Church–state relations in colonial Eritrea: missionaries and the development of colonial strategies (1869–1911)

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Abstract

This article focuses on the complexity of church–state relations in Eritrea in the years 1890–1911. The analysis is articulated at two levels. One level focuses on the theoretical production of the missionary and colonial authorities, dealing with procedural and strategic aspects of their presence in the African territory. A second level, probably the more intriguing, focuses on the complex interaction in the colonial territory between the theoretical instructions, the missionaries on the ground, the colonial administrators and the indigenous populations. The analysis of this interplay discloses a fascinating network of alliances and conflicts where the identity of the subjects concerned constantly evolves and which refutes the traditional stereotype of collaboration versus resistance as simplistic and superficial. From an Italian perspective Eritrea seems to have represented a unique opportunity to experiment with cooperation between church and state in a way which would have been unthinkable in the colonial metropolis. This was the case despite the antagonism between missionaries and colonial administrators, which was linked to the peculiarity of their background and training. From an Eritrean perspective both converting to the missionary model of Christianity and refusing to convert appear to have been part of a broader strategy for political survival in the changing world of colonial society. Through adopting such a strategy Eritreans seem to have often exploited the internal contradictions of the colonial society to their own advantage.

Keywords
Colonialism, missionaries, education, proselytism, indigenous policies, Eritrea.

1 Introduction

The aim of this article is to investigate the complexity of church–state relations during the early period of the Italian colonial presence in Eritrea (1890–1911) and to assess its impact on the development of colonial strategies. This period is particularly important as it shows the development of a pattern of cooperation, or attempted cooperation, between church and state, which differed substantially from the reality in the colonial metropolis, marked as it was by a more difficult and conflictual relationship. An additional aspect which makes this period particularly significant is the fact that in these years missionary societies played an important role – both direct and indirect – in defining colonial policies towards Eritreans. This role cannot be described as univocal and linear.
but rather as dialectical and in many regards conflicting. An important factor behind this contradictory approach is to be found in the complex dialectic developed between the often contrasting need of the colonial authorities for order and peace and the needs of missionaries to proselytize and achieve some kind of ‘evangelical expansionism’.

For analytical purposes, the period discussed in this article can be further divided into two main periods. The first period – between 1869 and 1894 – marks the development of Italian interest in what would become the Colonia Eritrea in 1890 and culminates with the establishment of the Prefettura apostolica dell’Eritrea in 1894. This initial period builds on the missionary experience of previous decades, starting from 1839 when the Catholic Mission of Abyssinia was officially established by Pope Gregory XVI. The second period – between 1894 and 1911 – runs from the establishment of the Prefettura apostolica to the death of Father Michele da Carbonara, its first Apostolic Prefect. At this time also, the Prefettura apostolica was upgraded to the Vicariato apostolico. This second period is characterized by a noticeable shift in the national composition of the Catholic mission, which changed from French to Italian, and by the mission’s interaction with the strong and influential leadership of Ferdinando Martini, the first civilian governor of Eritrea.

2 Pre-colonial background

An ‘anomalous’ aspect of missionary activities in Eritrea is that they encountered, alongside local non-monotheistic religions, dynamic and deeply rooted autochthonous Christian and Islamic traditions, which date back respectively to the early apostolic years and to the beginning of Prophet Muhammad’s preaching.

Christianity was introduced into the region around AD 320 (Sergew 1972) and, after an initial period of inertia, when it was principally the religion of the courts, it experienced a long season of fervid proselytism. The local Christian tradition attributes this to the missionary efforts of a group of nine monks who came from different areas of the Oriental Christian world at the end of the fifth century. However, the medieval Christian literature of the region clearly shows the complexity of a process that led to widespread Christianization there (McCann 1979). This process can be described as a struggle for the Christianization of popular culture and social habits. As a result, particular emphasis was put on the eradication of polygamy and other practices deemed incompatible with a pure form of Christianity (Munro Hay 1991). From the medieval period onwards, an important pattern in the history of the region emerges. In fact, Christianity provided not only spiritual guidance but also a framework for the maintenance and reproduction of the existing social order. This order was based on plough agriculture as the main economic model and Christianity as the ideology defining citizenship (Crummey 2000; McCann 1995). Although the political fortunes of this model were complex and changeable, it dominated the
political and social history of the highlands of present Eritrea and Ethiopia until the end of the nineteenth century (Tadesse 1972; Kaplan 1984). As a result, from the time of the initial attempts at conversion by Jesuit fathers in the sixteenth century, missionary activities in the region faced strong and continuous opposition from the local Orthodox Church.

From the second half of the nineteenth century, an important development could be observed in the political and religious history of the region. Abyssinian rulers such as emperors Tewodros II (Crummey 1969) and Yohannes IV (Zewde 1975) launched ambitious policies aimed at establishing a centralized and modern state in which religion, and more precisely Orthodox Christianity, was to play a key role as a central component of the ideology of legitimization of the new model of state (Caulk 1972; Crummey 1988).

Similarly, the presence of Islam in the region dates back to the earliest period of the development of this religion. Indeed, the very beginning of Islam is associated in the Islamic tradition with the history of the Abyssinian coasts of the Red Sea. It is significant that in this tradition, the birth of the Prophet Muhammad is traditionally dated to the year 570. This is known as the year of the Elephant because of an Abyssinian military expedition against Mecca led by King Abreha, which included battalions with elephants and ended with the defeat of the invader due to a sudden outbreak of smallpox (Sergew 1972).

Later, following the inception of persecution against the then small community of Muslim believers in Mecca, a group which included one of the daughters of the Prophet was sent to the Abyssinian shores of the Red Sea seeking asylum (Trimingham 1952). This first group of refugees remained in the region for a few years, waiting for the persecutions to end. When the situation at home improved, the majority returned to Arabia, though a nucleus remained in Abyssinia and contributed to the first Islamization along the coast and in some inland areas. However, there are two important stages in the spread of Islam in the region: the campaign launched by Ahmed Ibrahim known as Grañ (Left-handed) in the sixteenth century (Trimingham 1952) and the Egyptian expansionist campaign of the early nineteenth century (Talhami 1979). This latter stage led to a massive new process of conversion to Islam, particularly in the western lowlands of Eritrea, which was linked to political developments in the region (Michael 1992; D’Avray 1996). Through a long and complex process of becoming locally rooted, Christianity and Islam became a constitutive element of local identities functioning both as a basic instrument of social cohesion and as a source of legitimacy for political authority.

3 Macro-policies

Missionary and colonial activities in the region have to be considered within this complex and unique social and religious context. In analysing these activities, an important aspect to be taken into account relates to the strategic vision of the two main institutions discussed in this article - church and state. In my discussion I will
define this level as the level of macro-policy, which was normally formulated by
the upper hierarchies in the metropolis. These macro-policies were the result of
an intricate process based on the careful assessment of both information provided
by people in the field and the strategic interests and priorities of the institution
itself.

3.1 The church

The origin of missionary interest in the territories of present-day Eritrea and
Ethiopia can be traced back to the initial establishment of missionary institutions
in both the Catholic and Protestant churches. What kindled this strong interest
was the belief that the Eritrean shore of the Red Sea, as well as Abyssinia at large,
represented a gateway to the conversion of black Africa. Catholic missionary
authorities believed that the existence of a local Christian tradition, once ‘purified’,
would facilitate the spread of Christianity in Africa. Racial prejudices also
influenced this view. In fact, the presence of populations of Semitic origin in the
region made the Catholic hierarchies believe that this Semitic stock, assumed to
be superior to the rest of Africa, could facilitate the ‘civilizing’ mission of Chris-
tianity in black Africa (Massaia 1978). Finally, north-east Africa, given its stra-
tegic place in the core of the Islamic world, was viewed as the ideal location for
the containment of Islamic proselytism in black Africa. Seen from this perspec-
tive, it would not be incorrect to state that the beginning of missionary activities
in the region which corresponds to the present state of Eritrea, particularly in
the nineteenth century, was more an accident than a deliberate and planned
strategy. In fact, in terms of Catholic strategy, this territory was only a starting
point for their more ambitious missionary plans which aimed to reconcile the
Abyssinian Orthodox Church with the Catholic tradition and, at the same time,
to initiate conversions among the Oromo people in south-western Ethiopia.
This strategy, in terms of Catholic expectations, would have opened the whole
of black Africa to Christianity (Massaia 1885–95, 1978).

Similarly, Protestant attention to the region commenced at the beginning of
the nineteenth century and was marked by intense efforts to translate the
Gospels into local vernaculars. Amharic, one of the main languages of the
Abyssinian highlands and also the language of official transactions in Christian
Abyssinian society, was the first language into which the Bible was translated –
the Old Testament in 1824 (Browne 1859) and the whole of the Bible by 1840
(Canton 1904–10). Soon other languages followed, including Tigrinya,
Oromiffa and Kunama. Very soon Protestant missionaries also directed their
attention to the evangelization of the Oromo, which in the words of one of
them ‘in time might become for Africa, what our Germany became for Europe’
(Arens 1978). To make this point clearer I should mention that many of the first
Protestant missionaries in the region were either of German origin or
German-educated. They tended to read the history of the Oromo population
through the experience of the early German tribes who had converted to
Christianity between the fourth and fifth centuries and had then played an active role in the spread of the religion in northern Europe. This keen interest in the evangelization of central Africa should also be connected to the general atmosphere of enthusiasm which was stimulated in those years by exploration missions led by Burton and Speke to Lake Tanganyika and by Livingstone to the Zambezi.

From a conceptual perspective, the most important instrument for understanding missionaries’ ‘macro-policies’ in the region are the instructions that different missionary agencies gave to their own personnel. Indeed, such material allows us to reconstruct how religious hierarchies perceived the missionary field and how they developed missionary strategy.

With regard to Catholics, some of the most important materials were the instructions given by the Congregation of Propaganda Fide – the main missionary body of the Catholic Church – to its missionaries. Already in 1630, a few years after its foundation, Propaganda Fide issued a document which contained very detailed and interesting instructions to its missionaries in Indochina (Metzler 1971). The aim of these instructions was to offer guidelines regarding missionaries’ behaviour and praxis. Particular emphasis was put on the relationship with indigenous populations and the need to study languages and cultures in order to be able to integrate the evangelical message with local traditions. Despite referring to Indochina, these instructions constituted the blueprint for Catholic missionary endeavours until the nineteenth century. The main change that occurred in the nineteenth century was that missionary instructions were integrated with papal encyclicals, testifying to the centrality of missionary activities in the main ecclesiastical strategy of the Catholic Church.

In the period under discussion the principal results of this are the encyclicals Pro n o n s t i s (1840) issued by Pope Gregory XVI, and S a n c t a d e i c i v i t a s (1880) and C a t h o l i c a e E c c l e s i a (1890) both by Pope Leo XIII. Although based on the assumption of the non-negotiable superiority of Christian European civilization, what is interesting in these encyclicals is that they all put a great deal of emphasis on the value of tolerance, and, moreover, tended to promote a missionary model based on a dynamic interaction with the population who were the object of missionary endeavours.

On the Protestant side, similar material is also available, although the absence of a centralized management of missionary activities tended to produce more focused and specific documents. One of the most interesting is represented by the instructions which the British-based Church Missionary Society (CMS) gave, in 1815, to its agents participating in the Mediterranean Mission and to which the mission to Abyssinia also belonged (CMS 1816–17). Here, the suggested model of missionary activity was articulated in two stages. The first stage was the acquisition of information on the territory. This meant that the study of languages, religion and other cultural aspects was promoted as the basic prerequisite for the establishment of successful missionary stations. The second stage could be identified in efforts to spread the Christian faith among those
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non-Christian populations as well as for the ‘amelioration’ of the existing Christian tradition among local populations following the Orthodox faith. The dissemination of religious literature, frequent travel among the population and active involvement in educational activities were suggested as key instruments for the achievement of both the propagation and the amelioration of faith.

Missionaries’ macro-policies emerging from these general instructions can be categorized into two main models. One model was based on a relationship which could be defined as church without state, while the second model suggested a relationship based on the idea of church with state.

Early missionary activities in the region can be described in terms of the development of a church without a state as both Catholic and Protestant missionaries had to operate in an unfriendly environment and without the protective umbrella of a European state. This led to inconsistent behaviour which, at a certain point, even led Catholic missionaries to look for Egyptian protection (Aleme 1969; O’Mahoney 1987–92). This ambiguous and precarious status affected Catholic missionaries more seriously as, alongside the political instability troubling the region in these years, they had to face much harder financial and logistical constraints than their Protestant counterparts. However, what was common to both missionary groups was a condition of continuous fear and instability due to complex processes of regional and local redefinitions of power balances, which led to prolonged and devastating warfare in the whole area throughout the nineteenth century.

On the Catholic side, the ‘church without state’ model was the result of sundry political and religious issues which mainly reflect the troubled process of nation building in nineteenth-century Italy. The principal themes which confirm the relevance of this model relate to the theory of the moral and political primacy of the church over the state as a civilizing force and the polemic against industrialism. The theory of the primacy of the church had its origins in the debate originated by the Italian philosopher Vincenzo Gioberti. He claimed the ethical and historical primacy of Italy in an international context on the basis of its millenarian Christian-Catholic tradition which had Rome as its centre (Gioberti 1920). This tradition, in Gioberti’s thinking, gave Italy moral and political primacy among European nations and therefore also legitimized its civilizing mission. Originally this concept of the civilizing mission of a nation, which had its roots in the Romantic tradition, had two main components: duty and right. The ‘duty’ component was understood as the moral obligation of so-called civilized nations to spread their civilization and share it with ‘less civilized’ nations. Conversely, the ‘right’ component referred to the alleged predestination of nations to fulfill a civilizing mission (Chabod 1951). However, in colonial expansionism and to some extent also in missionary endeavours, the component of right tended to prevail over that of duty. From the church’s perspective, Gioberti’s theory, when applied to the European scramble for Africa, was utilized to mean the primacy of the church in the ‘civilizing mission’ to non-European populations. One of the key
arguments used to support the primacy of the church thesis was the lack of moral legitimacy of a state which advocated separation between church and state and supported the idea of secular education. In fact, the church went so far as to attack the colonial policy of the state as devoid of any ethical and moral legitimacy.

Another important element in this bitter dispute was the issue of anti-industrialism. In fact, within some sections of the Catholic Church industrialism was seen as just a further expression of a secular and atheistic society which had sacrificed family values and social cohesion for profit. This tense relationship was further exacerbated by the religious policy of the new-born Italian state, and particularly by its clash with the Vatican state. This clash was related to substantive issues such as the right of the state to endorse the nomination of bishops (exequatur), the definition of the relationship between church and state after the occupation of Rome (guarentigie), the authorization of Catholics' active involvement in Italian politics (non expedit) and, last but not least, defining the legal status of church assets (Marongiu-Buonaiuti 1982, 1971). These conflicts, and in particular the last, played a crucial role in the Vatican's decision to transfer the administrative offices of Propaganda Fide to France in 1884 and to appoint Cardinal Lavigerie as the person responsible for African missions. This meant that at its very inception Italian colonialism could not benefit from the political or ideological support of Propaganda Fide (Marongiu-Buonaiuti 1982).

The second model of church–state relations can be described as 'church with state'. This was, however, quite different from Cavour's formula 'Libera Chiesa in libero Stato' ('Free church in a free state'). Diplomatic and political manoeuvring outside the colony played a major role in the development of this second pattern of relations. In fact, it could be argued that Eritrea represented neutral ground for experimentation in new and innovative relations between church and state. At the time, such experimentation would have been absolutely unthinkable in the metropolis. A key role in this delicate and difficult transition was played by a group of Catholic intellectuals centred on the bi-weekly publication Rassegna Nazionale (Licata 1968) who, in the heated debate of those years, defined themselves as nationalists and conservatives (Confessore 1989a). These intellectuals, part of the broader group known as Concilatoristi, founded an association in 1887 with the programmatic name of Associazione nazionale per soccorrere i Missionari cattolici italiani all'Estero (National Association for the Protection of Catholic Italian Missionaries Abroad) (Confessore 1967). The aim of the association, as stated in a pamphlet circulated among its members, was to spread knowledge of the Italian language in the colonial territory and at the same time to preserve the values of Italian culture and Catholicism among communities of Italians abroad. March 1887, the date of the founding of the Associazione nazionale, had symbolic value, as this was a few months after the Battle of Dogali (Ganapini 1970), where Italian troops suffered one of their first disastrous defeats by troops led by Alula, who governed the region on behalf of
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the Ethiopian Emperor Yohannes IV. The decision to create the new association seemed in part to be a response to the hesitation and fear of both Italian public opinion and political circles. They had been sceptical about earlier colonial attempts which the Associazione nazionale had endorsed enthusiastically and actively. Through a peculiar encounter of different political, economic and religious interests, the Associazione nazionale started to promote a policy of rapprochement between the Catholic Church and the Italian state based on the utilization of colonial territories as a political and social laboratory (Ganapini 1970; Confessore 1967).

By calling for the diffusion and strengthening of Italian culture abroad the Associazione nazionale tried to tackle, under the banner of a conservative and nationalist Catholicism, sensitive issues in Italian politics such as rural unemployment, emigration and nation building (Ganapini 1970). At the same time, to add an international dimension and forge a broader consensus, the Associazione nazionale, together with the Naples-based Società antischiavistica italiana (Italian Antislavery Society), also began to focus on the struggle against the slave trade, an issue which aroused keen interest among international public opinion in those years. The result was the launch of a vigorous campaign against the slave trade in the Red Sea.

3.2 The state

Moving the focus of the discussion to the macro-policy of the state, one element which strikes the attention of the researcher is the fact that, like early missionary interests, Italian colonial interest in Eritrea also had a rather extemporaneous and casual origin. Since Cavour, Italy had been looking in a random and unsystematic fashion for colonial outlets (Ministero della Guerra 1935). When finally in 1869 the choice fell on the bay of Assab on the western shore of the Red Sea, the guiding principle for Italian politicians was the same as it was for missionaries to use this territory, which in 1890 was officially defined as the Colonia Eritrea, as a gateway to penetrate into Abyssinia. The difference from the missionary strategy is that Italian colonial policies aimed to play a hegemonic political and commercial role in north-east Africa.

To define the attitudes of the Italian state towards its Colonia Eritrea a variety of factors need to be taken into account. Taking a somewhat schematic approach, two main attitudes can be identified in the period under discussion. One approach tended to see Eritrea as an ideal outlet for social problems such as unemployment and emigration – two issues which seriously affected Italian society at the time. Supporters of this option sought to make Eritrea a colony of settlement where Italian surplus labour could be absorbed and used to make a profit for the economy of the motherland rather than being dispersed in foreign countries (Tekete 1987; Yemane 1988).

A second approach, which had developed by the end of the 1890s, sought to transform Eritrea into a regional commercial centre and into a source of raw
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materials for the Italian industrial sector. This change in attitude mainly reflected the complete failure of the settlement scheme which had been launched in the early 1890s. This had been unsuccessful both because Eritrean peasants rebelled against it and because of the lack of Italian government planning and logistical support for the settlers (Yemane 1988).

What is interesting to observe, however, is that in the state's macro-policies we also find an apparent attempt to experiment with unusual relations with the church in the colonial territory. Following the tense relations of the period 1870–90, with repeated clashes over issues such as the property of the church, the guarentigie and the non expedit, a new model of church-state relations emerged. In fact, partly as a result of the frantic lobbying activities of the Associazione nazionale, some level of understanding was reached between the liberal state and the Catholic Church on the issue of missions. Focusing on the struggle against the slave trade in the Red Sea and the need to preserve and spread the values of Italianism, an important agreement was reached between the Italian government and Propaganda Fide. This led to the substitution of the Lazarist Fathers in Eritrea by Italian Capuchins in 1894. It also led to the reorganization of the mission which, in keeping with colonial boundaries, was transformed into the Apostolic Prefecture of Eritrea and was thus separated from the previous Mission of Abyssinia. This process was finalized with the expulsion, in 1895, of all French Lazarist Fathers from the territory of the colony. After the Italianization of the mission, the Associazione nazionale played a crucial role in trying to make the settlement policy successful. It became directly involved in the selection of candidates from the Italian countryside and, in some cases, even covered part of their initial expenses (Confessore 1989b).

4 The field

Having broadly defined church and state macro-policies as they were elaborated in the metropolis, I shall now address how these broad guidelines were implemented by different actors in the colonial territory and how these actors interacted with the local environment. Three principal social and political actors can be identified - missionaries, colonial administrators and what I will define generically as Eritrean colonial subjects.

4.1 Missionaries

There are many different issues to be taken into consideration when discussing the implementation of guidelines from central missionary institutions. I will limit my analysis to three aspects: the human factor, missionary nationalism and logistical issues.

An important factor affecting the actual implementation of guidelines was undoubtedly the human factor. In other words, many of the missionaries in the
field did not have adequate training nor did they have a background that would enable them to live up to the expectations of their superiors. Often a dangerous mix of zealotry and ignorance tended to lead to very radical and intolerant attitudes towards indigenous populations and their habits, often summarily depicted as backward and barbarian. One aspect of missionary activities linked to this intolerance, which, to date, has barely been investigated, concerns the issue of race in the relationship between European missionaries and local priests. In fact, the soft and idyllic picture of race relations in mission stations, which are stereotypically repeated in missionary reports, is sometimes belied by letters written by local Catholic priests expressing bitter complaints about the attitude of missionaries to them. These documents shed new and intriguing light on race relations in the missionary milieu and seem to fit into the behavioural pattern described by Richard Gray in terms of ‘white missionaries’ versus ‘black priests’ (Gray 1990). On the one hand, missionary sources tend to display extreme racist attitudes, both anti-Semitic and anti-black. In the case of Eritrea, this emerges in the way the indigenous population and culture are described (Uoldelul 1999). The issue of anti-Semitism in missionary sources is particularly controversial and intriguing. In fact, the link between the Christian civilization of the highlands of Abyssinia and the Semitic world is often mentioned as an element which would have differentiated it from the otherwise backward and primitive tradition of black Africa and made it in some way closer to the ‘superior’ Christian European civilization (Massaia 1978). At the same time, however, when referring to Islam which is undoubtedly part of the Semitic cultural and linguistic tradition, missionary sources use extremely derogatory and racist terms, defining it as the main source of moral corruption and human degradation (Massaia 1885–95). On the other hand, given the general silence of local sources, a few occasional clues about an uneasy relationship between missionaries and the indigenous Catholic clergy emerge from missionary correspondence. This suggests that relationships were not quite as harmonious as the missionary literature tends to convey. According to these sources, the relationship between missionaries and black priests appears to have been marked by a persistent patronizing attitude on the part of the former and by shocking discrimination against the latter in the distribution of the meagre resources allocated to mission stations (Uoldelul 2002).

A second aspect which deserves special attention is the issue of missionary nationalism. In spite of their alleged universalistic vision of human relations, missionaries in the field tended to fall prey to their own national feelings. This often led to bitter internecine wars among different congregations, with frequent episodes of curial ambushes and intrigue (Marongiu-Buonaiuti 1982). In the Eritrean missionary field, the best example of this can be found in the build-up of political tension which culminated in the expulsion of the French Lazarist Fathers from Eritrea in 1895 (Betti 1985, 2000). In this episode, as well as the clash between the hierarchies of the institutions concerned, a second, subsidiary dimension of the conflict was led by missionaries in the field. This is
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documented in letters to the colonial authorities by Italian priests which denounced alleged anti-Italian intrigue by French missionaries. This sort of conflict tended to dilute and weaken the strength of the evangelical message preached by missionaries and to associate it too closely with more secular political issues (O'Mahoney 1987–92).

The third important aspect regarding the implementation of guidelines relates to logistical issues. This aspect is normally overlooked in the literature dealing with missionaries, although from a historical perspective it can be categorized as an influential factor which seriously hampered missionary activities by limiting their operational autonomy. In Eritrea, missionaries, especially the Catholics, had to operate in conditions of constant financial and logistical insecurity (Paoli 1908). Inadequate financial support in an unfriendly environment constantly forced missionaries in the field to beg for subsidies from the colonial administration or, occasionally, from a network of sympathetic supporters in Italian parishes. To this end, journal publications like the bi-weekly Annali Francescani, published by the Franciscan Fathers in Italy and widely circulated through parish networks, played a crucial role in raising awareness among Italian Catholics about missionary activities and in raising funds to support them. In fact, the Franciscan bulletin featured short reports and anecdotes written by missionaries about the activities in their missions. The main focus was on particularly moving stories about children, orphans or the disabled. However, the missionary consciousness of Catholic parishioners was of an emotional nature and, rather than being constant, was mainly invoked for specific emergencies such as droughts or epidemics. Thus, in the period under discussion, the network of Catholic parishes failed to make charity a regular habit and a reliable and substantial source of revenue for missionaries in the field (Metodio da Nembro 1953).

Conversely, financial considerations were not such a significant constraining factor for Protestant missionaries. In fact, those operating in Eritrea during the colonial period enjoyed regular help from a much stronger and more consistent network of supporters in Sweden. This made them quite independent and meant that they did not need to resort to or depend on assistance from the colonial administration (Tron and Jwarson 1918; Arens 1978).

4.2 Colonial administrators

Colonial administrators represented a varied and fragmented reality in the colonial milieu and this paved the way for a range of approaches and solutions regarding the implementation of political and administrative guidelines from the metropolis.

From the outset it should be stressed that the majority of colonial administrators operating in Eritrea in the period under discussion shared a common political and ideological background, rooted in the ideas of liberalism and nationalism embodied in the Italian Risorgimento. For the first generation of
colonial administrators the link with the Risorgimento was not only an emotional or idealistic one; many of them had also been directly involved in the military campaign for the reunification of Italy. This was the case, for instance, with General Baratieri who had fought with Garibaldi during the expedition of the Mille. He had subsequently fought in many military campaigns in Eritrea for which he had then acted as governor between 28 February 1892 and 21 February 1896 (Labanca, 1994). However, apart from their direct or indirect involvement in the Risorgimento, this generation of colonial administrators tended to share a belief in the values which were part of the ideological foundation of the Italian state – secularism and separation between church and state. This widely held view created some contradictions in their daily activity as colonial administrators. In fact, it is not rare to find evidence of difficulties in implementing instructions from Rome calling for a more harmonious interaction with missionaries in the colony (Martini 1942-3).

Colonial administrators tended to welcome the presence of Italian priests, who provided spiritual assistance to Italian soldiers and to the families of Italian settlers (Metodio da Nembro 1953). This was perceived as a stabilizing factor for the settler community and as a means of keeping discipline and order among the troops. At the same time, it is not rare to find evidence of Catholic missionaries complaining to their superiors or to the colonial authorities in Rome about the officers' poor attendance at religious services (Francesco da Offeio 1910) and expressing dismay about the open atheism of some of them (Gabriele da Maggiora 1949). It seems to me that this apparently contradictory attitude can be explained by the fact that both colonial administrators and army officers tended to regard religion rather contemptuously. Class factors appear to have played a major role as they viewed religion as a cultural expression of the subaltern and ignorant classes.

However, colonial administrators tended to become much more rigid and uncooperative when excessive missionary proselytizing aroused tensions in the indigenous population, jeopardizing the so-called pax coloniale, which, in the colonial literature, appears to have been the primary aim of colonial policies (Uoldelul 2002). In fact, for the Italian colonial authorities in Eritrea, the main administrative and political priority was the maintenance of law and order in the colony. To this end, religious policies were instrumental for the colonial strategy in obtaining passive acceptance by the local population. This broad strategy was implemented by the colonial authorities through the theory of the ‘indifference’ of the administration with regard to religions and this was further developed into a doctrine of the legal equality of all religions (Marongiu-Buonaiuti 1982). To implement this doctrine and ultimately to maintain the pax coloniale, colonial administrators expended a great deal of energy forestalling any possibility of conflict, including religious clashes. In this quest for stability they did not refrain from punishing what they considered to be dangerous and potentially destabilizing missionary excess (Marongiu-Buonaiuti 1982; Metodio da Nembro 1953).
4.3 Colonial subjects

A very important actor in this complex game between political and religious forces was represented by Eritrean society, whose role and dynamism are rarely discussed in the literature. What appears clear in the Eritrean case is that from the very beginning a major factor determining the nature of the relationship between the local society and missionaries was the cultural and social weight of pre-colonial religious traditions. As discussed in the introductory section of this article, local religions enjoyed a strong normative position in Eritrean societies, regulating general social life. Therefore, in spite of missionary expectations, rather than constituting a gateway to further missionary expansion in the region, Eritrea instead represented a closed gateway and an obstacle to missionary penetration in Africa. This is also borne out by statistical data which show very low rates of conversion to both Catholicism and Protestantism (Metodio da Nembro 1953). This trend is even more impressive if one takes into account the temporal span of missionary activity.

This leads to a much more intriguing issue: understanding the reason and strategy behind successful conversions in Eritrea. In the Eritrean case behavioural patterns can be detected which to some extent are similar to those discussed in the literature on other parts of Africa, particularly West Africa (Ayandele 1966; Ajayi 1965). What emerges is that the few limited cases of missionary success in Eritrea can be ascribed to communities that, for different reasons, could be broadly defined as occupying a position of political, social or ethnic marginality.

Some of the early communities who converted to Catholicism and Protestantism in Eritrea were composed mainly of former slaves of Oromo origin, whom missionaries had rescued and freed on the Red Sea coast. These freed slaves were subsequently organized into Christian communities along the model of the Saintes Chapelles launched by the White Fathers of Cardinal Lavigerie in the mission of Central Africa. From 1887, Assab on the Catholic side (Metodio da Nembro 1953; Gabriele da Maggiora 1949) and, from 1873, Moncullo on the Protestant side (Tron and Jwarson 1918; Arens 1978) acted as centres for the first nuclei of freed slaves. These slaves were trained by missionaries who intended to send them back to their original communities to make more proselytes.

Other cases of successful conversion of Eritrean communities were the Blin, Kunama and Tsenadegle. They represent quite interesting typologies as it is clear that, throughout the nineteenth century, the majority of these communities experienced situations of serious distress, marked by dislocation (Michael 1992), political violence (Mohamed Nur Abdu 1972) and, in the most extreme cases, genocide (Pollera 1913).

For instance, in the nineteenth century the Blin community, previously of Christian Orthodox faith, found itself in an extremely precarious social and political situation, caught as it was between the expansionist ambitions of the
Italian colonialism

Egyptians to the north and the Ethiopians to the south. Both regional powers attempted to exert their authority over the Blin community through collecting tribute and through raids if they failed to pay (Aleme Ashete 1969; Zewde 1975). Faced with this situation of prolonged instability and violence, which was threatening its very existence, this community resorted to conversion as a strategy for survival. Some segments of the community adopted Islam, the religion of the Egyptian aggressor, in order to escape from raids and enslavement (Trimingham 1952). Other sections converted to Catholicism as this was deemed to be the best strategy to obtain military protection from the violence of the conflicting parties, and to gain political patronage from France, which was the European power behind early Catholic expansion in the region (Aleme Ashete 1969).

The massive conversion of the Tsenadegle community to Catholicism could also be analysed as an interesting case of a successful strategy to solve local political conflicts. In fact the Tsenadegle population in the Akkele Guzay region represented an anomaly within the traditional typology of political systems in the Eritrean highlands. In contrast to the semi-feudal political tradition dominant in the Eritrean highlands, Akkele Guzay and Tsenadegle maintained obstinate loyalty to a political system which colonial literature defines as democratic (Perini 1905). In other words, in their opposition to the hereditary transmission of political power, the Tsenadegle were involved in a very bitter political struggle with the nobility of the neighbouring region of Tegray who, unlike the Tsenadegle, supported this principle to legitimize their ambition to control the Eritrean highlands. In this context of bitter conflict, the adoption of Catholicism was of great political significance and stood both as an expression of diversity and as an attempt to establish alliances with foreigners who were also expected to provide military and political support to local parties (Mohamed Nur Abdu 1972).

Archival as well as published documentation shows that missionaries failed to understand the complexity of local interests and strategies underlying cases of conversion. In fact, missionary literature tends to transmit a very idyllic image of flocks of sinners or pagans ‘genuinely’ rushing to join the ‘true’ faith preached by Europeans, having understood their mistakes. A good example of this misunderstanding can be found in the case of missionary activities among the Kunama population. In fact, early missionary sources enthusiastically report whole villages deciding to convert to Christianity and only mention incidentally the absolute predominance of males among the newly converted (Metodio da Nembro 1953; Arens 1978). This detail, which is mentioned as a minor curiosity, seems to have puzzled missionaries in the field, without, however, raising any serious concern. Nevertheless, deeper ethnographic sensitivity would have probably allowed missionary groups to understand that there was a quite clear strategy behind this ‘anomaly’. In fact, in a matrilineal society like the Kunama, the conversion of males was accepted and in some cases even suggested by local chiefs since it was perceived as an action which did not
jeopardize the stability of the social system. Indeed, conversion could even have brought some benefit to the community, in terms of both political protection and social services, particularly in the area of health.

5 Strategies and implementations

To conclude this article, I would like to discuss how the complex interaction of instructions from the metropolis and different social actors in the field concurred in defining and implementing colonial strategies. If one word were to be selected to express this complex process, it would be fluidity. In fact, the colonial milieu was characterized by a constant flow of different strategies which shifted continuously between alliance and hostility. These strategies were the result not of a single decisional centre but of the dynamic interaction of different actors (Taddia 1986).

A meeting point for both colonial and missionary strategy lay in the notion of the Italianization of the colonial territory and the production of ‘loyal’ colonial subjects. In the years discussed in this article, one of the main concerns of colonial authorities both in the metropolis and in Eritrea was the Italianization of the colonial territory. In this context Italianization meant a composite strategy which aimed to deeply affect the entire colonial society and its own mechanism of reproduction. This was expected to encapsulate a range of cultural, ethical and social values, which were assumed to represent the essence of being Italian or Italianità.

Missionaries played a crucial territorial and cultural role in this ambitious project. At the territorial level, through the Italianization strategy of the Catholic mission, Italian missionaries in the field, backed by strong support from lobbying forces such as the Associazione nazionale, helped to further Italianize the colony by making the Catholic mission an Italian Catholic mission (Confessore 1967). At the same time, by taking over the mission from the French Lazarists they supported colonial strategies which aimed to minimize French influence in the region (Marongiu-Buonaiuti 1982; Betti 2000).

A second important arena of missionary intervention related to the cultural Italianization of the society. Here, the role of missionaries was crucial as they were able to capitalize on the substantial linguistic and ethnographic knowledge they had accumulated through years of presence in the field. Missionaries’ knowledge of Eritrean society was very valuable to colonial administrators in terms both of defining colonial strategies and of their implementation. Moreover, and probably also more importantly, Protestant (Arens 1978) and Catholic (O’Mahoney 1987–92; Cordovani 1997) missionaries had already become involved in the education of indigenous populations before the formalization of Italian rule over Eritrea.

Therefore in Eritrea, despite the bitter dispute between church and state raging in Italy over the issue of education, the colonial administration – compelled by both political and budgetary reasons – acknowledged and
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endorsed the involvement of missionaries in the field of education. It should be noted, however, that missionary involvement was confined prevalently to the education of Eritreans. The curricula of mission schools for Eritreans, as well as the teaching materials utilized, clearly show the conscious and active commitment of missionaries to this duty (Tekeste 1987). From this perspective, the education provided to Eritreans by mission schools was a crucial step both towards the attempted social and cultural Italianization of the colonial territory and towards the production of colonial subjects. It is significant that the curricula of the so-called scuole di arti e mestieri (the only educational institution beyond elementary schools accessible to Eritreans), as well as putting substantial emphasis on learning the Italian language, also included substantial military training. In fact, in the colonial literature, and to some extent also in the missionary literature of those years, the colonial soldier (ascaro) appears to be an ideal model of colonial subject. Exposure to the Italian language and culture, unconditioned submission to colonial authority and love of the tricolore (the Italian flag) seem to have encompassed the main virtues expected from Eritreans in the colony (M etodio da N embro 1953).

This conclusion would, however, be incomplete without taking into account the role of Eritreans in the complex process of the production and implementation of colonial strategies. Although this area has not been adequately investigated, the role of colonial subjects in the definition of colonial policies in Eritrea is a fascinating area, representing a political and social frontier which could provide further insight into the complexity of the colonial milieu.

With regard to Eritreans, fluidity remains the keyword summarizing the nature of a process characterized by flexible strategies of alliance and conflict. As repeatedly discussed in the literature dealing with missionary activities in Africa, in Eritrea, too, a basic strategy of alliance was through conversion to missionary proselytism. In fact, apart from its spiritual dimension, conversion can also be analysed as an important step in a strategy aimed at the acquisition of privileges in the colonial society. This is especially true if conversion was to Catholicism, the official religion of the colonizers. As a matter of fact, conversion, while not an absolute prerequisite, nevertheless facilitated new social and political opportunities for Eritreans, including education, health services and job opportunities in the colonial administration. The most intriguing example of this kind of strategy can be found in the case of the famous Eritrean chief Bahta Hagos whose name is mainly associated with the most significant incident of anti-colonial rebellion in Eritrea, which flared up in 1894 (Tekeste 1986; Cauk 1986). However, if analysed from a broader perspective, the life story of Bahta Hagos is paradigmatic of the complexity of colonial relations. Initially involved in a bitter struggle for power in his district in the region of Akkele Guzay, Bahta Hagos converted to Catholicism under the auspices of the Lazarist Fathers and, with the arrival of the Italians, he became one of their most important local supporters (Cauk 1986; Francesco da Offeio 1910). In this position, as the colonial literature makes clear, he played a central role in the decision-making
process of colonial administration in the region, as colonial officers regularly sought his advice before taking important decisions on issues involving the local population (Martini 1942–3). Due to his privileged position, Bahta Hagos was able not only to actively influence colonial strategies but also to bend them to suit his own interests. His word was sufficient to disgrace people in front of the colonial administration and to make them disappear into colonial jails (Martini 1942–3; Baratieri 1994).

However, there are other behavioural patterns which deserve a mention. In fact, missionary literature indicates frequent cases of local opposition to missionary activities. These were articulated through a complex strategy aimed at playing off ‘loyalty’ to the colonial administration against the missionaries. This is the case in areas where missionary proselytism led to social and political unrest among the local population (Francesco da Offeio 1910; Metodio da Nembro 1953). For instance, colonial and missionary literature frequently report incidents caused by missionaries’ insistent attempts to suppress local practices which they considered pagan and barbaric (Martini 1942–3). Similarly, there are references to disorders fomented by missionaries’ proposals to build Catholic churches in predominantly Orthodox or Muslim areas. It is interesting to note how in all these cases, local chiefs used the weight of their political credibility and the strength derived from their ‘loyalty’ to the colonial administration to oppose these schemes by calling for the sympathetic intervention of the colonial authorities. These examples demonstrate the ability of ‘colonial subjects’ to be lucid and active political actors through exploiting the internal contradictions of the colonial milieu.

In light of the points discussed in this article, a historical analysis of the role of missionaries in defining and implementing colonial strategies in Eritrea needs to be developed by taking into account a variety of concomitant social and political actors, including not only missionaries and colonial administrators but also different segments of Eritrean society. Moreover, the interaction between these different actors should not be assumed to be unidirectional and formulated by central authorities, but rather multidirectional and often formulated locally. This reflected continual strategy adjustments on the ground in order to cope with changing power relations. From this perspective the image of missionaries, colonial administrators and Eritrean ‘colonial subjects’ that emerges from the literature is not clear-cut. Rather, it is a variegated image, encompassing the variety of interests at stake. Hence, broad categories like ‘missionary’, ‘colonial administrator’ and ‘colonial subject’ tend to become blurred and elusive, and need to be substituted by more pragmatic and stringent categories. Detailed analysis of reality on the ground leads to an intriguing scenario animated by a variety of actors whose roles are in constant flux. As discussed throughout this article, some of the factors of change to be accounted for are class, ethnicity, religion and economics in their interplay in the colonial as well as the metropolitan territory.
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Notes
1 As stated in the Rassegna Nazionale of February 1887, L’associazione ha fine del pari religioso e nazionale, proponendosi di promuovere, sotto la direzione dei missionari, la diffusione della lingua italiana, specialmente in Oriente e nell’Africa, e di mantenere vivo insieme con la fede l’amore per la patria nei numerosi italiani che sono emigrati in lontane regioni.

2 Baratieri had also been considered the person mainly responsible for the Italian defeat at the Battle of Adua in March 1896.

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As is standard practice, Eritrean and Ethiopian authors are listed under their first name, followed by their father’s name.


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