

Italian transnational fluxes of labour and the changing of labour relations in the Horn of Africa, 1935-1939

Stefano Bellucci

ABSTRACT

Italian colonialism in Africa reached its dramatic peak during the Fascist invasion and occupation of Ethiopia and the creation of Italian East Africa (AOI). Labour is a critical factor, distinguishing Italian colonialism from that of other European powers. In a few years, from 1935 to 1939, workers from Italy poured into the so-called AOI. More than 150,000 workers arrived as immigrants in this region of Africa, only to repatriate a few short years later. This enormous movement of labour – in-flux and out-flux of Italian workers – represents an interesting case in global labour history: it was transnational in nature, and changed the nature of labour in the Horn of Africa, introducing into the region the capitalist mode of production based on wage labour. Some cases of hybridisation in labour relations were also formed, and this paper seeks to analyse these transformations as well as the connections between different labour regimes and workers from diverse regions of the world, which are at the basis of the social and economic transformation of the people in the Horn of Africa.

KEYWORDS

Fascist invasion and occupation of Ethiopia, Italian East Africa, Italian migrants in Africa, Introduction of wage labour in the Horn of Africa

The Italian colonial rule of 1935-1939 in the Horn of Africa created an in-flux and out-flux of several tens of thousands of European workers into Africa over a time-span of only about five years. The experience was short-lived – even more so than the delirious Fascist ideology it stemmed from – for it proved to be politically, economically and socially unsustainable. Yet, it is argued here that it had long-lasting consequences on the labour relations in the region.

This article reviews this episode in Italian colonialism through the prism of Global Labour History and, more specifically, from a transnational perspective. With Patel, transnational history is broadly defined as the history of “interactions” beyond (*au-delà*) national borders, whereby states are considered as actors among others.¹ The focus lies on mobility of ideas, people and knowledge beyond national borders and for this reason, when looking at Italian labour in the Horn of Africa, the intention is to go beyond a mere history of control/neglect and domination/resistance;² the goal is not just to contrast Italian interests in Africa and African resistance to colonial exploitation. Rather, the main point is to analyse the inter-dependence between different societies and states – the national State of Fascist Italy, the colonial State of Eritrea and the Imperial State of Ethiopia – and to address the transnational fluxes of Italian labour and its complex impact on the African labour context. Understanding the ways in which Italian workers who settled in Africa (Italy > Horn of Africa > Italy and elsewhere in Africa or the Middle East) interacted with local workers, helps to explain how different – capitalist and feudal – forms of labour exploitation intertwined or reacted with each other. For, although the Italian presence was short-lived, this link produced changes in labour conditions in and among the peoples of the Horn

¹ See Patel, Klaus Kiran. *Transnational History*, in: *European History Online (EGO)*. Mainz: The Institute of European History (IEG), 2010-12-03, URL: <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/patelk-2010-en> URN: <urn:nbn:de:0159-20100921314> [accessed: 04 April 2013]. Approached in this sense, transnational history is close to other “global” methodological perspectives: “the global migration history” by Jan Lucassen, Dirk Hoerder, and Donna Gabaccia; the “entangled history” by Sanjay Subrahmanyam; the “histoire croisée” by Michael Werner and Benedicte Zimmerman; “translocality” by Ulrike Freitag and Achim von Oppen; the “new imperial histories” and “tensions of empire” by Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (regarding the circulation of ideas between the mother country and the colonies). Also of interest are studies based on individual or family biographies or based on the experiences of restricted groups throughout borders, such as in *The inner life of Empire* by Emma Rothschild. Moreover, transnational history is both an approach to the study of history and an object of study of history. See for example TYRELL, Ian. “History”. In: IRIYE, Akira, and SAUNIER, Pierre-Yves. eds. *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*. Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 493.

² See: COOPER, Frederick; GUTKIND, Peter C.W.; COHEN, Robin, and COPANS, Jean. eds. *African Labor History*. London: Sage Publications, 1978; BERMAN, Bruce. *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya. The Dialectic of Domination*. Oxford: James Currey, 1990.

of Africa: hybrid forms of labour relations occurred and the meaning of work – economically *and* culturally – changed forever in the region.

Transnational, Italian labour fluxes to and from Africa

In-fluxes (1935-1936). Italian East Africa (AOI, the acronym for Africa Orientale Italiana) was created in 1935, and corresponded approximately to today's Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. It was divided into 6 governorates: Eritrea, Amhara, Shoa, Harar, Galla-Sidama and Somalia. According to the statistics available, which do not all coincide, the total number of workers who were transferred to the AOI between 1935 and 1939 was around 200,000.³ In 1936, 80 per cent of the migrants were navvies and labourers destined to work on the roads and railways, while the rest were drivers (around 3,500), dock workers, (around 2,000), bricklayers (around 4,000) and various other industrial workers.⁴

Between 1936 and 1939, workers emigrated to the AOI from territories “outside” the Italian peninsula: around 1,200 from Italy's Mediterranean colonies in the Aegean islands and Libya; and around 1,500 additional emigrants from what the statistics referred to as “unknown regions”.⁵ The majority of workers, however, came from the Italian peninsula itself. As Gianluca Podestà explains in his accurate book, *Il mito dell'Impero*, they mostly came from rural areas, were themselves agricultural workers for the most part, and did not generally hold any qualifications that might have enabled them to be engaged in the manufacturing sector.

By identifying the Italian provinces where most workers came from, the criteria of selection appear not only based on the economic situation prevalent

³ See *Gli Annali dell'Africa Italiana*, III, 2, 1940, p. 1075; also consult “Commissariato per le migrazioni e la colonizzazione”, in Ipsen, Carl, *Demografia totalitaria. Il problema della popolazione nell'Italia fascista*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1977, p. 178.

⁴ The period in which most workers emigrated was between 1936 and 1937 when Italy adopted a huge plan for establishing an infrastructure, involving the construction of roads. *Commissariato per le migrazioni e la colonizzazione interna. Migrazioni in Africa Orientale Italiana al 31 dicembre 1937*, Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ASC), PCM, 1934-1936, f. 1.1.23 / f. 3299/14. See also, “Migrazioni verso l'Impero”. In: *Rassegna economica dell'Africa Italiana*, January 1938, p. 93; “Le migrazioni e la tutela del lavoro nell'Impero”. In: *Rassegna economica dell'Africa Italiana*, October 1938, p. 1634. The Fascist sources stressed that this mobility towards Africa contributed to somewhat lowering the level of unemployment in Italy, although clear data were never provided. Unemployment, moreover, had already fallen after the war effort of the period from 1934-35 for the conquest of Ethiopia, when around 330,000 troops and Fascist Blackshirt militants had been mobilized. GUARNIERI, Felice. *Battaglie economiche fra le due guerre*. Milano: Garzanti, 1953, p. 517; TAGLIACARNE, G. “La partecipazione delle regioni d'Italia alla guerra d'Africa”. In: *Giornale degli economisti e rivista statistica*, October 1938, p. 789.

⁵ Commissariato per le migrazioni e la colonizzazione interna (Commissariat for Internal Migration and Colonisation), *Migrazioni in Africa orientale Italiana al 31 luglio 1937*, Archivio storico del ministero Affari Esteri (ASDMAE), ASMAI, ASG, b. 67.

in the areas of provenance in question, such as the high unemployment rate – e.g. the North East of Italy, Sicily and the Neapolitan metropolitan area – but also on the political and geo-political situation – e.g. greater emphasis was put on recruitment from regions where the Socialist movement was strongest, such as Emilia-Romagna or where organizations of agricultural workers existed, such as Apulia.⁶ The following table shows some effects of the labour transmigration from Italy to the Horn of Africa on the Italian labour force.

Provenance of Italian Workers to the AOI: 1936 and 1937

	<i>Numbers</i>	<i>Percentage of resident males aged 20-49</i>
Northern Italy	105.639	23,9
Central Italy	21.642	13,5
Southern Italy	36.748	19,8
Sicily and Sardinia	25.708	26,6

Source: TAGLIACARNE, Giovanni. “La partecipazione delle regioni d’Italia alla guerra d’Africa”. In: *Giornale degli economisti e rivista statistica*, October 1938, p. 791.

According to the historical statistical data extrapolated from historical publications and reports, in 1939 the in-flux of labour force from Italy amounted to some 165 thousand workers (see the chart below), at a time when the population in Ethiopia was between 9 and 10 million.⁷ The three main regions of in-flux of Italian labour were Eritrea, Shoa (where the imperial capital Addis Ababa was located) and Somalia (colonized by Italy at the beginning of the XX century).

⁶ The first ten Italian provinces of residence of the workers mobilised in the AOI were in order: Udine, Naples, Bologna, Modena, Treviso, Rovigo, Rome, Bari, Belluno and Brescia. See: PODESTÀ, Gianluca. *Il mito dell’Impero*. Turin: Giappichelli, 2004, pp. 336-338.

⁷ The estimate is derived by an average between available sources that talk about a minimum of 4 to a maximum of 15 million people in the 1920s and 1930s. Italian colonial sources talk about 7,5 million people, but these numbers tend to understate the population for political reasons: the Fascist regime used Ethiopia as a settling colony for the Italian poor. Furthermore the 7,5 million figure excludes Eritrea. See: ABATE, Alula. “Demography, Migration and Urbanization in Modern Ethiopia”, In: BEKELE, Shiferaw. ed. *An Economic History of Modern Ethiopia*, vol. 1. Oxford: CODESRIA Book Series, 1995, p. 277. For Eritrean historical demography, see CIAMPI, Gabriele. “La popolazione dell’Eritrea”. In: *Bollettino della Società geografica italiana*, issue 2, 1995, pp. 487-524.

Historical map of AOI



Italian residents in the AOI in 1939

<i>Administrative Territory</i> <i>(Governorate)</i>	<i>Numbers</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Eritrea	72.408	44
Amhara	11.103	7
Shoa (Addis Ababa)	40.698	25
Galla-Sidama (Oromia)	11.823	7
Harar	10.035	6
Somalia	19.200	11
Total	165.267	100

Fonte: Ciferri, Raffaele, "I cereali dell'AOI", in *Rassegna economica dell'Africa italiana*,

January 1942, p. 12.

The largest number of Italian workers settled in areas where the largest investment in public structures was being made – this, in turn, depended, first, on historical links with Italy, as in the case of Eritrea and Somalia, and, second, on objective reasons, such as the presence of the largest urban conglomerate of the region, as in the case of Addis Ababa in the Shoa region.

The table below shows the presence of mainly Italian industrial and commercial firms in the AOI in 1939.

Industrial and Commercial Firms in the AOI, 1939 (*million lira)

<i>Administrative Territory</i> (<i>Governorate</i>)	<i>Number of</i> <i>Industrial Firms</i>	<i>Capital Invested*</i>	<i>Number of</i> <i>Commercial Firms</i>	<i>Capital Invested*</i>
Eritrea	2.198	2.597	2.690	486
Somalia	584	75	659	22
Shoa (Addis Ababa)	561	305	634	498
Harar	223	60	166	37
Amara	163	21	510	38
Galla-Sidama (Oromia)	278	71	126	33
Total	4.007	3.129	4.785	1.114

Source (re-elaborated): VALORI, Francesco. "Le industrie e il commercio". In: *Gli annali dell'Africa Italiana*, III, 2, 1940, p. 1116.

Transnational and inter-regional mobility of Italian workers was made possible by incentives, among them primarily the higher wages. The absolute values of the salaries paid to Italian workers in Africa were significantly higher than in Italy. The minimum daily wage for the various categories set out in the rules applied to Italian workers in the AOI (*Regolamento dei rapporti di lavoro dei cittadini italiani equiparati nei territori dell'AOI*), issued on 10 March 1937, ranged from 33 to 55 lira per day, while drivers and driver-mechanics were respectively paid monthly wages of 1500 and 1700 lira.⁸ Moreover, although the cost of living was high in the AOI and it is difficult to pinpoint the exact difference in real wages for we do not have access to statistical data on the prices and salaries that would allow us to develop comparable data, the available documents and the reports of those who were directly involved allow us to say that the rate of payment in the AOI was notably superior to that applied in Italy, especially between 1935 and 1939.⁹

⁸ See *Rassegna economica delle colonie*, March 1937, pp. 368-383.

⁹ For example, Gianluca Podestà, points out that in the same period the wage of a FIAT worker (i.e. a specialised blue-collar worker) ranged between 4,000 and 4,400 lire, while the daily wage of agricultural workers was 12.5 or 14.0 lire for between eight and ten hours of work depending on the case (in AOI as we have seen, it was between 33 and 55 lire for an eight-hour day). PODESTÀ. *op. cit.*, 2004, p. 339.

A combination of two factors made the salaries high: (1) the keen competition between companies in the labour market; and (2) the additional allowances that raised the value of the basic pay. In the first instance, the shortage of labourers, especially skilled ones, made competition fierce between companies, in particular between construction companies engaged in public contracts, which sought to secure a suitable labour force in order to be able to finish the works within the timeframes established. In the second instance, workers employed in areas below an altitude of one thousand metres, where the climate was more difficult for Europeans to bear, and those who worked at altitudes above 3,000 metres, were entitled to an extra allowance of 6 lira per day to compensate for having to work in difficult locations. Those employed in Somalia and Harar were entitled to a 10 lira daily allowance, while for those who worked in the lowlands and near the border with British Sudan (where the salaries in GB pounds were even higher) the allowance rose to 15 lira per day. A decree issued in 1938 somewhat changed these figures. It eliminated payment based on piece work, individual work and team work, the rates of which had to be established in a way that would allow the worker to earn a minimum daily wage that exceeded the standard rate of payment by at least 25 per cent.

High salaries and the possibility to become reasonably well-off tempted workers to face the challenging living and working conditions in the area. Fascist authorities, from their point of view, could not allow workers to return to the homeland unsatisfied with the payment they had received, as this would have compromised the image of the “colonial worker bursting with pride for the Imperial glory” that Fascist propaganda had gone to great length to promote. Moreover, the economy of the AOI was constantly financed by public (i.e. state) funds, a sacrifice – so it was conceived – made by the nation as a whole to ensure the success of the empire in Africa, and, by extension, of those who played a key role in it, both workers and companies. The state therefore made funds available to private companies – which it controlled, by establishing contracts subject to tenders – to be invested in the colony for hiring national wage workers to produce infrastructures. Roads, in particular, were to be used for the circulation of the goods imported from and exported to the Horn of Africa, but also for the circulation of goods from circuits beyond the colonies, such as, for example, the nearby Arab peninsula.

Out-fluxes (1937-1939). The out-fluxes of the labour force from the AOI areas, shown in the following table, reveal the extension of the repatriation organized by the Italian authorities starting from 1937.

	<i>In-Flux</i>	<i>Out-Flux</i>
1935 (October-December)	61.807	11.288
1936	102.548	45.647
1937	27.694	84.426
1938	7.333	51.338
1939 (January-June)	2.098	15.302
Total	201.480*	208.001*

Sources: *Gli annali dell'Africa italiana*, III, 2, 1940, p. 1075; IPSEN, Carl. *op. cit.*, 1997, p. 178.

* The positive balance between workers who had immigrated (in-fluxes) and repatriated workers (out-fluxes) is due to the fact that the Commissariat, which produced these figures, included among the "repatriated" also those soldiers demobilised after the Ethiopian War of 1934-35 and engaged as workers in the AOI.

Officially, the selection of the workers to be repatriated followed these criteria: those who had requested to return home; those who were not physically, "morally", politically or professionally fit; those who had concluded their contract or had been in the AOI for the longest length of time; those who did not have a family in the AOI.¹⁰ Repatriation was gradually reduced on the eve of the Second World War, in 1939, and with the opening of the military front in East Africa against the British, it was suspended as the workers could now serve as soldiers. However, Italian workers were increasingly disenchanted and this affected their moral as soldiers. No surprisingly, the African front was immediately lost to the Allied forces led by the British. All in all, the repatriation policy reveals the unsustainability of the Italian imperialist system, from both the economic and social-political point of view.

First, from an economic point of view, the decision to repatriate in 1937 was envisaged to control public spending as well as to reduce unemployment among the settlers in AOI.¹¹ On the one hand, the Italian government's deficit spending had been high since the Ethiopian war and kept having a negative impact on public debt, because of the key role played by the state in funding economic development (the *valorizzazione*) of the African Empire. On the other hand, to put it simply, too many unskilled workers (mainly landless peasants) had arrived in the area, their unemployment rapidly soared and the

¹⁰ Those who had participated in the Ethiopian military campaign and those who had a large family were more likely to be allowed to remain in the AOI. See PODESTÀ. *op. cit.*, p. 345.

¹¹ Consult *Crisi di assestamento*, 3 May XVIII (1939), Eritrean Government to MAI, 22 April 1938; HQ of the Police of Italian Africa to MAI, 25 February 1940, in ASDMAE, ASMAI, ASG, env. 67.

lack of any social infrastructure and/or family safety net made it more problematic to deal with than that of their counterparts in Italy.¹²

Second, a social and political element explains the decision to repatriate workers: protest and unrest among the workers themselves. Already in 1935, the Governor of Eritrea, Emilio De Bono, had repeatedly reported the lack of discipline in the Italian labour force and threatened to use the strictest form of discipline.¹³ Delays in paying the workers' salaries and, to a lesser extent, the working conditions, were the main causes for minor incidents and insubordination that had occurred. The authorities tried to downplay these episodes in their official documents, but in some cases had to concede they did take place. An inspector named Battaglini, for instance, began a series of on-site visits on behalf of De Bono in May 1935. He wrote that the workers "had enough food and medicines" and that "it was not necessary to organise moral and spiritual support for the workers".¹⁴ However, he reported that in the locality of Palazzina the workers' organization was considerable, and that the officer in charge, Spadonaro, had told him that many workers refused to carry out the duties assigned to them – possibly evidence of the growing socialist and trade unionist influence in that locality. The military police (*carabinieri*) intervened: some protesters were repatriated at their own expense, and the workers' alleged leaders were sent to the detention camp in Assab – Battaglini himself defined it a "concentration camp". Yet another site of protest amongst the workers was Ghinda, which the inspector described as a "place where the requests of the workers had Marxist reminiscences", since they demanded an 8-hour working day and paid holidays.

Things were to deteriorate further in labour relations between Italian workers and employers due to the hiring of a large number of local workers, as we shall see in the next section. Repressive measures against the Italian workers were more frequently introduced, but did not necessarily succeed in curbing workers' resistance. In January 1938, the British consul in Naples – one of the ports from which the Italian migrants left and to which they returned home – noted that the 800 Italian workers who had disembarked were handcuffed.¹⁵ Already in 1937, an employee of the British consulate in Addis Ababa, informed of this occurrence, had explained in a note: "For several months past the less desirable workmen have been repatriated in train loads of three to five

¹² See LOCATELLI, Francesca. "Oziosi, vagabondi e pregiudicati: Labor, Law, and Crime in Colonial Asmara, 1890-1941", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 40, issue 2, 2007, pp. 225-250.

¹³ PANKHURST, Richard. "Italian and 'Native' Labour During the Italian Fascist Occupation of Ethiopian", *Ghana Social Science Journal*, vol. 2, issue 2, pp. 44-45.

¹⁴ BATTAGLINI, Guido. *Con S.E. De Bono: nel turbinio di una preparazione*. Airoldi: Roma, 1938, pp. 111, 195.

¹⁵ The National Archives of the UK (ex-PRO), FO, 371/22028/131.

hundred. [In] one entire train load [were] [...] [workers who] expressed their discontent at being sent home by singing the *Internationale* and giving the Communist salute”.¹⁶

Protesting against an employer or going on strike was not the only ways workers showed their opposition to those who exploited their labour power. Walking away, to be hired by another employer, proved yet another protest strategy.¹⁷ Tempted by higher salaries and aware of the worsening conditions in Eritrea, many Italian workers left the Italian colonies in the Horn of Africa, heading to Egypt, Yemen and even Syria, among the others.¹⁸ In nearby Sudan alone, thousands of Italian employees working for national companies showed no intention of going or returning to Eritrea, despite the fact that the authorities repeatedly requested them to donate their labour power to the national cause. An observer noted the presence of around 2,000 of them at the construction site of the Jebel Aulia dam, near Khartoum. He also reported that the standard wage in Sudan was higher than in Eritrea, and that many of these workers who sent part of their salary via remittance to Italy had no reason to deprive their families of money in order to favour the imperialist Fascist cause.¹⁹

To what extent is it possible to talk about “free” wage labour for the Italian workers in the AOI? The question is especially significant for those categories of workers, such as women, children and certain groups of landless agricultural workers, who were actually forced to accept from the Italian economic authorities the slave-like, feudal type of employment originating in the Abyssinian Empire. Moreover, especially in the construction industry – and particularly in road works – the transfer of workers from one employer to another had to be approved by the administration, but most of all it was agreed upon by the various employers without the worker having any say in the matter, even if it was not forbidden for him to forward his requests.²⁰ At least in these particular cases, the free wage workers’ “freedom” to choose his employer only existed in theory.

¹⁶ The National Archives of the UK, FO, 371/22028/141.

¹⁷ See VAN DER LINDEN, Marcel. *Workers of the World. Essays towards a Global Labour History*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008, p. 185.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 226-227. At the same time, Fossa notes how there were more than 870 Libyan workers and 200 workers from Sudan engaged in the building works for the Massawa-Decaméré road alone. FOSSA, Davide. *Lavoro italiano nell'Impero*. Milan: Mondadori, 1938, p. 329.

¹⁹ FARAGO, Ladislav. ed. *Abyssinian Stop Press*. London: Robert Hale, 1936, p. 227.

²⁰ See, for example, the decree of the governed territory of Amhara, dated 25 November 1937, in *Bollettino Ufficiale del Governo dell'Amhara*, II, 1937, pp. 521-522. It should also be remembered that in Ethiopia the salaries were considered “static” – even tips were illegal and employers were forbidden from paying any over-time.

The changes in labour regimes: (free) wage labour

From 1935 onwards both Eritreans and Ethiopians were employed in large numbers as wage labourers.²¹ Contemporary observers noted that the related increase in both the prices of the goods and the availability of the labour force gradually began to change the life of thousands of local peasant-workers in the countryside, who had traditionally worked in farming.²² These transformations, however, were not homogeneous within the very territories of the AOI, nor were they uncritically accepted by the local population.

With the Italian conquest of Ethiopia in 1935, Eritrea ceased to exist as an “independent” Italian colony and was annexed to the AOI as a governorate. However, Eritrea had a longer history of Italian colonialism and, from a labour history perspective, the Italian influence there was stronger and long lasting.²³ In particular, the increase in the number of wage labourers was higher in that region than in any other part of the Horn of Africa. It was, moreover, largely concentrated within the military, due to the considerably higher salaries in that sector: for while the average wage of an Eritrean was around 1.5 lira per day in the 1930s, a Royal Decree established in 1931 the wage of the “native” troops between 2 and 5 lira. Consequently, some 65,000 Eritrean men – nearly ten per cent of the local population as a whole – signed up in the Italian army as “native troops”. In turn, this made them accustomed to view wage work in a public institution as the best way to gain a decent return for their labour.

Furthermore, Italian employers paid their Eritrean workers in hard currency and this monetization of the local economies, similar to what happened in the French and British colonies, came to represent one of the main changes produced by Italian colonialism in the Horn of Africa.²⁴ Most importantly, this shift from a barter-based and tributary economy into a monetised market economy did not stop after the Second World War, and wages became a *sine qua non* condition for *abesha* workers – as the people from the Horn of Africa call themselves. An observer wrote in 1948: “[Italian activity] uprooted a

²¹ Ibid., pp. 441-442. The introduction of the wage system in the region by the Italians apparently had an influence on the wages in nearby British Kenya as well. See SMITH, Alan. “The Open Market: The Economy of Kenya’s Northern Frontier Province and the Italo-Abyssinian War”, *East Africa*, Vol. 6, Issue 11, 1969, p. 39.

²² This also led to an increase in the economic burden for the Italian Government, since these workers were co-opted into jobs that were linked, either directly or indirectly, to the work in the colony and the positive portrayal of the Italian Government. In *Bollettino Ufficiale del Governo dell’Eritrea*, XLIV, 1935, p. 61.

²³ GUIDOTTI, R. and GUBELLINI, M. “Il problema dei salari nella mano d’opera di colore in Eritrea nel periodo pre- e post-bellico”. In: *L’agricoltura coloniale*, vol. XXX, 1946, p. 341. See also VOLTERRA, Alessandro. *Sudditi coloniali: Ascari Eritrei, 1935-1941*. Milan: Franco Angeli, 2005.

²⁴ MESGHENNA, Yemane. “The Impact of the 1935-1941 Economic Boom on the Eritrean Labour Market”, *Africa*, vol. 58, issue 1, 2003, pp. 96-97.

large and important part of the community from their own social organisation, accustomed them to a form of work for which their community had no demand, and by so doing rendered them unfit to readapt themselves to the way of life and economy obtainable in Eritrea under even the best of normal conditions”.²⁵

However, the situation was different in the rest of the AOI, and especially in Ethiopia. Up until the Italian invasion, labour relations in the Ethiopian region had been mainly centred around the so-called tributary labour system.²⁶ In the countryside, the work of peasants and their families was primarily of a subsistence nature, i.e. barely sufficient to cover their basic requirements, while the remaining gain went to the feudal owner of the land where they laboured. Besides fixed contract soldiers – who were very few in number there, but were nonetheless wage labourers to all effects – limited examples of commoditized labour based on free wage relations existed in the capital Addis Ababa and in some parts of the countryside. An observer reported, for instance, of wages being paid in MT thalers for the agricultural workers in a vaguely defined area of the Ethiopian upland.²⁷ And wages could be significantly higher in the very small number of plantations owned by foreign investors. As another witness noted: “Already at the end of the reign of emperor Menelik a Syrian farm near Gambela [...] was said to be paying his labourers 4 MT thalers per month [...] Workers in the gold and platinum mines of Walaga [...] received a monthly wage of 5 MT thalers [...] builders in pre-war Addis Ababa, mainly [from the ethnic group of] Guragés, earned a thaler for three days’ work, plus 1/32 of thaler lunch money per diem”.²⁸

After the Italian invasion, the first scale of wage rates in the history of the Horn of Africa was established for the local workers, distinguishing them as unskilled workers, craftsmen, and foremen.²⁹ Its main goal was not so much

²⁵ Consult GRAY, G.C., and SILKERMAN, L. *The Fate of Italy’s Colonies*. London: n.d., 1948, pp. 23-24.

²⁶ See: CRUMMEY, Donald. *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia: from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000 and PANKHURST, Richard. *An Economic History of Ethiopia: 1800-1935*. Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie I University Press, 1968.

²⁷ GRIAULE, Marcel. *Burners of Men: Modern Ethiopia*. Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1935, p. 87.

²⁸ PANKHURST. *op. cit.*, 1968, pp. 42, 46-47.

²⁹ Governor of Galla and Sidama, decree dated 6 October 1937, in *Bollettino Ufficiale del Governo dei Galla e Sidama*, I, 1937, p. 252. In Eritrea, the oldest Italian colony, where the wages were higher than in the rest of the AOI, the governor’s decree of 9 October 1937, set forth the following table, in *Bollettino Ufficiale del Governo dell’Eritrea*, XLVI, 1937, pp. 1028-1029:

<i>Type of Employment</i>	<i>Rate per day (Lira)</i>
Servants	2.50
Day labourers	6

to reduce the cost of labour but to “convince” local workers to lend their labour to the colonial economy. For this was indeed a problem for the colonial authorities, and led to major differences in the resulting social and economic changes.

It proved initially difficult, for instance, to find labourers to build roads and perform similar manual jobs. The reason lay in the cultural attitude of the upper strata of the local population. An American journalist noted: “The natives living along the highway came to gaze in wonder at the road-builders – objects of derision, men who worked. No free self-respecting Ethiopian male ever exerted himself”.³⁰ Many other documents similarly show how, in a derogatory sense, the respected *abesha* men did not deem working on the roads to be a job for them, but for the lowest casts, such as the Guragé in the case of Amhara and Shoana societies. And because only the simplest and poorest men had traditionally worked in construction jobs in Ethiopia, seeing European white people working alongside the Africans proved a true culture shock for many of these local leaders.³¹

In the case of this economic sector, the increasing monetisation of the economy, and the convenience of entering a stable labour relation virtually forced many Ethiopians to enter into a wage labour system entailing manual labour. In the racially biased term one observer put it, these native workers then became “good, enthusiastic builders”, and in bigger numbers than what was actually required.³² They did not improve their immediate quality of life – on the contrary, in many cases social and living conditions probably deteriorated – but, because of their colonial connections, they felt themselves “protected” from any potential repercussions by their former masters and, under particular circumstances, were even able to claim rights over the white landowners.³³ It was perhaps for these reasons that the first strike of the

Skilled worker (masons, joiners, assistant smith, etc.)	9
Various categories (messenger boys, scullions, etc.)	2.50
Other skilled workers above the age of 12	7
Port workers	11.50
Yemenis and Sudanese	9

³⁰ WISE, Edward. “To Addis Ababa on the Conqueros’ Trail”, *New York Times*, 5 September 1937, p. 7.

³¹ Before Ethiopia was conquered by the Italians, Greek craftsmen in imperial Addis Ababa had been the only Europeans who had been employed in significant numbers in sectors of the economy such as construction. See KONOVALOV, Fedor E., *History of Ethiopia*, Stanford: Hoover Institution, (unpublished manuscript), p. 351.

³² POLSON NEWMAN, Edward W. *Italy’s conquest of Abyssinia*. London: T. Butterworth, 1937.

³³ TADDIA, Irma. “Sulla politica della *terra* nella colonia Eritrea”, *Rivista di storia contemporanea*, Vol. 12, issue 1, 1984, pp. 42-78; and BELLUCI, Stefano. “Gestione della terra ed evoluzione del mondo contadino nel Corno”. In: CALCHI NOVATI, Giampaolo. ed. *L’Africa d’Italia. Una storia coloniale e postcoloniale*. Rome: Carocci, 2011, pp. 265-290.

Ethiopian workers in the German gold and platinum mines near the Dabus river was recorded in this period. A successful strike too, for the German owners were obliged to increase the workers' wages to 10 lira per day.³⁴

On the other hand, the very process by which agricultural workers left their feudal obligations in the plantation to work for the Italian companies in the building sector,³⁵ led to a shortage of labour in the plantations. In order to face this problem, the colonial authorities first unsuccessfully introduced laws that prohibited the use of "native" labour for other activities, in areas close to locations licensed for agricultural or mining purposes. Subsequently they were forced to start an experiment, originally introduced in the province of Harar, which combined European and African forms of labour exploitation. Three types of "hybrid" labour commoditization emerged as a consequence: (1) "co-ownership", a form of share-cropping by which the Italian owner or farmer prepared the land for planting and providing the seeds, while the "native" agricultural workers took care of the rest of the work. The harvest was then divided up according to the percentages that had been established beforehand, based on the initial investments made by the Italians. (2) In the second type of labour relation, the owner or licensee of a piece of land leased a house – which often also included a small piece of land – to the "native" worker and his family; in return, the latter worked in the Italian plantation. (3) The third type of labour relation consisted in casual or full-time wage work that was either partially or entirely paid in kind. In the first case, the cash payment was made weekly or once a fortnight, while the payment in kind (agricultural products) was made daily, at the end of the working day, and consisted in a quantity of between 500 grams to one kilo of *durra* (an autochthonous type of barley), more than a set quantity of *chat* and some firewood.³⁶

Also consult, PRINZI, Daniele. "La manodopera indigena nella colonizzazione nazionale", *Rassegna economica dell'Africa Italiana*, vol. 25, 1937, p. 114; QUARENTA, Ferdinando. *Ethiopia, an Empire in the Making*. London: P.S. King & Son, Ltd., 1939, pp. 32-33. In this sense, some contemporary historians also talk of the revenge of the Oromos and other populations that were traditionally exploited by the Shoan-Amharic élites which took place thanks to the support (albeit indirect and due to a vested interests on the part of the Italians), of the peasant populations that the feudal system aimed to dominate completely.

³⁴ GUIGLIA, Giacomo. *Lineamenti economici del nuovo impero*. Genova: Emiliano degli Orfini e figli, 1938, p. 112.

³⁵ In some places, such as the Harar governorate, in September 1936, wages were still paid in MT thalers (which was a stronger currency than the Italian lira), and this attracted many workers towards enterprises run by Italians. See *Bollettino Ufficiale del Governo dell'Harar*, I, 1936, p. 257.

³⁶ SANTAGATA, Fernando. *L'Harar: territorio di pace e di civiltà*. Milan, 1940, pp. 209-211.

Final remarks

his article has focussed on two aspects of labour history in the Horn of Africa, and especially in Ethiopia, during the 1930s. First, it has analysed the transnational fluxes of labour to and from the region during the Italian colonial rule. The Fascist regime claimed to have created an “empire of work” in Africa. However the system put in place in Africa was impossible to sustain, and, within a few years, the goal of transferring labour from Italy to Africa failed, as it proved both economically unfeasible, due to the high costs of the entire imperialist enterprise and of labour in particular, and socially and politically unfeasible, because of increasing protests and insubordination on the side of the Italian settlers.

Second, this research paper has sought to show how the Italian decision to invade Ethiopia favoured the introduction of a system of wage labour and transformed the labour regimes and relations in the African region far beyond the short period of the Italian colonial rule. From that time onwards, wage labour became part and parcel of the labour system, intertwined with other forms of labour relations. As noted, this process was uneven in its development within the very territories of the AOI, and entailed a considerable level of agency by the local populations, in the forms of resistance, adaptation and hybridisation.

Another aspect has remained outside the scope of the present article, but is certainly worth addressing in future research, namely, the consequences *in Italy* of Italian rule in Africa. How did the transnational flux of labour impact on the Italian economy and politics, for instance in terms of consensus or opposition to the Fascist regime? What were the social and cultural consequences of migration on the households of the settlers during and after their experience in the colony, for example in terms of the representation of work and labour and as far as consumption is concerned? By showing the multidirectional connections and influences created by and within Italian colonialism, this perspective will strengthen our argument against Eurocentrism and for a transnational approach.

