

# Gender and Sexual Abuses during the Italian Colonization of Ethiopia and Eritrea

—*The “Insabbiatti”, Thirty Years after*

Fabienne Le Houérou<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>CNRS, MIGRINTER, UMR 7301, France

<sup>2</sup>Science-Po, Aix-en-Provence, France

Email: [lehouerou.fabienne40@gmail.com](mailto:lehouerou.fabienne40@gmail.com)

Received \*\*\*\* 2015

Copyright © 2015 by author and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

---

## Abstract

This paper explores the singular role of cross-cultural couples of Italian men and Abyssinian women during the fascist colonies in East Africa (Eritrea and Ethiopia). This article is based on an inquiry driven ethno-historical research conducted 30 years ago in Ethiopia among ex-Italian colonial actors in Ethiopia and their concubines. These ex-colons were calling themselves *insabbiatti* a very original term locally employed. To be an *insabbiatto* is to be stuck, shipwrecked, stranded in the sand. It means to be forgotten in Far-South Italian colonies (such as East Africa or Libya).

## Keywords

Ethiopia, Eritrea, Abyssinia, Italian Colonization, Gender, Insabbiatto, Madamism, Antchilite, Bambine Mania, Sexual Abuses, Pedophilia

---

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to revisit categories that these white colons used to name their concubines, wives and girlfriends. A new notion is explored in this paper highlighting a dark inclination of the *insabbiatti* for under aged girls: *bambine mania* (girl's mania or obsession). The vocabulary will be explored in order to distinguish marital status (*madamism*) to other transgressions characterizing the white male relations with local colored women in Ethiopia and Eritrea during the fascist period and will tempt to analyze what is specifically fascist in these particular relationships.

During this field research a camera was introduced at the heart of the ethnographic investigation using the first video cameras in the early eighties (HI 8 camera). The use of cinematographic tools was unusual at the time and opened the gate to a deeper and unexpected observation in the mixed families and gave the opportunity to

read between the lines, the gender roles and the position of black young women with their old white colonial called *goytana* in amharic language (masters). All the 30 ex-colons interviewed for this research have died a long time ago. They were already in their late eighties when I interviewed them. Data and results of this research were published in France with the thesis “The fascist adventure in Ethiopia” (1989) and in diverse articles and documentary film (*Hotel Abyssinia*, 1996). The methodology adopted was a classical participant observation used in qualitative research in cultural anthropology and European ethnology. Its goal is to reach an intimate familiarity with a given group of individuals and their practices through an intensive involvement with people in their cultural environment, usually over an extended period of time. I have spent two years in Ethiopian and Eritrea conducting interviews with thirty ancient Italian colons in 1986-1988.

What I have perceived during this field investigation (in Ethiopia in 1986-1987) never had the chance to be translated into academic publications. I avoided to fully recounting what I had observed in my Ph.D. dissertation, partly because the academic world and the French institutions—at the time—were not ready to apprehend and accept the results of this “*participant observation*”. Gender perspectives were not what they have become in the XXI century: retracing academically the sexual relations between ex-fascist and young black girls fell under a cultural taboo. I am proposing in this article to re-visit my sources and archives, visual and written, collected 30 years ago in order to explore the unspoken sides and hidden dimensions of this investigation among the Italo-Ethiopian families highlighting the singular positions of the Ethiopian concubines. The written documents and reports related to gender relations were—at the beginning of the Italian colonization—mainly characterizing free unions and marital *concubinage* as *madamism*. This term was originally a French word that we can find very early in the colonial literature in Eritrea during the nineteenth century. The fascist administration and journalists are also using the word *madamism* to identify a crossed-cultural partnership. The colonial archives and written literature do not mention the concept of *antchilite* which I picked up among the *ensablés* (*insabbiatto*): the one who is stuck in the sand. The notion *anchilite* was invented by the colons *ensablés*, *isabbiatti*, interviewed in Addis Ababa. The neologism was fabricated associating an Amharic personnel pronoun (*antchi*) with a Greek suffix (*ite*). In ancient Greek  $\alpha\iota\tau\iota\varsigma$ , *-itis* (“inflammation”). The neologism means “*inflammation for you*” that we could translate in English as a toxic attraction. *Antchi* is a strictly feminine identification (you) and refers to a female. In consequence the word *antchilite* can be translated by “*fatal force for an Ethiopian woman*”. The word in Amharic *antchi-lite* is sticking the suffix *ite* to indicate a pathological state, a disease. Assimilating a physical attraction to a sickness. The formal inquiry conducted in the mid-eighties was central to elaborate the notion of *antchilite*. The *insabbiatti* forged this notion to designate a short and temporary “passion” of Italian men for Ethiopian or Eritrean women. At the opposite the term *madamism* referred to a long term association or marital union. Both fundamental concepts *madamism* and *antchilite* correspond to the relations between women and men and remain essentially distinct.

## 2. Fascist Infringement

Most of the documents and analysis produced by the academic world and the colonial literature intermingle the two concepts. They all mention the vague notion of *madamism* and do not operate the dissemblance with *antchilite* blurring the lines of two very specific relations. These biracial couples were dissimilar and there were a myriad of different partnerships and mixed unions during the colonial time. The variety could comprise solemn weddings, formal marriages (after and before the colonial period) to a negotiated marital life and to a confinement of young girls abused in an asymmetrical and abusive relationship of a colonial adult with a very young girl almost a child. Transgressive adoptions were contracted with un-matured girls (teenagers or even pre-teen children) who became captives of their stepfathers who adopted them in order to impose forced sexual relations at a very early age. This paper will explore the variety of these relations and analyze them in a fascist colonial dialectic highlighting the political dimension of such transgressions.

Our hypothesis posits that the colonial moment is a key factor to shape the nature of this biracial relation. The first Italian colony in East Africa, the Eritrean colony in 1891, did not encourage mixed couples but more or less tolerated them in a rather flexible way: the children of these couples benefitted from the Italian citizenship and were registered as Italians. In 1936, after Mussolini invaded Ethiopia and proclaimed the “Empire of Italian Africa” the laws became harder and half-caste children couldn’t be granted the Italian nationality anymore. The law against *madamism* was applied in 1937-1938 and became effective introducing a juridical breach that will have a series of unfortunate consequences. Mixed couples were henceforth identified as illegal and criminal in

front of the law provoking various corruptions and perversions. I have interpreted the transgressions operated by the fascist *insabiatti* as a social mechanism to bypass and circumvent the new rigidities of the fascist laws to react against fascist drastic rules against biracial couples.

### 3. From the Ethiopian Point of View: Fascism Is a Moral Deviance

The attitudes of the colons towards local women varied from legal to illegal social *habitus* with the introduction of new fascist laws. The fascist rules introduced a modification forcing the *insabbiatti* to live forbiddingly and hidden with Ethiopian concubines deprived of any status and legal position. These illegal mixed couples expanded widely according to our testimonies and the colonial literature. Most Italian men lived an informal life with their concubine or captive and this was morally condemned by the Ethiopian Amhara aristocracy of the time. It was considered unscrupulous, immoral and dishonorable to share a marital life with a woman without a specific status. The well-off families and elite of the country were refusing to accept their daughters to have any kind of relations with the Italian colons most of the time they used to condemn and despise the manners of the *insabbiatti* generally considered as *villains*.

This situation is an overriding distinction between Eritrean and Ethiopian colonial experience. We mentioned that before the colonial fascist adventure in Ethiopia mixed couples were tolerated in Eritrea. The 1938 racial laws on *madamism* (called in Ethiopia laws on *madamism*) did change everything and transformed the family equilibrium of crossed-cultural units. From then upon any mixed couple became shameful and marginal. These couples inspired moral disgust on the Italian side but also on the Ethiopian side.

The *insabbiatti*—as they used to confess during interviews—insist on their sexual appetite for the *facette nere* (“black little faces” a well known fascist song). In the book “*Les enlisés de la Terre Brûlée*”, published in 1996, following the documentary film “*Hotel Abyssinia*”, the main intimate problematic of the *insabbiatti* was related to their sexual obsessions for Ethiopian women.

One of my main informant used to declare that certain Italians *insabbiatti* were capable of anything to keep on living a life with a myriad of different concubines. Amedeo Venditti name it “*il vizio*” (depravity) and used to tell a story about an Italian ex-colon disguised in a traditional Ethiopian magician (*tanqway*) in order to have a privileged position to deal with as many women as possible, influencing their sexual life and finally making money with it. This Italian worker in Abyssinia was so impoverished during the eighties that he was reduced to act as a local magician.

The interviews of thirty men aged between 70 to 85 have largely insisted on the *black woman* as object of desire. They expressed it directly without any shame or any sense of guilt as a *fatalité*, an inevitable fate and uncontrolled attraction well translated by the concept they invented *antchilite*. It was a method to avoid any kind of regrets regarding their reprehensible un-decent conducts with women. One informant used to tell me “*When I met my lady, my feet became lead*”. This sexual appeal was concerning the totality of the men I have interviewed. I have retraced this principal inclination and fascination in the book “*L’épopée des soldats de Mussolini en Abyssinie*” (Le Houérou, 1994). In addition to this major eccentric lean most men were absolutely ignorant of the traditional and local conditions of the women during the thirties in Ethiopia. They were taking advantage of the traditional servile roles of the Ethiopian women during that period of history especially in the countryside where the *insabbiatti* had chosen their partners in order to become the *absolute* masters of their concubines or captives. After the departure of the Italian administration in 1941, and the comeback of the King of the Kings Hayla Selassié, the situation of these ex-colons changed completely. They—as ex-colons—became caged by their concubines who protected them from (the) British deportation. A hundred ex-colons decided to remain in the country after the fascist had lost their Empire. They could remain in Ethiopia or Eritrea because their concubines wanted them to stay and hid them in their houses. From that time their relation became legalized and most Italian got married with their ex-concubines or mistresses. In the mid-eighties these men were completely dominated by their wives and obsessed to be betrayed by their younger partners who in generally were 20 or 30 years younger than the *insabbiatti*. They were already old and had lost their powers in the mid-eighties and their ladies were still full of energy. All of them expressed the phobia to be the “toy” of their wives and be completely dominated by them. All their lives had a main basic fear related to their relations with women in their different historical episodes. We could identify three important historical parentheses. The fascist period corresponding to their young age and arrival in Abyssinia, the postcolonial age in the 1950-1960 corresponding to their maturity and the twilight period from the 1970 to the 1980s. Most of interviewed *insabbiatti* died at the end of the nineties. At the origin

of the most significant experience of their private lives *there was a love story (or many love stories) at the very start of their arrival in Abyssinia.*

The junction with a local woman a *faccetta nera* (little black face) changed their life. The informants used to diagnose the beginning of their *insabbiamento* with the first *flirt* they had with a country woman and used to represent *eros* as the key factor for staying in Ethiopia after the loss of the Italian fascist Empire. The *insabbiatti* point of view is that this first love story is the beginning of a process of *insabbiamento*. That is to say a mechanism of getting more and more adapted to the local culture. We have named it in our previous academic works a process of acculturation. Being an *insabbiatto* meant, in their eyes, being almost *ethiopianized* and having progressively lost some kind of *italianness*. This Ethiopian cultural integration took many dimensions and a series of *interstitial spaces* (as brilliantly theorized by Homi Bhabha) could be identified on the ashes of the Italian culture. Most *insabbiatti* argued that sharing the same religion was a very important and powerful *interstice*. A space they had in common, sharing the same religious festivities such as Christmas and Easter, a similar idea of good and evil with a Christian-like moral (or absence of moral) as part of their identities. Even though the Ethiopian and Eritrean women were orthodox and the *Insabbiatti* were Catholics. Being Christians was a kind of permission for such arrangements and it is interesting to stress that no *insabbiatti* (I have interviewed) has never taken a Muslim concubine. Choosing a Muslim concubine was obliging them to get married and to become Muslim as the *shari'a* law was demanding. In their eyes a conversion would have been a crime so they confessed to have uniquely taken Christian women as partners.

The *insabbiatti* cultural modification was mainly confined to their personal and intimate life. It concerned their way of living, cooking and their family integration as individuals. They borrowed traits from the Ethiopian culture. They used to drink coffee in the traditional and ritual style of the Ethiopians and eat *ingera* bread (a *chapatee* kind of bread). In public, they never dressed as traditional Ethiopians they used to wear the *borsalino* hat that they kept from the thirties and bear out-fashioned suits and ties. What was striking—in the mid eighties was that they could be clearly identified and recognized in the urban settings of Ethiopian towns. They were dressed as if they were still living in another age and seemed out of time. Dressing was thus an *interstitial space* that we could consider a relic or a remnant of the Italian colonial *grandeur*. They truly wanted the Ethiopian society to recognize them as Italians. Except from the clothes and style of wearing them, their domestic life was completely Ethiopian. Here and then, few traces of *italianness* could be found inside their places. On the walls of their homes you could see a picture of Rome, the Pope and other cultural signs of what was supposed to be typically culturally *Italian*.

In their opinion, the starting point of this acculturation was the biracial couple that they formed. Acculturation was thus the fruit of a long term commitment in local families. The time spent in Ethiopia with their Ethiopian relatives was identified as *insabbiamento* a progressive abandon of their Italian identity for a cross-cultural mixity. During the colonial period there were few Italian women in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The young men, who came in 1936, had no other choice than locally finding a partner. The Italian migration in Ethiopia was a military migration transformed into a labor migration. They came as soldiers in 1936 but later on, after 1941 they stayed in Abyssinia as workers. There were few hundreds of Italian women for thousands of Italian men. Most of the Italian women were married with Italian high ranks officers. Simple soldiers did not come with their *findanzata* (*fiancée*) and found a new girlfriend in Ethiopia as Amedeo Venditti explains clearly in the documentary film “Hotel Abyssinia “ (1996) (**Figure 1**).

Live-in partnership a formal cohabitation was the main explanation for justifying the presence of the Italian Diaspora in Ethiopia and Eritrea and the territorial anchorage of this migration after 1941. What we have observed with the *insabbiatti* in Ethiopia present a lot of resemblance with the Russian experts who came to Ethiopia during president Manguestu time during the eighties. Exiled Russians arrived as technicians in Ethiopia during the dictatorship of Manguestu (1976-1991). These Soviet experts remained in Abyssinia after the fall of the dictator for reasons similar to the ex-Italians colons. Simple labor migrations were modified into durable immigrations. Different studies accomplished by Sociologists or Anthropologists about *mobilities* are often recalling how uneasy it is to qualify and offer a pertinent theory on migrations. Migrations are in essence fluids and the process of fixing a theory on a permanent movement remains a laborious mission. It is important to stress that the personal marital choices of the migrants (either volunteer migrants or forced migrants) is a fundamental experience in their individual path. It is a crucial step in their itinerary, a turning point for the *insabbiatti* but also for the Soviet migrants experts, working in Abyssinia in the mid-eighties. These Russians got married with Ethiopian women and probably never went back to their native land just like the ex-Italians colons.



**Figure 1.** A *Madama* from Eritrea. *Madamism* was a formal cohabitation between an Italian man and an Ethiopian woman.

When we were in Ethiopia to accomplish a Ph.D. research we concluded (maybe too rapidly) that only men could meet the process of progressive *insabbiamento*. The reality might be more pragmatic. If Italian men stayed in Ethiopia more importantly than the Italian women it is less related to gender roles but more probably a consequence of population density and balance. The young colons came as singles and found local partners because it was due to the demographic context. Amedeo Venditti expresses it lucidly when he says: that he was with an Ethiopian lady because it was the only opportunity he had to share a life with a woman. He summarizes the high number of mixed couples by a narrow “*market of marital opportunities*”:

“*We stayed with a black woman, because there was no white lady out there! Otherwise I would have married a white like me! But In Abyssinia in 1936 where do I find a white woman?*”

#### 4. The Black Concubines and the White *insabbiatto*

In anterior academic works I underlined the relation of oppression and superiority between the white colon and the black partner. With the novel *perla nera* (*per-la nera*) published in 2014, I explored the sexual subjugation of the relation. Frightened to be colonized sexually by a black woman is an axial and durable obsession that started with the beginning of the colony. The fascist song *facetta nera* expresses it quite manifestly. The song tells the story of an Italian soldier that came to conquer Ethiopia and who falls in love with an Ethiopian girl. The soldier invites the Ethiopian girlfriend to parade in front of the “Duce”, Mussolini. That idea irritated so much the Italian dictator that he forbade the song explaining that this song was an invitation to give birth to half-cast sons (*figli caffè-latte*: literally coffee with milk sons). Most of the soldiers had erotic postcards that they were exchanging as a game. These collections of pictures exhibited very young undressed Ethiopian girls showing their breasts in a strip-tease style. In many pictures the girls look very sad and they have a terrible expression: a submissive smile or a look of anger. Suggesting that they were almost forced to pose for the photo.

Here a picture presenting this despair (**Figure 2**).

Most of these girls do not smile and are visibly ashamed and uncomfortable with the artificial positions asked by the photographer. The body of the woman is in full view object for white male use and consumption. The woman is presented as a prey or a trophy for the conqueror. Girls were symbols of the warrior’s break or Sunday holiday: epitomizing a reward or a gift for the soldiers for having conquered the land. The black woman humanity was denied. Visual anthropology analysis of this postcards name this relation a *predation*. It is mentioned in the book “*Les enlisés de la terre brûlée*” (Le Houérou, 1996). We insisted in this text on the Amharic words and concepts used by the ex-colons *insabbiatti* to refer to their ladies. The *insabiatti*, as cited above, fabricated the

concept of *antchilite*. Listing the names, the nicknames, the insulting epithets and plural denominations for the Ethiopian women is a very heuristic exercise. Analyzing each concept acknowledge the inferior and humiliating position of the colored woman.

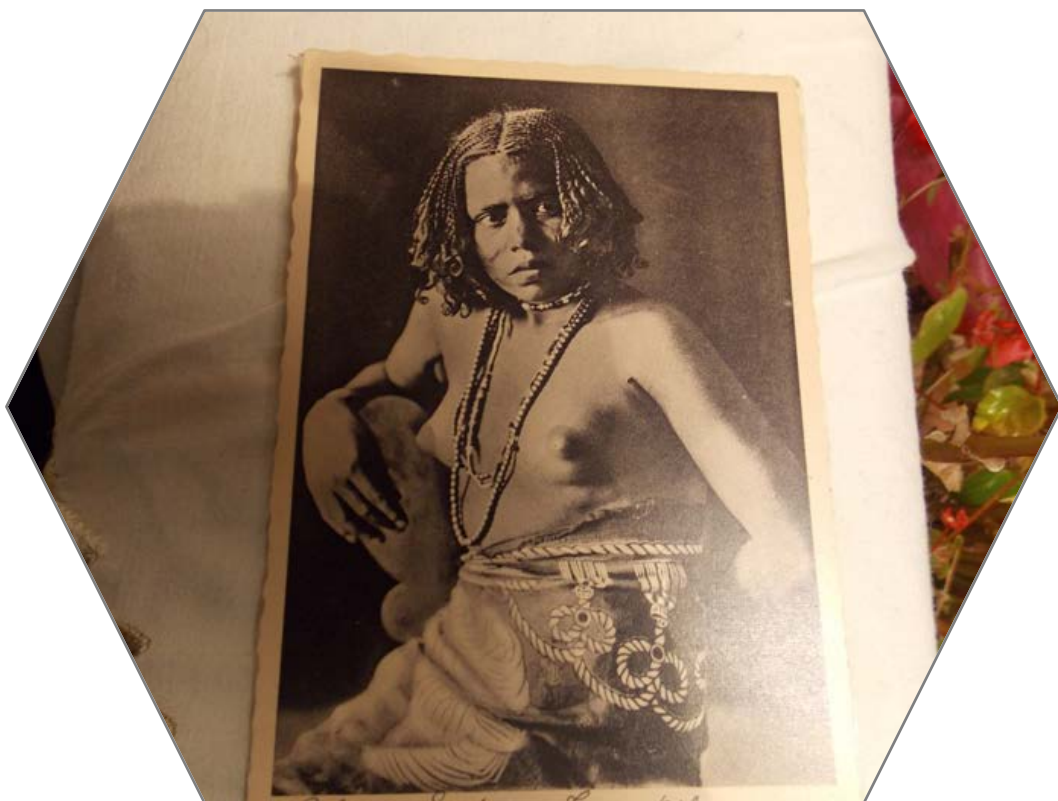
## 5. Antchilite

*Antchilite* notion is slightly different from the *madamism*. *Madamism* concept emerged in Eritrea at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the *antchilite* concept was produced during and after the fascist period.

The *madamas* were socially respected in Eritrea. There was an extreme variety of unions. Some of them relied on traditional agreements for example the well-known *Damoz* marriage was re-organized and reinvented in Eritrea. The *antchilite* does not refer to this respectable arrangement but implicates a limited sexual relation. *anchilite* is a passing fancy or a devastating passion with a woman contrary to *madamism* meaning a durable cohabitation. *Antchilite* does not refer to love or attachment but to a sexual healing or fever that do not interfere with feelings but *vizio* (depravity) at the opposite of a well-constructed relation with a *madama*. As one informant puts it:

*“We have to say that all Italians have caught a sickness that nobody has ever indexed in any medical dictionary: the antchilite. A disease which provoked their destruction and ruin. The Ethiopian woman does not share the same western romanticism and the Italians never understood it: they have lost their heads!”*

The researcher admission inside the households was decisive to fully comprehend the variety of the relations between men and women in Ethiopia. The state of subjugation of the women were not neat and transparent in this context. The movements, gestural, body language, style of acting, the expressions, body interactions in the space, enunciate much more than any discourse. Most of the time the *insabbiatti* themselves did not realize and measure the extent and scale of their supremacy and dominance in the household. In my view, oppression is speaking very directly in every day to face-to-face interaction. Needless to have a written testimony: ordinary interaction and place of bodies in social confrontations are telling us the whole story of a master and his captive.



**Figure 2.** 2-Young Ethiopian girl forced to pose for the photo during Italian colonization of Ethiopia (1936-1941).

The images are essential, crucial to have a survey of the series of humiliations for the women. The Italian man eats alone at the table and the woman serves him. She stands up in order to assist him. One of those ladies told me 30 years ago “*Whites are better than us because of their skin*”. Most black women have assimilated the racist theories of their husbands. They have internalized and digest the horrible nicknames given to them or humiliating jokes. The same lady was married to this *insabbiatto* and she owned a restaurant outside Addis Ababa: she was cooking and working very hard in the kitchen when her husband was playing cards with his friends. She confessed that she was dreaming to be white and she was really proud to have very clear sons almost white “*quasi bianchi*” (almost whites).

The latter example is rather “soft” and remains a paradigmatic case of normative association between a white man and his wife. During the fascist time some relations were much more degrading for the women. We identified also criminal interactions between adults and under aged girls. I have never published or treated the subject in my previous works but I was aware of these perverse relations that we can call pedophilia. In the documentary shot in 1997, in Ethiopia, one informant, ex-colon, pronounces the word *bambine* (little girls). This gravitational pull and primitive captivation for under aged girls is the most insane relation of these adults.

## 6. Bambine Mania

One ex-colon named Oreste solicited me to take his adopted daughter with me to France. He gave the nickname MICIA (a little cat name in Neapolitan Dialect) to this 14 years old teen ager during the mid-eighties. The girl appears briefly in the documentary “Hotel Abyssinia” in 1996. She was in a state of deep trouble and dire situation because Oreste was very sick and she was anxious of his imminent death. Oreste had a father role but also a husband and a lover function. He was blurring and confusing all the lines. At the moment Oreste was about to pass away, Micia expressed the wish to suppress herself. She could not imagine a life without her persecutor. It is when I tried to find a foster family for her that she confessed that Oreste was imposing her insane and morbid games. What she acknowledged was uneasy to express in a scientific approach. First of all I was little older than Micia and was totally confused and unarmed to deal with such a delicate and taboo problematic. In consequence, I have skipped the pedophilia dimension when analyzing the gender relations during the colonial fascist time in Abyssinia. Escaping the subject was a strategy not to hurt the academic culture during the eighties in France. I did not know how to treat the oral material collected related to the *insabbiatti* pedophilia in Abyssinia.

It is only after 30 years of experience in many countries during humanitarian crises or genocidal situations in Sudan (Darfur Studies) dealing with refugees, in very sensitive contexts that I could find the strength (force) to recall what had been told to me decades before.

It is in the middle of a sob, few days before Oreste disappeared for ever, that Micia spoke about the games that Oreste was imposing on her. She was living under his roof as a servant, a daughter, a lover cumulating all roles. She was fed and obeying him like a domestic animal and the nickname Micia was also reminding this position. She had to call him *padroncino* (little boss), under Oreste dependency and ascendancy this teen girl was submitted to all his disgusting vagaries: he was requiring from her to make a strip-tease and to dance, naked, in his bedroom before going to bed. Oreste practices, for instance, are not related to *antchilite* but to an *insane abusive and pathological* relationship that he called himself *bambine mania*” (little girl mania)

I happened to know that he was not the only ex-colon that used to adopt a young girl with the objective to abuse her. Different informants admitted that orphan small children were adopted by male adults for sexual purposes. Micia, for example had no parents and was found in the streets of Addis Ababa near a brothel. Prostitutes were very often abandoning their children during the colonial period and afterwards. These abusive adoptions were structured in a rational mode and were organized in a pedophile network. This phenomenon of *bambine mania* should not be euphemized and underestimate even though measuring it remains complicate. What is important is to link this *habitus* (in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense) with the *habitus* of traditional Ethiopian conducts and gender relations during the thirties in Abyssinia. It is important to recall social hierarchy and ethnic racism and discrimination in the Amhara society during this period of time. A number of orphan girls, for example, belonged to low social groups and despised social units like pottery, prostitution or blacksmith groups object of contemptuous social discrimination. The Amhara society was a feudal and very discriminative society with masters and slave-like servants. Slavery still existed in the thirties. The colons took advantage of this rigid hierarchy and imposed themselves as feudal lords. The word *goytana* (our masters) that they imposed on natives translates, without any doubt, the will to replace the dominant feudal lord in a traditional society. They never

brought a more egalitarian Italian *habitus* but took the ancient social position of the “lord” in traditional Amhara Society.

A lot of little girls were taken inside discriminated groups and became sexual objects or sex toys of their colonial masters. The case of Oreste was far from being marginal! At the age of 80 years old, Oreste abuses were limited to shameful gesticulations and inappropriate pettings. Micia have asked me if what Oreste was demanding to her was “normal”. I realized that she had no idea of what was right or not, good or bad. The way she was educated did not gave her any sense of moral guidelines. She grew beyond good or bad but she stated that she felt humiliated and she doubted if Oreste acted as a real father. She admitted that she was crying every day because of that imposing dancing. She felt mortified but she did not know exactly why. Oreste adopted her at the age of 6 or 7. She refused to speak in front of the camera but the imminence of Oreste’s death was devastating: he was her only family. He had isolated her from any other social group in consequence when Oreste was at the end of his life she found herself completely lonesome and desperate. She was completely wiped out. I suggested that this situation could be a chance for her to have a better life and to be (a) released. Paradoxically it was the contrary, she felt even more alienated by Oreste’s death. She had known this only cage where she was imprisoned; her vulnerability was total and the ex-colon *insabbiatto* was the sole social and family reference to her. She admitted that Oreste could not rape her anymore because he was too old in the mid-eighties but he was daily imposing sexual games on her. I was not educated in psychology and clinical psychiatry but I have interrogated specialists and they characterized Oreste’s conduct as *perversion*. This notion is very often associated to fascism as an insane political system and theory. As a visual anthropologist, I will be tempted to make a comparison and *rapprochement* with the film of Pier Paolo Pasolini in 1975 “*Salo and the 120 days of Sodomia*”. This fiction film is dramatizing political fascist actors subjugating in horror ways teen agers submitted to atrocious tortures. The film is the rise in power and the surge of cruel games inflicted to the young adults. The whole progress of the film shows a sadist increase in order to demonstrate that these young people have lost their humanity. This element is very important because it is the focal axis of my observation on the gender relations in Abyssinia. Women were called with the names of little animals. The meaning of the humiliation of Micia is to crash (break her down) her and to invalidate her humanity.

Micia’s confessions remind the pattern of absolute domination of the one who holds control and power and who enjoys to harm, mock and lower a dispossessed and disarmed child. The *insabbiatto* in this example became the “almighty” and all-powerful master (*goytana*) for a poor and abandoned orphan. A pattern epitomizing a total and omnipotent oppression. The *insabbiatto*, ex humble worker, simple white man, impoverished ex-colon, feels important and strong because of this sexual ascendancy and dependency. This slave-master relationship is going beyond personal relations and can be translated into political order. The connections between the *insabbiatti* (like Oreste) with his victims and prey do not meet normal and classical relationships even if it not marginal it remains uncommon. The main feature of the relation is the persecutor facing a victim and we have interpreted it as a fascist type relationship. It involves a totality and an extreme form of domination going above common abuses. To my view Oreste connection to Micia demonstrates ressem blances and similarities with what Pier Paolo Pasolini has depicted in his fiction film in 1975 in “*Salo and the 120 days of Sodomia*”. The filmmaker explores in this cinematographic work the tight link and interdependence between sadism and fascism. In Pier Paolo Pasolini fiction film the fascist senior figures kidnapped and jailed their young victims in a villa which became a place of horrors were fascist are persecuting children in an increased sadist violence. The violence is well dominated by the filmmaker and offers a political dimension of an epitomized “fascist violence”. One of the fascist senior figure of the film profess “*We fascist are the real anarchists!*!”. The whole film evokes transgression of morality and laws and the pleasure for these senior fascists to persecute innocents. The idea of torturing innocents and pure victims is at the centre of this dramatization. Here and again, the drama present few similarities with the *insabbiatto* situation in Abyssinia during colonial time when they were demanding virgin girls to commit their criminal acts. They adopted children in order to be sure that they were virgins. The young age was a guarantee and the children gained a commercial value. We are talking about human trafficking, a business where the body of the child is an item exchanged according to a negotiated and fixed value. Virginity was at the centre of his business. The persecutor enjoys himself at his best when the victim is totally innocent to establish a game where he is in total control. This totality offers the fascist dimension in a relationship marked by a slavery kind of dependency. The other is totally dashed like in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film where captives are attached with dog’s leads and forced to eat their own faeces. The victim becomes animalized. Like Micia who was given a nickname of a cat and forced to act like a kitten in the house.



Micia was a black little orphan girl facing a white man who had no limits, no frontiers. Oreste, I repeat it, was the father, the patron and the lover. Lack of any landmark and point of reference is what specialists name *perversion*. All the frontiers were crossed and confuse to lead to a totalitarian domination, colonial, masculine, white and also related to age. This addition is the metaphor of the colonial relation and illustrates a pedophilia that was largely consumed in fascist Ethiopia.

A colonial pedophilia uneasy to measure as my interviews with the fascist senior figures in Ethiopia took place in the mid-eighties. It is not obvious and facile to trace this sexual deviation in the archives. Some testimonies can be found in colonial memories specially soldiers and officers diaries. It is off records, after a long time spent with the families with an approach of shared anthropology (resulting from shared rather than collected datas) without no quantitative ambition, that we gathered records related to gender and sex roles. The position of the researcher is part of a social theater and the academic is thus included in the scene rather than a neutral and objective outsider. It is only after a year of participant observation in Ethiopia that these testimonies came to the surface. The presence of the researcher on a period of ten years in repeated missions is also a favorable disposition to approach such delicate subjects. Micia's testimony pushed me to review my archives and my interviews three decades ago in order to complete the study of the relationship between men and women during the fascist period.

To conclude I would recall what an *insabbiatto* told me about this predilection for young girls:

*“l’Etiopia era il paradiso di noi uomini vecchi in Africa”* (“Ethiopia was a paradise for us old men!”) used to declare Amedeo Venditti in 1991.

To mention Ethiopia as a paradise for old men demonstrates in transparent terms that the ex-colons *insabbiatti* had a lucid conscience related to the sexual deviance. For Amedeo staying in Ethiopia was offering a series of opportunities for possessing young partners and the will to stay despite their impoverishment and poverty was related to what he called *“il vizio”* (depravity).

He declared in the documentary “Hotel Abyssinia” that only Ethiopian from the poorest and most miserable families could be recruited as sexual partners. Girls were sold to Italians colons for few Thalers. The *insabbiatti* in the same time adapted remarkably to the Ethiopian traditions of the time on the Ethiopian plateau. A famous writer, [Arnaud D’abbadie](#), on the 19<sup>th</sup> century narrates the simplicity of the adoption ritual in the “Galla” Society. The *insabbiatti* like Oreste have adopted very young girls in the segregated groups and the lowest ranks of the north Ethiopian society.

Amedeo Venditti explains that in Ethiopia *“the Italians have taken as sexual partners women that an Ehtio-pian man would have never accept to touch”*. He refers here to *untouchability* of the lowest groups considered as unclean.

## 7. Fascists and Pedophiles

We cannot seriously present the fascists as detaining the monopoly of criminal conducts toward colored women. The axis and strict equivalence between fascism and pedophilia does not resist a systematic examination.

The governor of Eritrea during the Republican colonization of Eritrea, Martini in his diary “Diario Eritreo”, published in 1898, referred to the case of an Italian officer who took out of a catholic school an Ethiopian teen in order to become his *madama*. Martini gives many examples of soldiers remaining in Eritrea because it was an occasion to express and manifest their violence. The governor describes in his book the cases of children abuses. In consequence it is arduous to sustain the thesis that insane behaviors were a unique characterized fascist conduct. It is also significant to remember that in many academic works on Ethiopian rural societies, researchers are mentioning the permanence of the marriage of children. To forbid children weddings was one of the priority of the social program of the Eritrean Liberation Front (EPLF) in the seventies.

A collective publication in 2003, mentioned that in many places *“in Ethiopia girls are forced to marry at early age, very often at the age of nine”*

(Institute of Rural Reconstruction, 2003). These weddings have heavy consequences on the children growth and health and can lead to permanent problems. The *insabbiatti*, like else-where, in other European colonial contexts, actors (for example the French in Africa) in colonial situation or postcolonial context, have adapted themselves to the local customs when it was advantageous and comfortable for them: denying the suffering of very young children. The Judeo-Christian ethics and morals dissolved in the colonial context. They thought that their conducts was adjusted to the ambiance. They also used to call themselves the *ambientati* the one who ac-

commodates and arranges... They would also use another term *imboscato* (*in-forestement*) literary meaning to be *lost in a forest*. An expression indicating that they were hiding themselves in the Ethiopian Plateau. In their opinion they were exactly like other Ethiopian men, well acclimatized culturally in Ethiopia and Eritrea. They *happily* performed a cultural transplantation in removed and backward areas of the country and they never were worried or troubled after the departure of the colonial administration. The return of the Emperor Haile Sellasie did not disturb them. They took profit of the new opportunities of a land like Ethiopia to fulfill their hidden and dark phantasmagorias of masculine domination. The fascist propaganda never reduced these tendencies, at the contrary they invented a whole propaganda inviting Italian males to project themselves sexually in the Ethiopian women. Ethiopia was presented as a sexual paradise and a well-known poem named *perla nera* was boasting about the beauty of a black pearl. The *insabbiatti* explained to me that the Ethiopian women in the thirties were much more liberated than their women in South Italy. The appeal was also an appeal of freedom and experiencing liberated morals.

The women in Abyssinia were perceived as *easy going* and free to go with any man. This freedom had a major impact and the erotic propaganda was playing with it in order to push men in Ethiopia and Eritrea to populate the new colonies.

The colonial situation was fabricating a new man, a conqueror bragging a masculinity that he was putting forward like a crown. The colonial literature shows many examples of the state of hyper masculinity of the conquerors, the winners, the heroes of a military adventure. Texts in French, Italian and even in English use the term colonial *penetration* blurring the meaning between a territorial and a sexual conquest. Women in that context were trophies or war booties. In a man's imagination the colon was a warrior and a conqueror. Mussolini used to recall it in his meetings naming the Italian "*Un popolo di eroi, di navigatori, di artisti e di conquistatori*". In conclusion the *insabbiatti* actors of the conquest, identified themselves with the hyper male's images projecting themselves as "*lions*" and "*adventurers*" (**Figure 3**).

## 8. The *insabbiatto* an Ordinary Monster. The Triviality of Evil

Like the famous question raised by Hannah Arendt in her study of the proceedings of the Nazi Eichmann (Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, 1963) we could ask if we can consider a personality like Oreste as a monster? An hideous character like the one depicted by Pier Paolo Pasolini in the film cited above? When we did the ethnographic study in Ethiopia we did not meet caricatures and criminal personalities personifying and embodying the dark suit of a bad humanity. In reality the criminal mind is complex. Oreste for example was perceived by the Ethiopian entourage as a *good guy*. A brave and joyful man in harmony with his neighbors adapted to his social life. Well integrated. My visual archives show a friendly, pleasant man. Each time he was out of his home he used to distribute a lot of coins to the children of his neighborhood and the children were following him noisily all the time. He lived in a small house and was impoverished in the mid-eighties, retired he benefitted a modest pension from the Italian Embassy, but he was still very generous with his immediate neighbors. Sharing the few things he had. You can see his house in the film "Hotel Abyssinia" and the good relations he used to share with his entourage. It is quite impossible to imagine this kind and un-harmful old man as a predator. Insisting on the story of a character like Oreste is far from being trivial. The life experience of this *insabbiatto* is beyond any anecdotal tale and becomes, in the context of colonial Abyssinia, a paradigm of "totalitarian personality". A man divided in different schizoid sides, fragmented into pieces not presenting a congruent monolith.

Oreste, as the Ethiopian children of his neighborhood confessed, was seen as a grandfather and the Amharic term used was *abat*. Hannah Arendt intuition related to the vulgar and ordinary dimension of evil was perfectly illustrating Oreste's social conduct and his inscription in the local landscape. Hannah Arendt used to refer to Eichmann "*an ordinary German man. Not spiritually weak, not indoctrinated, not cynical*"...but absolutely incapable to distinguish good from bad. Oreste was debonair and easy-going; behind a jovial and breezy face Oreste dissimulated a man confusing moral notions. Oreste in 1996 was no more a colon but an ex-colon. In spite of this postcolonial situation, Oreste appeared to be imprisoned in the fascist historical momentum. To characterize him as an emblematic fascist would be a relative anachronism. In reality the man is an ex-proletarian worker from South Italy, very ordinary Italian, who came as soldier and who arranged himself with fascism with no conviction.



**Figure 3.** Italian postcard showing a underaged girl in Eritrea. They were called “bambine” and these postcards sold in the shops during colonial time illustrate the theory of “bambine mania”.

He adjusted himself with the fascist racial laws in Ethiopia without zeal. He became member of the Fascist National Party (PNF) in order to find work in the big construction sites in Ethiopia (especially the road construction sites) Oreste was perfectly integrated in his Ethiopian family he had two children with his ex-wife. Divorced, he was still visiting his ex-wife every week and had good relations with everyone. He explains that his ex-wife protected him in 1941 from deportation by the British Army. He used to help financially his ex-wife who re-married to an Ethiopian man.

The house of Oreste was full of women and children of all ages and he justified that he did not know who was and who was not his own children, he was functioning like the *abba* (father) of every one like a *pater familias* at large. He identified all the women as a global term *servitù* (servitude) and it was understandable that this vague notion was embracing a various series of relations including ex-girlfriends, daughters, servants, adopted daughters. Micia was a member of a very heteroclitic social group more or less alike a *harem* or a tribal unit. Women in this heterodox assembly were all-powerful. In fact if the men were eating alone at the table and the women were serving them, even though men detained the first positions, they all seemed to be at mercy of this *servitù*. All decisions were taken by the older woman an ancient lover of Oreste. She was the organizer of the household and everything relied on her shoulders: cooking, shopping, and cleaning. She was attributing to the other women

the tasks of the day. She has a pivotal position in the household agency. When we mention the subaltern position of the women of the house we should not caricature the complex relations inside a family.

## 9. Conclusions

When we filmed the documentary *Hotel Abyssinia* in 1996 we asked Oreste about his taste for very young girls (*bambine*). He justified himself telling that Africa was different from Europe. Girls were reaching sexual maturity much earlier... He argued that in Africa, at the age of 9 years old, a girl had already her menstrual flows. To him the exotic *bambine* were much more precautions. In their view, Africa couldn't be compared to Europe. It was a justification to consume and to justify their inclination for pedophilia. It is quite uncomfortable to identify a pedophile because most of time they have plural hiding strategies to make-up their reality. But what I have observed, on the ground of fascist studies, is a mechanism of de-responsabilization. They use strategies not to be responsible. It is always the victim's fault. For Oreste, it was quite tricky to seize his fondness for girls below the age of puberty: he had plural partners and his sexual practices were diverse. It was arduous to isolate the relation he had with Micia in the household and he was a master in camouflages. The victims generally keep silent and it is only in tragic circumstances that Micia started to speak.

Elsewhere in Africa the practice is common and the literature is aware of the situation of "*captives de case*" (house captives); almost jailed and kept in slavery kind of relationship with their masters. Generally modest and small white men, revenging their mediocrity on subjugating colored women that they totally dominate.

As Amedeo puts it "*A black woman who lives with a white man can feed all her African family. So there is a financial temptation for being with a white man*". The question here is related to the benefits from such an association.

Historians of Italian fascism have neglected to study the gender relations on the angle of transgression and pedophilia during the colonial period. To me the work of Giulia Barrera (Barrera, 1996) is crucial and innovative to understand these relations between colored woman and white colons. Her fundamental study enables us to figure out that most italo-ethiopian marital associations were arrangements. A complex *agency* where you could find anti-colonial contracts like the *damoz* wedding (a negotiated union) and the marriage called *maraqal-kidan* (solemn and pompous marriage). She does not operate the common amalgam and juncture on the Ethiopian women and she makes a distinction between the Tigrinya society and the Amhara society. Arnaud D'abbadie writings are also precious because they give us information on the marriages before the fascist time. He stresses, for instance, on the Christian religious dimension of the Amhara wedding. In effect during the 19th Century, the sacred rituals for a wedding were given after a long and durable marital life. It's when the couple could prove that they were able to stay together forever that the religious sacrament was completed. In consequence, Christian women living with Italian men were not experiencing social marginality. They were completely normative. Their status as *madamas* was perfectly honorable in colonia Eritrea before 1936. These *madamas* were nor rejected or seen as outcasts. We could also make an analogy with the Congai girls in Asia (Tonkin). In French colonial Vietnam the term Congai meant, with successive sliding definitions, the concubine, the wife or the prostitute. In Ethiopia the notion of *madama* progressed from the ninetieth to the twentieth century, *mutatis mutandis*, as "established prostitute".

In this progressive change of meaning the fascist period has a dramatic impact. The semantic collapse and changing definition is due to the new racial laws forbidding formal and legal unions with colored women. With the fascist period the *madamas* became a degrading and shameful relation. Visible during the 19th century, the *madama* becomes invisible in the thirties. In the French Vietnam (Tonkin) the colons invent the neologism "engongyment" (being with a local *congai*). In Ethiopia the term for a men living with a local is to get *insabbiatto* (**stranded in the sand**) or to be **madamized**. All these concepts underline in this colonial situation the gender issue and determinant perspective. Gender, sex and race are interconnected in the colonial context. Comparing different colonial situations and relations between colons males and local women in Asia or Africa highlights the association with a native as a decline, a fall, a deterioration of the white race. On the point of view of the colonized society these relations were shameful and hidden.

The concepts of *antchilite* and *bambine mania* are distinct from *madamism*. *Bambine mania* is the most transgressive and criminal notion. The racial laws have radicalized the conduct of the Italians in Abyssinia and led to sexual perversions. Traditional weddings in Abyssinia were plural but all implied the negotiation of the position of the woman.

During the fascist period this negotiated place is troubled and obscure it progressively became opaque and

more complex. The series of interviews handled in Ethiopia and Eritrea in the mid-eighties revisited 30 years after emphasize the pertinence of Erich Fromm or Adorno works on fascism as a mental sickness. He insisted of the essence of an authoritarian personality of a fascist mentality and stressed on the sadomasochist dimension. The case of Micia and Oreste is illustrating the sadist dimension of fascism giving to the paradigm of cruelty his concrete and living experience. Participant observation used in cultural anthropology and European ethnology should be stressed as a heuristic qualitative approach enabling to “speak” about the hidden dimensions of colonial sexuality during the thirties. It stresses that the involvement of the academic is part of the apparatus and brings to the surface the researcher’s subjectivity to be able to enter the group’s subjectivity, imagination reaching the fantasies of the studied subjects. This circulation of subjectivity is rarely convoked as a heuristic tool but using images and visual anthropology is offering a whole grammar of signs that are not linguistic messages but gestural meaningful signs. It is a common statement that this given subjectivity can be a trap but controlled with assumed honesty it can also be a boon.

No other methodology—than the one using images—can stress the character of “anarchy” of a fascist personality. Reasoning on the life experience of Oreste and Micia is illustrating a mechanism based on disregard to law. The word anarchy is derived from Greek *anarkhiā*, from *anarkhos*: *without a ruler*. The colonial experience of the *insabbiatti* describes a state of lawlessness, disorder and violence. Cruelty resulting from a complete denial of the “other’s” humanity a despise of all established authority or mechanisms of limitations.

Most fascists had an ambiguous relation to fascist laws regarding marriage and live-in partnership. These colons were-most of them-belonging to the PNF (Partito Nazionale Fascista) but they bypassed the racist sex rules imposed by the fascist regime (Del Boca, 1976; Sbacchi, 1986; Le Houérou, 1994). They created their own laws, inventing themselves their relations to women and girls, using and abusing of their status of male conquerors and colons. The sense of anarchy is given by the fact that these *insabbiatti* imposed a full power, full load to their families. Absence of frontiers, absence of limitations leading to chaos and confused roles in countries like Ethiopia and Eritrea—far from their homes—has pushed toward an escalating raise of power culminating with the use of very young girls that were exchanged as items. Cancelling the humanity of the prey is shown by the animal names given to the women and girls of their households. Emphasizing on the gender roles during fascist colonial Abyssinia corroborates Pier Paolo Pasolini intuition related to the anarchical dimension of Fascism and its violent sexual roots. The fascist colonial adventure in Abyssinia opened the gate of all kind of *outrages*. The Italian conquerors were proletarian workers in Italy before coming to Abyssinia. They were poor and young when they arrived in Africa in 1936. In this “Far South” they experienced persecutions and ill-treatments that a traditional Catholic Italian Society would have never tolerated in the thirties. As a context the colonial situation offered them a new territory to express their violence suppressing all inhibitions and offering a field for lawlessness creating an atmosphere of anarchy favorable to any authoritarian personality to expand.

## References

- Adorno, T. W. (1950). *The Authoritarian Personality* (990 p.). New York: Harper & Row Publishers.
- Arendt, H. (1966). *Eichmann à Jerusalem. Rapport sur la banalité du mal*, trad. A guérin, Paris: Gallimard. nouvelle édition revue par M.I. Brudny de Launay, coll. “Folio Histoire”, 1991.
- Barrera, G. (1996). *Dangerous Liaisons: Colonial Concubinage in Eritrea, 1890-1941* (79 p.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University. Program of African Studies, Working Papers PAS 1890S1941, Number 1.
- D’Abbadie, A. (1980). *Douze ans de séjour dans la Haute Ethiopie (Abyssinie)* (628 p.). Città Del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.
- Del Boca, A. (1976). *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*. 4 Vols. Rome and Bari: Laterza, 84.
- Fromm, E. (1973). *The Anatomy of human destructiveness*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Fromm, E. (1975). *Anatomie de la destructivité humaine*. Paris: Robert Laffont.
- Le Houérou (1994). *L’épopée des soldats de Mussolini en Abyssinie (1936-1938): Les Ensablés* (199 p.). Paris: L’Harmattan.
- Le Houérou (1996). *Les enlisés de la terre brûlée* (102 p.). Paris: L’Harmattan.
- Mussolini (1999). Paris: Fayard. 985 p. (Prix Guizot-Calvados, Grand Prix d’histoire de la Société des gens de lettres, 2000)
- Martini, F, *Il diario Eritreo, 1841-1928*, Vallecchi, Firenze, 1942.
- Sbacchi, A. (1986). *Ethiopia under Mussolini: Fascism and the Colonial Experience* (Third World books) (272 p.). London: Zed Books.