. *L'Africa d'Italia. Una storia coloniale e post-coloniale*, Rome, Carocci, 2011, p. 246.

⁵⁸ MARCHITTO, Nicola. *La difesa della razza nell'Impero*, *op cit.*, p. 19-23.

⁵⁹ NEGASH, Tekeste. *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882-1941*, *op cit.*, p. 109-110.

the framework of school separation between Italians and natives? Facing this research question, what emerged is that education for the *meticci* was open to their Italianization until 1939 and then Italian Eritreans were given access only to school for natives: placing the *meticci* on either the Italian or the African side of the color bar aimed at keeping the apartheid lines intact. Although this paper contributes to observing the issue of Italian Eritreans from a historical educational perspective, much still remains unexplored and further insights into this research topic are sorely needed.