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THE EMPIRE AS A MYTH. VITAL SPACE, FASCIST  
UNIVERSALISM, DEMOGRAPHIC PLANNING  
AND NEW URBAN LIFESTYLES IN THE ITALIAN AFRICA

The conquest of Ethiopia radically modified Italian colonial policy, shifting it onto another level, that of the empire. The empire, in Mussolini's opinion, was above all a spiritual goal towards which Italians should strive in order to avoid the fate of decadent Western people. The common traits, which bore witness to the universal vocation of imperial policy, concerned economic planning, the creation of schools both for Italian and autochthonous students, archaeological research, the diffusion of newspapers and magazines (including some in the local languages), the cinema, theatres and the radio, the spreading of Western and/or typically Italian lifestyles and leisure pastimes, the planning of an overseas Italian architecture, the founding of cultural and sports institutions.

Africa, fascism, empire, demography, towns

La conquista dell'Etiopia modificò radicalmente la politica coloniale italiana ponendola su un altro piano, quello dell'impero. L'impero, secondo il duce, era innanzi tutto una meta spirituale ideale verso la quale avrebbero dovuto tendere gli italiani per sfuggire il destino dei popoli decadenti dell'Occidente. I tratti comuni, che attestavano la vocazione universale della politica imperiale, concernevano la pianificazione dell'economia, la creazione di scuole per gli studenti italiani e indigeni, l'impulso alla ricerca archeologica, la diffusione di giornali e riviste (anche nelle lingue locali) e di cinema, teatri e radio, la divulgazione di stili di vita e di gestione del tempo libero occidentali e/o tipicamente italiani, la progettazione di un'architettura oltremare, la fondazione di istituzioni culturali e sportive.

Africa, fascismo, impero, demografia, città

The conquest of Ethiopia radically modified Italian colonial policy, shifting it onto another level, that of the empire. The empire, in Mussolini's opinion, was above all a spiritual goal towards which Italians should strive in order to avoid the fate of decadent Western peo-

ple<sup>1</sup>. The meaning attributed to the term transcended the mere material increase in the size of conquered territories, assuming an almost metaphysical character. Fascism's idea of empire conceived a new totalitarian colonial policy, which included some common guidelines for the colonies (such as the racial hierarchy and the school programmes), thus overcoming the historical, political and cultural heterogeneity of the various dominions, and also taking into account that one of the principal objectives was to create large Italian communities overseas. To highlight the differences between the fascist model and the classic colonialism of the other European powers, and underline its communitarian outlook, jurists defined the fascist empire as a *corpus mysticum* made up of several parts which, however, «although they all concurred to reach the same common goals and though each obtained its own advantage»<sup>2</sup>, were not on the same level: first came Italy and Albania, followed by Libya and the Italian islands in the Aegean sea; AOI came last.

Of course the elements concurring to make up the hierarchy of dominions were mainly racial and cultural. The administration of the territories was also differentiated: the Aegean Sea and Albania, which was part of the imperial community as an autonomous and independent entity associated to Italy, depended on the Foreign Ministry, whilst Libya and AOI depended on the Ministry for Italian Africa (Ministry of Colonies until 1937), which had purposely changed its name to underline the new way to conceive the relationship between the colonies and the motherland. Between 1936 and 1940, in all its overseas possessions, including Albania and Rhodes, the fascist regime elaborated demographic colonisation plans for the transfer of Italian colonists. The emigration of select Italian families represented one of the cornerstones of fascist policy. The common traits, which bore witness to the universal vocation of imperial policy (whose objectives were chiefly the shaping of the new Italian colonists as well as raising the degree of "Italianness" of indigenous populations), concerned economic planning, the creation of schools both for Italian and autochthonous students; archaeological research; the diffusion of newspapers and magazines (including some in the local languages), the cin-

<sup>1</sup> *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, XXVIII, *Dalla proclamazione dell'Impero al viaggio in Germania (10 maggio 1936-30 settembre 1937)*, ed. by E. e D. Susmel, La Fenice, Firenze 1959, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> G. AMBROSINI, *L'Albania nella comunità imperiale di Roma*, Quaderni dell'Istituto Nazionale di Cultura Fascista, Roma 1940, p. 63.

ema, theatres and the radio; the spreading of Western and/or typically Italian lifestyles and leisure pastimes; the planning of an overseas Italian architecture; the founding of cultural and sports institutions.

Between 1935 and 1940 Italy spent 53,000 million current lire for the war and civilian building projects in Italian Africa. This remarkable sum (no other power had spent so much money on the colonies, and in such a short time) reached over 10% of GNP in 1936, the year of greatest expenditure. According to a document elaborated by the Ministry for Italian Africa, total State expenditure for civilian works in Italian East Africa between 1937 and 1941 increased to about 10,000 million current lire, of which over 8,000 were spent on roads and about 2,000 for other building work<sup>3</sup>. The total sum equalled 56% of the expenditure forecast by the government as necessary to provide the colonies with the indispensable civilian infrastructures (17,800 million lire). It is impossible to evaluate precisely the money invested by private citizens. Some Ministry of Italian Africa's estimates only stated that total Italian investments were equivalent to about 4,000 million current lire.

The new Italian settlers enjoyed notably larger incomes compared to Italians back home. This modified their lifestyle, increasing the popularity of cultural and sports activities some of which, such as tennis and horse-riding, represented a rise in social status. This phenomenon also touched that part of the African population in direct contact with Italians. Schools and the Fascist Party (PNF) were the institutions in charge with the spreading of culture and sports. All tourist and sports facilities were either built by the government or by the PNF.

The Party looked after Italians' leisure time through some collateral bodies: if the Institute of Fascist Culture, the Fascist University Groups (GUF) and the Italian Lictorian Youth (GIL) prevalently dealt with political and cultural indoctrination as well as physical education, the Working Men's National Association (Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro - OND) played an important role in the involvement of its members in cultural, leisure and sports activities, which favoured

<sup>3</sup> Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome (from now on called ASDMAE), Archivio del Ministero dell'Africa Italiana (from now on called ASMAI), *Africa III, Direzione Generale Affari Economici e Finanziari. Riasunto delle spese per opere pubbliche o di pubblica utilità raggruppate secondo la loro natura*, 1945, b. 73.

the aggregation of large numbers of people and the strengthening of the feelings of “Italianness”. The creation of the Arab Lictorian Youth (GAL) in Libya and the Indigenous Lictorian Youth (GIL) in East Africa also allowed the PNF to organise and form the younger natives. The diffusion of Western sports, such as football, in African schools or among the young members of GAL and GIL integrated the young subjects’ education.

The Italian Touring Club also played a crucial role in the empire’s cultural and tourist promotion, both by organising trips and events, and above all through its own publications. Besides fascist institutions a remarkable number of sports, cultural and military associations helped to manage the colonists’ leisure time.

Imperial publications were generally published by the government or by the Fascist Party and therefore had an official character, but there were also some catholic magazines, whilst cinemas and theatres were growing in numbers. The cinema was also a formidable political and cultural tool in the process of assimilation of subject people, as the Under-secretary to the Italian Foreign Office, Zenone Benini, highlighted in one of his reports to Mussolini on Italian cultural penetration in Albania, though his remarks can be extended to all other dominions:

“For the purpose of spiritual elevation, educational activities are and will be more and more supported [...] by the action of those technical means, such as cinema and the radio, which are especially apt to take the educating voice of Italian civilisation to the most isolated outposts [...] To this aim [...] several itinerant cinemas have been sent which, as well as broadcasting everywhere the beauty of Italian sights, provide the first recreational occasions for the masses”<sup>4</sup>.

### *The School*

Until the mid-1930s the fascist regime had been little interested in education, delegating it to the Catholic missions. In the Aegean islands the schools sponsored by the National Association for the Support of Italian Missionaries (ANSMI) were placed under the control of the Government Office for Public Education and subsidised by

<sup>4</sup> G.L. PODESTÀ, *I luoghi della cultura nell’Impero fascista*, in *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, ed. by S. Luzzatto and G. Pedullà, III, *Dal Romanticismo a oggi*, ed. by D. Scarpa, Giulio Einaudi editore, Torino 2012, p. 657.



the government<sup>5</sup>. Schools managed by the Orthodox and Muslim communities had to teach Italian for at least four hours a week, while school teachers had to obtain a diploma from the Rhodes Teacher Training Institute. In Northern Albania the Jesuits and Franciscan monks had created some Catholic institutions. From 1933 Italian became the compulsory language in Albanian secondary schools. In Libya and the Aegean Sea, the Jewish communities were also spreading Italian language and culture. From 1925 in Rhodes, schools founded by the Alliance Israélite Universelle became Italian Jewish schools, adopting Italian as the official teaching language, whilst Libyan Jews normally attended Italian schools.

The creation of the empire and the increase of Italian colonists in Libya (119,139 in 1939) and in AOI (165,267 in 1939) represented a turning point in the scholastic organisation of the colonies. On the one hand, new primary and secondary schools were founded and reserved for Italian pupils, on the other the "Italianisation" of subjected populations was intensified, by creating a new educational system aiming at assimilation.

The outlines of the school systems in the different territories had been developed according to racial hierarchies, although particular attention was given to Muslim culture and traditions (in line with Mussolini's pro-Islamic policy). Everywhere the State gradually assumed direct responsibility for both Italian and native students' education, replacing the Catholic missions, not only to gain greater political control on the programmes (especially as regards subjects such as physical education), but also to avoid hurting the sensitivity of Muslim populations.

In July 1937, at the start of the implementation in the school sector of what governor Cesare Maria de Vecchi loved to call the beginning of a necessary «totalitarian clean-up», all schools in the Aegean Sea (including the Orthodox and Muslim ones) were placed under government supervision and management<sup>6</sup>. Italian became the only teaching language, whilst regulations, programmes and textbooks were the same as those used in the Kingdom of Italy. Starting from the 1940-41 school year, Italian also became compulsory in the last two forms of Albanian primary schools.

In Libya and AOI, beside schools for Italians, state schools for

<sup>5</sup> L. PIGNATARO, *Le isole italiane dell'Egeo dall'8 settembre 1943 al termine della II guerra mondiale*, «Clio», 3 (2001), pp. 465-552.

<sup>6</sup> PODESTÀ, *I luoghi della cultura nell'Impero fascista*, p. 656.

indigenous students were also created and organised according to special rules elaborated by the Ministry for Italian Africa, which took into account the specificity of the single territories as regards race, culture, religion, economic needs, etc. Nursery and primary schools were free. Compulsory education, which for Italian pupils was the same as in the mother country, could be imposed on the natives only as far as the first three years of primary school<sup>7</sup>. Metropolitan schools could also be entrusted to Italian religious congregations, which thus became officially recognised institutions, on condition that the same should only employ teachers that had acquired the suitable qualifications back in Italy, and who would accept to carry out activities and programmes in line with government directives and control. But in AOI the PNF was determined to limit the missionaries' involvement in education to a few areas of the former Ethiopian empire.

The creation of Italo-Arabic State schools in Libya (in competition with Islamic schools) and of schools for the natives in AOI (including in the most peripheral areas), all equipped with a set prepared by the Paravia publishing house, which included Mussolini's portrait and that of the Emperor King), highlighted the regime's effort to create a new imperial pedagogy: the purpose was no longer just to annihilate the conquered people with the image of Italy's power, in order to subjugate them in line with traditional paternalism: in fact the fascist goal was much more ambitious, because its real aim was to actually mould them, i.e. to train a generation of young subjects, who would acquire superior political awareness and could act as a guide and controller for the indigenous masses:

Paternalistic policies, especially suited to Southern people – Italo Balbo stated at the Volta Congress in 1938- should necessarily be integrated, for the Arabs of coastal territories, by a system of provisions aiming at their moral elevation and civil evolution, such as to create spiritual harmony between the conquering power and its subjects [...] The fascist government's work [...] is therefore so politically and morally charged that it will be able to transform the population's social structure; it could indeed create the necessary conditions for greater participation to our civil life on the part of this same population<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> G. MONDAINI, *La legislazione coloniale italiana nel suo sviluppo storico e nel suo stato attuale (1881-1940)*, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, Milano 1941, I, pp. 602-606, 793-795, e II, pp. 358-359.

<sup>8</sup> I. BALBO, *La politica sociale del fascismo verso gli arabi della Libia*, in REALE ACCADEMIA D'ITALIA-FONDAZIONE A. VOLTA, *Atti del III Convegno sul tema: l'Africa*, I, Roma 1938, pp. 734-735.

Mass literacy – since access to higher education was to be rigidly regulated – would allow the regime to display all educational and communicative tools at its disposal, such as newspapers, radio and the cinema. In Libya and in the Muslim regions of Italian East Africa the education policy, by integrating Italian programmes and Koranic studies, seemed aimed at the preservation of traditional culture, but it was obvious that in the future the ambition was to “channel” Islam too in the bosom of fascist totalitarianism. In 1935 Italo Balbo founded a Higher Institute of Islamic Culture<sup>9</sup>, in competition with Tunis and Cairo universities, which aimed at training civil servants and teachers, whilst in 1936 he created a girls’ boarding school for training nurses. This was the first institution allowing Arab girls access to specialised training at higher levels, no longer restricted, as in the case of the other women’s training colleges, to household economy and to the art of traditional weaving. In AOI too, secondary schools of Islamic studies were founded at Gimma, Harar and Mogadishu. The cultural opening towards Islam was meant to represent the most tangible and remarkable sign of Fascism’s universal mission, as conceived by Il Duce, while of course it also met political and diplomatic goals. But it also had implicit in itself the intention to attract and integrate Muslims, by showing them that the spiritual conception at the core of fascist imperialism offered them the instruments to escape backwardness, by reconciling modernity with tradition and offering them an opportunity for redemption.

Table 1 – *The population of Italian Empire in 1939 (estimate)*

	Population	Italians
Libya	893.774	119.139
Italian East Africa (AOI)	12.100.000	165.267
Aegean Islands	140.848	16.711 (1)
Albania	1.037.856 (2)	?
Tien-Tsin (China)	9.017	?
Total	14.181.495	301.117

Source: ISTITUTO FASCISTA DELL’AFRICA ITALIANA, *Annuario dell’Africa Italiana e delle Isole Italiane dell’Egeo 1940-A. XVIII*, Società Tipografica Pio X, Roma 1940.

(1) Included soldiers.

(2) The 31 december 1937.

<sup>9</sup> F. CONTINI, *Storia delle istituzioni scolastiche della Libia*, «Libia. Rivista trimestrale di studi libici», 3 (1953), pp. 5-101.

*Italian East Africa (AOI) 1936-1941*

In AOI il Duce intended to create a new organic social system conjugating demographic colonisation with other forms of valorisation, transferring from Italy «the whole machinery of its own civilisation»<sup>10</sup>. Fascist colonisation should be understood, in space and time, as «the settlement and empowerment of a people», that is the transposition to the colonies of all the productive elements of the mother country, such as farmers, workers, artisans, clerks, traders, small entrepreneurs and intellectuals, thus shunning the loathsome model of capitalistic colonisation exclusively aimed at benefiting a restricted class of privileged individuals. This conception met with three crucial objectives: preserving and increasing the country's numerical power, cementing Italians' racial cohesion in the empire and in Italy itself and, finally, promoting the social elevation of large popular masses.

There are no precise data on the European and African population in AOI. An estimate carried out in the spring of 1939 indicated 165,267 Italian civilians, against about 12 million Africans. The greatest number of settlers, amounting to 72,408 lived in Eritrea (43.8%). The percentage of women was very small and only in Eritrea did it exceed 20% of the Italian population: in 1939 there allegedly were 26,628 women, of whom 14,827 in Eritrea (55.7%).

Table 2 – *Italian civilians in AOI (1939)*

District	Italian civilians	%
Eritrea	72.408	44,0
Scioa	40.698	25,0
Somalia	19.200	11,0
Galla e Sidama	11.823	7,0
Amara	11.103	7,0
Harar	10.035	6,0
Total	165.267	100,0

Source: R. CIFERRI, *I cereali dell'Africa Italiana*, «Rassegna economica dell'Africa Italiana», 1 (1942), p. 12; *Annuario dell'Africa Italiana e delle Isole Italiane dell'Egeo*, Istituto Fascista dell'Africa Italiana, Roma 1940.

<sup>10</sup> «Italian East Africa [...] is a peculiar colony, which can be fairly called an empire», R. MEREGAZZI (Chief of the Cabinet at the Ministry for Italian Africa), *Lineamenti della legislazione per l'Impero*, «Gli Annali dell'Africa Italiana», 3 (1939), p. 33.

Table 3 – *Italian women in AOI (1939)*

District	Italian women	% of the Italian population
Eritrea	14.827	20,4
Scioa	6.564	16,1
Somalia	2.287	11,9
Harar	1.350	13,4
Amara	946	8,5
Galla e Sidama	654	5,5
Total	26.628	

Source: ARCHIVIO CENTRALE DELLO STATO (from now on called ACS), *Ministero Africa Italiana* (from now on called MAI), b. 2123, *Popolazione nazionale femminile residente in AOI e iscritte ai fasci femminili al 31 dicembre 1939*.

Besides workers, the military and all those who depended on the public administration (including those with a temporary contract), and private companies' employees (including banks and insurance companies), a large number of Italians, not quantifiable but certainly amounting to some tens of thousands, had set up their own business. These were hard-working people that had shown great adaptability, initiative and inventiveness. A multitude of small entrepreneurs, traders, managers of small, often itinerant, catering businesses, drivers and owners of means of transport, skilled workers who doubled as artisans, owners of small building firms, trade representatives and intermediaries.

Mussolini constantly urged the need to increment the number of families, in order to balance the ratio between the two sexes. Il Duce was obsessed with racism. He was above all horrified by the sexual promiscuity of Italian workers and soldiers with African women, about which since 1935 he had been receiving hundreds of alarming reports that deplored the increase in the birth of mixed-blood children; he had even discussed this subject with the foreign press. The issuing of racial legislation, from spring 1937 onwards<sup>11</sup>, was a consequence of the decision to force settlers to take their families with them to the colonies. Unfortunately the problem was not so easy to solve, because African towns did not yet possess a sufficient number of homes or the necessary services. The management of the demographic colonisation programme was delegated to the Opera Nazionale Combattenti (ONC—the War Veterans' National Organisation) and to some

<sup>11</sup> G. BARRERA, *Colonial Affaires. Italian Men, Eritrean Women and the Construction of Racial Hierarchies in Colonial Eritrea (1885-1941)*, PhD Thesis, Northwestern University, Evanston 2002.

regional bodies depending on the PNF. Until 1940, according to data published by the Italian press, the farmer families already settled in their plot were 854, whilst more reliable sources reduce their number to 377<sup>12</sup>.

Most Italians of course lived in the towns. But the increasing number of new arrivals between 1936 and 1938 caused great difficulties to colonial governments, who were totally unprepared as regards housing and other urban services (water, electricity, gas, transport, etc.).

The case of Asmara was emblematic. In 1934 Asmara had a population of about 3,500 Italians and 12,000 Africans. In 1939 Italians had risen to 48,000 whilst Africans were 36,000. In just five years the total population had increased fivefold, whilst the proportion between Italians and indigenous people had been reversed. This was an unprecedented phenomenon, determined by the economic importance of the city as a logistic base for the war. Families coped as best as they could, while many single men even resorted to sleeping in their vans. At the start almost all new immigrants were single men, but in 1938, thanks to the construction of new housing estates, families started to arrive regularly, thus normalising the population's female-to-male ratio. In 1940 11,296 women were recorded as living in Asmara (23.5%)<sup>13</sup>.

In Eritrea the Italian population's birth rates were constantly on the increase and this seemed to confirm Mussolini's hopes that the empire would contribute to the regeneration of the Italian race: the birth rate was 27.8°/00 in 1937 and 28.8°/00 in 1938, whilst in Italy the percentages were 22.9°/00 and 23.6°/00 respectively.

Although town planning, even in the Eritrean case, could not obviously avoid the traditional colonialist model of subjugation, it is possible to state that, even leaving aside the mixed zone, discrimination did not give rise to two «two distinct urban organism» with that drastic separation between colonial and indigenous areas, which could be encountered, for example, in French North Africa or, to mention an Italian instance, in Tripoli<sup>14</sup>. There, in the presence of a pre-existing urban tradition, the colonial city was prevalently identifiable with

<sup>12</sup> A. SBACCHI, *Il Colonialismo italiano in Etiopia 1936-1940*, Mursia, Milano 1980, p. 324.

<sup>13</sup> Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), MAI, *Popolazione nazionale femminile residente in AOI e iscritte ai fasci femminili al 31 dicembre 1939*, b. 2123.

<sup>14</sup> S. ZAGNONI, *L'Eritrea delle piccole città 1897-1936*, in *Architettura italiana d'oltremare 1870-1940*, ed. by G. Gresleri, P.G. Massaretti and S. Zagnoni, Marsilio, Venezia 1993, p. 158.

the European area, a foreign entity placed in antithesis to the Arab town. In Massawa a special contest developed where the core of the indigenous town cohabited beside «absolutely central and strategically vital functions and locations» of the colonial settlement. A characteristic which, also due to the practice of building in a «neo-Moorish» style, offered «relative homogeneity of formal features», and which was destined to survive even after the issuing of racial legislation. As for the other towns, including the capital, the absolute absence of a pre-existing urban nucleus caused the colonial city to represent, both for the Italian rulers and their African subjects, the only model of a town. Anyway, except for Asmara, only few Europeans settled in the other urban agglomerates, which were therefore inhabited and animated by the indigenous population. Eritreans, as a matter of fact, were more and more attracted to the urban areas, where economic activities set up by Europeans offered job opportunities, or where they could enrol in the colonial army or apply for a job in the public works planned by the government.

The new residential quarters built in typical Italian style in the city suburbs, featuring two or three-storey buildings, symbolically faced the old town centre characterised by one-storey houses, occupied by Eritreans lured to Asmara because of the demand for labour. The new town planning scheme provided for the forced removal of the indigenous quarter, the market and the mosque, but the governor of Eritrea, Giuseppe Daodice, objected, highlighting the loyalty always shown by Eritreans towards Italy. The town therefore kept at its core an indigenous area which contradicted fascist racial policies and which, as has been remarked, determined «the peculiar social structure characterising the town for a long period after the war»<sup>15</sup>.

In Addis Ababa the situation was different. The capital of the empire was due to become, in Mussolini's opinion, the most beautiful and futuristic city in Africa, the beacon of the new fascist civilisation<sup>16</sup>. The preparation of the new town planning scheme was very long and problematic, involving top professional people like Giò Ponti,

<sup>15</sup> G. GRESLERI, *1936-40: programma e strategia delle "città imperiali"*, in *Architettura italiana d'oltremare*, p. 198. The governor of Somalia, Francesco Saverio Caroselli, was also against moving the old mosques from the centre of Mogadishu. ACS, MAI, Governo Generale AOI. Direzione Superiore Affari Civili to Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, 10 March 1940, b. 104.

<sup>16</sup> G.L. PODESTÀ, *Le città dell'impero. La fondazione di una nuova civiltà italiana in Africa Orientale*, «Città e Storia», 1 (2009), pp. 119-135.

Enrico Del Debbio, Giuseppe Vaccaro and even Le Corbusier, who asked il Duce to be allowed to design the plan for the new city<sup>17</sup>.

Work only started in 1939. The plan provided for a clear separation between the European and indigenous areas. However, this would have meant transferring the African population and building tens of thousands of new homes. Italian settlers had increased from a few thousands in early 1937 (with 150 families) to over 40,000 in March 1940 (33,059 men, 6,998 women and about 4,000 families) whilst the African population had practically doubled and was estimated at about 120,000 people.

In Addis Ababa the number of new-born babies was continually growing, rising from 50 in 1937 to 570 in 1939 and the number of weddings being celebrated shot up too, despite the dramatic housing shortage. Italians coped in all possible ways: many continued to live in temporary shelters (tents, huts and prefabricated houses), whilst a lot of families used indigenous homes that had been expropriated or rented. Mussolini found this situation intolerable, and he constantly urged the Italian East Africa's government to ensure a more vigorous policy of racial separation (on his orders the African market had been forbidden to Europeans, but the measure was later withdrawn, because indigenous trade was indispensable for the provision of food by whites). As Amedeo d'Aosta once remarked, the solution of the problem of racial prestige was incompatible with the housing situation: firstly, there was not enough money to build houses for Italians or tukuls in the new indigenous town, then there were huge difficulties in sourcing water and building materials; that is why most Ethiopians, after cashing in their expropriation indemnity, went back to the old quarters. To confront the situation, given that, as the Viceroy repeated, it was impossible to separate the two races «by evicting one hundred thousand native», and whilst waiting for the implementation of a low-cost building programme for the colonists, it was necessary to stop new family units emigrating to Italian East Africa<sup>18</sup>. To house the families of AOI government employees, who had been forced by Mussolini to take their wives and children to Africa, the national housing body for civil servants (INCIS - Istituto Nazionale Case degli Impiegati dello Stato) financed the construction of 42 buildings with

<sup>17</sup> M. TALAMONA, *Addis Abeba capitale dell'impero*, «Storia contemporanea», 5-6 (1985), p. 1116.

<sup>18</sup> ASDMAE, *ASMAI, Archivio Segreto di Gabinetto* (from now on called ASG), b. 70, Amedeo d'Aosta to Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, 29 March 1940.



119 flats, largely insufficient to satisfy all requests. Private individuals did not have any incentives to invest in residential building save for exceptional cases. Notwithstanding the “winds of war”, only in July 1939 a law was emanated which authorised banks operating in AOI to grant loans and mortgages to institutions, societies or private citizens who wished to build civilian houses (including cheap homes), and the planning schemes of the most important towns were completed only on the eve of WW2.

The war definitely put an end to all works in progress, and today the traces of Italian occupation are absolutely insignificant.

But if the new imperial cities had trouble in taking shape, social life in Addis Ababa and Asmara was pulsating just like that of any other European town. At the heart of the city were the markets: in the capital in 1939 over 75,000 heads of cattle had been slaughtered and thousands of tons of foodstuffs had been sold. Dozens of shops and even department stores were opened in both cities. Leisure activities also boomed: in Addis Ababa four cinemas had been built for Europeans and one for Africans; eight were functioning in Asmara.

New dance-halls, restaurants and bars were being opened everywhere. The working men’s clubs and numerous sports and recreational societies, supported by local government and by the PNF, organised the colonists’ free time. In Eritrea, near the strategic hubs where companies and the army had located their logistic bases, new urban agglomerates rose from scratch, such as Dek’emhare and Nefasit, with plenty of restaurants and clubs<sup>19</sup>.

The PNF was a crucial instrument in moulding colonial society in a fascist sense and also in the involvement and training of those Africans destined to fill some inferior role in the civil administration or in the army, through school education and the Indigenous Lictorian Youth. Italian colonists’ degree of adhesion to the fascist party was massive, well above the percentage of party members back in Italy, especially among women: at the end of 1939 the PNF had 51,146 members in the colonies, whilst pending applications for membership amounted to 24,397 and those transferred from Italy were 9,950. There were 3,308 women enrolled in the fascist organisations (12.8% of the female population). There also were 237 fascist working men’s clubs with 38,235 members and 106 sports societies with 19,822 members.

<sup>19</sup> G.L. PODESTÀ, *The Eight Vibration. Asmara and Dek’emhare, Cities of Work, Cities of Leisure*, «Diacronie. Studi di Storia Contemporanea», 21 (2015), pp. 1-14.

A remarkable effort was made to establish a school system in AOI, both for Italians and for Africans. Schools for Italian students were built in thirty locations. Some secondary schools of all kinds were also created in the main towns. In Eritrea, where the number of Italian families was higher than in the rest of AOI, the educational system was structured in the same way as in Italy: in 1938/39 primary schools for Italians counted 107 classes in total, attended by 2,554 pupils, of whom 1,793 in the capital alone. In Asmara the lyceum (grammar school) had 470 registered students, while the technical college had 341 pupils. Between 1937 and 1938, in the whole of AOI, teachers had increased from 209 to 380. On the eve of the war some teacher training schools were also due to be opened.

### *Libya 1911-1943*

The demographic colonisation myth elaborated by fascism has partially hidden the reality of things: in fact Italian society in Libya was still prevalently made up of citizens employed in the factories and services, whilst tens of thousands of Libyans were also integrated in the urban economy. Therefore, on the eve of the Second World War two models of society were combined in the colony: the urban society, very similar to that of the mother country, and the rural one of demographic colonisation, structured on the villages and state land, composed by farmer families selected on the basis of moral, political and physical requirements; the fascist regime had entrusted these latter with the aim of pursuing food autarchy in the dominion and increasing birth rates, in order to compensate the progressive decrease in births in the urban environments.

The Italian population in Libya had risen rapidly: if in 1927 Italians were still only about 26,000, they grew to 44,600 in 1931, 66,525 in 1936 and 119,139 in 1939. The increase in the towns had been even sharper: in 1929 there were 16,761 Italian settlers in Tripoli (25.6%), out of a total population of 65,688 inhabitants and 7,901 in Benghazi (25.3%) out of 31,248; ten years later they had grown respectively to 47,442 (42%) out of 113,212, and 23,075 (34.5%) out of 66,801, whilst there were respectively 47,123 (41.6%) and 40,331 Arabs (60.3%).

Table 4 – *The population of Libya in 1939*

Italians	119.139
Arabs	744.057
Jews	30.578
Total	893.774

Source: *Annuario generale della Libia 1940-41*, Unione Coloniale Italiana Pubblicità ed Informazioni, Tripoli 1941.

Table 5 – *The population in the main urban centres of Libya in 1939*

	Italians	Arabs	Jews	Total
Tripoli	47.442	47.123	18.467	113.032
Misratah	1.735	44.387	977	47.099
Benghazi	23.075	40.331	3.395	66.801
Darnah	3.562	13.555	391	17.508
Total	75.814	145.396	23.230	244.440

Source: *Annuario generale della Libia 1940-41*, Unione Coloniale Italiana Pubblicità ed Informazioni, Tripoli 1941.

In 1939 Italians residing in the main urban centres (Tripoli, Misratah, Benghazi e Darnah) were 75,814 (64%), while 43,325 lived in the demographic villages or in other locations. Demographic settlers were about 41,000 (34% of all Italians), of whom 27,000 had immigrated in just two years, 1938 and 1939.

In 1936 there were 28,701 Italian women (43% of the Italian population), whilst in 1939 they would rise to about 34,200 (29%). On the whole, the Italian population was rather young: 1/3 was under 14 years old and only 2.4% was over 65. The percentage of single men was 57.6%, 39.2% were married people, and 3.2% were widows<sup>20</sup>.

The economic and social transformations certainly contributed to the juridical and administrative reorganisation of the territory in 1939, according to which, at least formally, the coastal regions became Italian provinces and Libyans could be granted a special kind of Italian citizenship, whilst only the Sahara remained a proper colony.

Until 1937, before the demographic migrations of 1938 and 1939 increased the number of people employed in agriculture, most Italians were working in industry, the civil service and commerce. It was

<sup>20</sup> J. HERKOMMER, *Libyen von Italien Kolonisiert. Ein Betrag zur vorbildlichen Kolonialpolitik Italiens in Nordafrika. Libyens Geschichte-Land und Leute-Industrie und Handel*, J. Bielefelds Verlag, Freiburg im Breisgau 1941, p. 29.

hoped that demographic colonisation, integrated by indigenous agriculture and capitalistic concessions, would speed up the increase in agricultural production. Up to April 1937, 840 farms had been set up by Italians. But the real revolution was represented by the planning and construction, between 1933 and 1940, of 36 rural settlements (villages), of which eight were reserved for Arab colonists; however, not all of them were in fact completed, because of the outbreak of war. It was a tragic operation, destined to have a long-lasting negative influence on Libyan-Italian relationships: in order to carry out the colonisation programme, it was necessary to forcibly remove the Libyan population living in the Cyrenaic Gebel from the plateau to the coast<sup>21</sup>.

The acceleration of economic and social transformations was the outcome of the infinite possibilities that a modern totalitarian regime had to directly control and influence social structures, as no democratic government could even conceive of. The instruments used by fascism to exercise its influence were school education, the PNF, sport and leisure and cultural organisations. State primary schools were set up for Italian students in all locations where a sufficient national community was present (84 in 1939/40 with 12,000 pupils), while secondary schools were opened in the most important towns (10 with 3,100 pupils)<sup>22</sup>. In 1939 there also were eight nursery schools with over 800 attending children. Teachers had grown from 670 in 1937 to 972 in 1938.

In Libya the PNF played an even more relevant role as a cultural and social life organiser for the Italian communities. Overseas the PNF premises were not only «the temple of political religion»<sup>23</sup> conceived by Mussolini, but also the institution which, besides promoting the regime and carrying out its propaganda, arranged Italians' social life, managing their leisure time through its own collateral organisations. Italo Balbo, the Governor, also wished to organise a football league where teams of young Italian fascists and those made up of Arab youths from the GAL would compete together, but Mus-

<sup>21</sup> ASDMAE, *ASMAI*, *ASG*, b. 70, Italo Balbo to Attilio Teruzzi, 25 July 1938 and 4 August 1938.

<sup>22</sup> ACS, *MAI*, *Funzionamento scuole*, b. 161; G.L. PODESTÀ, *Mito e realtà del progetto demografico*, in *L'Africa d'Italia. Una storia coloniale e postcoloniale*, ed. by G.P. Calchi Novati, Carocci, Roma 2011, pp. 194-195.

<sup>23</sup> E. GENTILE, *Il culto del littorio. La sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1995, p. 197.

solini objected because the football tournament would contradict his racial policy.

As well as the fascist institutions, there were plenty of cultural, sports and military societies, which helped to regulate the colonists' free time<sup>24</sup>. Each organised all sorts of events, exhibitions, meetings, sport competitions, concerts and plays, festivals and parties, often publishing their own bulletins and newsletters, just like in Italy. The most common form of entertainment was the cinema. Some theatres, like the one in Tripoli, and a few movie houses, pre-dated the foundation of the empire, but after 1936 their number increased manifold. Itinerant theatrical companies also performed in the demographic villages. In November 1938 a new radio station, Radio Tripoli, had been inaugurated in Zanzur, transmitting programmes in both Italian and Arabic. In the two capitals the settlers could find museums, public libraries and bookshops.

### *The Aegean Islands and Albania*

With a choice that would later show its far-sightedness, the Italian government decisively promoted tourism in the Aegean islands. However, the aim was not just to advance economic development of the archipelago and increase the influx of valuable currency, thus improving the country's financial situation; in fact, transforming the islands into seaside, thermal and cultural resorts would represent a formidable instrument to influence both Italian and international public opinion in a positive way. The planning and development of tourist facilities was carried out directly by the government, through the creation in 1926 of the *Ufficio propaganda e turismo* (Propaganda and Tourist Bureau). This was an obvious choice, since in this case all political, ideological, economic, cultural and architectural aspects were strongly intertwined. Based on a doubtful etymology, the rose was chosen as the symbol of Rhodes, and floral iconography was largely used in the publications of the time.

In the 1920s in order to "mould" an architectural image which would meet travellers' tastes (especially foreign ones), as well as restoring monuments dating from the time of the Crusades to their original state, Ottoman decorative-architectural features were also adopted

<sup>24</sup> PODESTÀ, *I luoghi della cultura nell'Impero fascista*, pp. 664-670.

in some new buildings, such as the Grand Hotel of the Roses, built by the Italian Company for Great Hotels (CIGA)<sup>25</sup>. To upgrade Rhodes' tourist offer to the level of other major international resorts (Deauville, Cannes, San Remo, etc.), the government promoted the creation of several sports and recreational infrastructures such as the Hunting Club, a golf course, a stadium, clay pigeon shooting, bathing establishments, cinemas and the "Puccini" Theatre. The Italian Touring Club played a crucial role in the cultural and tourist promotion of the islands (and of the other overseas territories too) both by organising events and cruises, and above all through its own publications. In 1929 a guide entitled *Possedimenti e colonie* (Dominions and Colonies) was published as the 17<sup>th</sup> volume of the series *Guida d'Italia* (A Guide to Italy), edited by one of the Touring Club's pioneers, Luigi Vittorio Bertarelli<sup>26</sup>. The Minister of Colonies Emilio De Bono described it as a work of «excellent propaganda», thus underlining the close link between tourist promotion and colonial propaganda<sup>27</sup>. A specific guide to the Aegean Islands was due to be printed at the end of the Thirties (as it had been done for Libya in 1937 and Italian Africa in 1938), but the volume was never published.

The Italian Movie institute (LUCCE) was very active in depicting local Greek folklore – both orthodox and Turkish – in its documentaries and news programmes, presenting a picturesque image which was already vanishing on the ground, but which would continue to represent an important feature of tourist attraction in the boom years, such as, for example, the women's costumes of Castelrosso and Stampalia, popular dances, religious ceremonies, country festivals and local craft works (with the express aim of re-evaluating the traditional image, carpet and pottery manufactures were even reopened).

One of the paradoxes of fascist policy in the Aegean area is indeed represented by this re-invention of traditions to attract tourists, while, for example, a few miles away, Mustapha Kemal's Turkey was setting in motion a powerful effort to modernise society in a non-confessional direction.

In Tirana the Italo-Albanian Club "Skanderberg", founded at the

<sup>25</sup> S. MARTINOLI, E. PEROTTI, *Architettura coloniale italiana nel Dodecaneso, 1912-1943*, Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, Torino 1999.

<sup>26</sup> L.V. BERTARELLI, *Guida d'Italia del Touring Club Italiano. Possedimenti e colonie. Isole Egee, Tripolitania, Cirenaica, Eritrea, Somalia*, Touring Club Italiano, Milano 1929.

<sup>27</sup> PODESTÀ, *I luoghi della cultura nell'Impero fascista*, p. 657.

beginning of 1939 with branches in all larger towns, aimed at «intensifying, through closer co-operation in the cultural, artistic, sports and recreational fields, cordial relationships between the Albanian and Italian peoples»<sup>28</sup>. According to the Italian government, the club should strengthen Italian cultural influence, by attracting the middle-classes, both in the capital and in the other Albanian towns. After the Italian occupation, the club became the reference point of Italian presence in Albania, symbolically too, by regaling Tirana with a unique architectural structure, complete with a library, sports facilities, tennis courts, large halls, a bar, a restaurant and a swimming pool. The first cinema-theatre of the capital was also built in its premises.

Table 6 – *The cultural institutions in the main urban centres of Italian empire (1940)*

	Tirana	Rhodes	Tripoli	Benghazi	Asmara	Addis Ababa	Mogadishu
Cinemas and theatres	4	6	9	5	9	5	3
Newspapers and magazines	3	2	20	5	6	21	5
Cultural, sports and tourist associations	3	7	47	33	13	11	11

Source: G.L. PODESTÀ, *I luoghi della cultura nell'Impero fascista*, in S. Luzzatto-G. Pedullà (eds.), *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, III, D. Scarpa (ed.), *Dal Romanticismo a oggi*, Giulio Einaudi editore, Torino 2012, p. 655-670.

The Italian colonial towns were important tools for spreading Western lifestyles. In the colonies even lower-class Italians (often farmers) acquired typically bourgeois habits and practised sports (like tennis) which in the mother country were reserved to the higher classes. In Eritrea Italians and Africans even shared in the foundation and growth of cities (built after 1900). Western lifestyles and sports activities also influenced the indigenous elite, as well as those Africans working for the Italian administration (soldiers, drivers, interpreters, factory workers). Tourism also played an important role. Moreover, the fascist regime attributed a crucial importance to school education in the task of forming its colonial subjects. A similarly relevant function was car-

<sup>28</sup> G. GRESLERI, *La via dell'Est: da Tirana a Lubiana*, in *Architettura italiana d'oltremare*, pp. 324-329.

ried out by the Fascist National Party and its collateral organisations. Cinemas, theatres, the press and above all the radio were considered the most important instruments for the persuasion and involvement of both settlers and indigenous people in the regime's policies.

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