

“The Eritrean Askari believes to be the best soldier in the world!”

How the Eritrean colonial soldiers were
represented in Italian military memoirs

Student: Aldo Giuseppe Scarselli (s1494112)

Master Colonial and Global History 2014-2015

Email: aldo.giuseppe.scarselli@gmail.com

Supervisor: Prof. dr. J.B. Gewald

Second Reader: mr. Dr. S. Bellucci

Acknowledgments

Leiden, January 2015

I would like to thank those who helped me during my research and during the composition of this thesis. First of all I have to thank to Gen. Dott. Mauro Giuseppe Tedeschi and to Prof. Ugo Barlozzetti, for their inestimable suggestions and advice. My acknowledgments go also to the staff of the Biblioteca Attilio Mori, Istituto Geografico Militare of Florence, for their helpfulness and kindness.

My gratitude goes firstly to Martina, for her indestructible faith in me during this Master, for her love and support, for her ability to keep my spark alive during dark times. My infinite gratitude goes to my parents Alberto e Rosanna, who encouraged me during the last year, and to my friends Andrea, Lucrezia and Lucia, who offered long distance support in finding books and information, precious suggestions and moral aid. I say thank to Matthew and Dominik, for their precious company during this year, for their flamboyant friendship, for the support they offered, their suggestion and correction about my writing. Thanks also to Vanessa for her inestimable opera of proofreading.

Aldo Giuseppe Scarselli

Table of contents

Map	4
Introduction.....	5
Italy and its askari: an historical approach to the European gaze on the “other”	6
A topic scarcely explored.....	9
Sources and methods.....	11
Structure	12
Chapter one: how Italians met the askari	14
A small country that wanted to be great	14
Recruiting unwanted elements: from bashi-bazouk to askari	15
Rise, fall, and again rise of the askari	18
Chapter two: the askari as an army man	21
Different officers for different times.....	21
Flattering the pride of the soldier.....	23
Those who love war	24
Impulsive and ingenuous soldiers	27
Weapons were the askari’s best friends	32
Sparkling uniform for the askari	37
Chapter three: beyond the uniform: the askari as a man.....	41
The men under the uniform: body and “race”.....	41
How the body was cared for: medicine and pain	45
Askari: a good husband or not?.....	49
The askari always guards his honour	54
The gods of the soldier.....	57
Conclusions.....	61
Bibliography.....	65



Map

The Italian Colonial Empire at the apex of its expansion in 1940: this map includes also the protectorates over Albania and the Adriatic islands. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Introduction

During a recent journey to the city of Rome, walking along boulevards, flanking the Tiber waterfronts and crossing the majestic squares of the Capital, it was very easy to spot street names like viale Libia, viale Eritrea, via Assab, via dell'Amba Aradam, via Adua, via del Tembien or largo Somalia - all names that send me back to the colonial heritage of Italy. Near Via Luigi Einaudi it is possible to find the obelisk of Dogali, a commemorative monument to the Italian colonial soldiers killed during the Battle of Dogali, Eritrea, of 26th January 1887, while near the metro station of Lepanto, in front of the Nazario Sauro military barracks, two bronze busts portray Major Pietro Toselli, who died during the aforementioned battle of 1887, and Lieutenant Colonel Giuseppe Galliano, who strenuously defended the Eritrean fort of Macallè from the Abyssinian siege of 1895-1896. All these names came from Italian conquests, military heroes and even colonial defeats.

According to Nicola Labanca the colonial past lingers in Italy, because *“in almost all the cities of the Peninsula the topographic memory of the colonial enterprises of the unified Italy endures”*¹. From 1882 to 1941 Italy, the last of the colonial powers, directed its expansion toward what is modern day Eritrea (1882), the eastern part of Somalia (1888), a concession in the Chinese bay of Tianjin (1902), Libya and the Dodecanese Islands (1912) and Ethiopia (1935). While they were following these imperialistic vectors, Italians entered into contact with local realities, peoples, and cultures, sometimes considering them enemies to fight and subdue, at other times considering them precious allies to absorb into the colonial dimension. During the victories and defeats that gave their names to streets and monuments, the Italians were not alone; they recruited local military forces to reinforce their presence in the area.

In this research I am going to analyse one of these cases: the Eritrean *askari*, African soldiers recruited in the first Italian colony, Eritrea. They were the objects of attention of an entire colonial class, and it is precisely this peculiar attention and interest that will be the pivotal element of my analysis.

¹ Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare: Storia dell'Espansione Coloniale Italiana*, (Bologna, 2002), p.7

Italy and its askari: an historical approach to the European gaze on the “other”

In their colonial expansion, Europeans have never been completely alone in perpetrating occupation, conquest, oppression and exploitation in Africa²; while their armies were sweeping grasslands and savannas, climbing mountain passes, scouting rivers on steamboat gunships, patrolling exotic cities or just installing trading points or mercantile routes, the European colonizers often attracted the interest of the population they had subjugated, an interest that often resulted in open collaboration. The motherland was too far away to allow a continuous and economically sustainable replenishment of soldiers, and local environments were often too alien for the Europeans. To be able to sustain a serious military involvement and especially to enforce European law and civilisation, the colony’s “...*internal defence and security rested upon locally recruited forces*”³, as also Victor Kiernan has efficiently pointed out:

*“Shortage of numbers, need to economize costs, climate and disease, were all arguments for use of native troops. It started as soon as white men began to find their way overseas. [...] Soldiers might be recruited from the debris of defeated forces; resistance could thereby be abridged and resentment allayed”*⁴

In this regard, Italian colonialism was not different from the other colonial empires: Italy had its local military collaborators, its indigenous troops, it had a method to enforce and strengthen colonial power with the participation of the colonized subjects.

The name of these colonial soldiers, the subject of my research, was askari⁵, and I am going to direct my attention toward those askari recruited in Eritrea, the first Italian colony. Their importance was not only for their use in the colonial scenario as powerful instruments of conquest and repression, but also for their relationship with the Italian soldiers and officers and their influence on Italian culture. They became more than mere colonial troops, literally influencing the perception that the Italians had of the colonial world, sometimes directly in the motherland. To describe the aim of my research, it is necessary to highlight a characteristic of Italian colonialism, which is its preeminently military nature and organisation:

²See for example Antoine Champeaux, Éric Deroo, János Riesz, *Forces noires des puissances coloniales européennes : actes du colloque organisé les 24 et 25 janvier 2008 à Metz*(Lavauzalle, 2009)

³ David Killingray and David Omissi, *Guardians of Empire: the Armed Forces of the Colonial Powers c.1700-1964*, (Manchester, 1999), p.6

⁴ Victor G. Kiernan, *Colonial Empires and Armies, 1815-1960* (Sutton,1998), p.16

⁵ Askari, ascari in Italian, remains the same both singular and plural, even if sometime it is easy to find the Italianized singular *ascaro*.

“More in general the politic of Italian colonial expansion, late in comparison to the one of the other great European powers, had advanced more thanks to the actions of soldiers, than to the slow and peaceful penetration of missionaries or merchants.”⁶

Even when they were organising scientific and explorative missions, Italian geographical societies were largely formed and supported by army men. For example, the *Società Geografica Italiana*, founded in Florence in 1867 for scientific purposes, was formed principally by diplomats and officers, while only 11% of its members were geographers or scientists⁷. This does not mean that other colonial powers were more peaceful than Italy, but rather that the non-military aspects were always of minor impact or importance during Italian colonialism, and that a great part of the decisions, the administration and the government was in the hands of soldiers and officers:

“In Italian colonial expansion in Africa, merchants, farmers entrepreneurs and missionaries were missing in the first phase, then they had a reduced development until 1936. As a consequence, the role of the military became dominant, also in the administrative establishment.”⁸

Not only were these aspects preeminently military oriented: even the interpretations of local realities, the contact with other cultures, the collaborations with local entities, and even in some cases scientific investigations were mediated by the eye of the army man.

Precisely this eye in action is one of the protagonists of my research about the askari: the primary sources of my research, the fields from where I am going to extract the information about the black soldiers of the Italian army, are three military accounts, all centred on the figure of the askari. These sources are *Fra gli Ascari d'Italia: i ricordi di Mohammed-Idris* by Giovanni Gamerra edited in 1899, *Gli Ascari d'Italia* by Errardo Di Aichelburg, an insert of the prestigious periodical *Rivista Militare Italiana* from 1914 and Tito Piccirilli's *Fra gli Ascari Eritrei: Ricordi dal Taccuino di un Coloniale* from 1936.

These sources have a particular aspect in common. This aspect is the approach in describing the askari: they take the forms of ethnographic surveys on what it meant to be an askari, on which aspects defined the askari and which ones did not. They circumscribe, in some cases

⁶ Nicola Labanca, Premessa, in Società Italiana di Storia Militare, Quaderno 2001-2002, *Militari italiani in Africa: per una storia sociale e culturale dell'espansione coloniale*, Atti del convegno di Firenze, 12-14 Dic. 2002, by Nicola Labanca (Napoli, 2004), p.8

⁷ David Atkinson, Construction Italian Africa: Geography and Geopolitics, in *Italian Colonialism*, by Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, (New York, 2008), p.17

⁸ Giorgio Rochat, L'Esercito dinanzi alle guerre d'Africa, in *Militari italiani in Africa*, cit., p.17

unintentionally, the boundaries that defined the many and variegated identities of the askari. In doing so, they also offered an ethnographic panorama of the realities they were involved in.

This practice has been described by Barbara Sòrgoni in her *Etnografia e Colonialismo: l'Eritrea e L'Etiopia di Alberto Pollera 1873-1939*, a book about the life of the Italian colonial ethnographer Alberto Pollera, who spent most of his life exploring the Italian colonies of the Horn, cataloguing tribes, customs, cultures and religions. The relevant element for my research is that Pollera was not a specialist of cultures, but just an army officer who was assigned to Eritrea, who started to grow interested in the cultural dimension of the colony, becoming in the end:

“...an Italian who lived for many years [in the colony], who had an interest in knowing the local populations and learning their language, who felt obliged to convey them to the motherland , starting to write more or less extensively about them. In this sense, it is what I have called in a different moment, «accidental ethnographers», colonials – both military and civilian – who invented the profession of anthropologist even though they were not scholars at the origins, and produced important chapters of colonial ethnography.”⁹

In some cases even pioneering works emerged from such situations¹⁰. The askari became one of the subjects of this descriptive interaction, the aim of the curious and pervasive eye of the colonizer: through the channel of military training and discipline, of daily life in the barracks and encampments, of conquest expeditions and punitive raids, Italian soldiers and officers entered into more and more contact with the native troops.

We should not think that this situation created forms of equality between blacks and whites: in the Italian colonies racial segregation was as strong as in other colonial realities. Nevertheless the askari became an archetypal figure of many literary works coming from the colonial experience; he became a mythological figure, the “faithful ascaro”, thanks to his large and efficient participation in the colonial expansion and consolidation, “for whom the colonial authorities did not spare praise [...]”¹¹.

The askari became also the favourite subject of Italian illustrated magazines: *La Tribuna Illustrata*, *Illustrazione Italiana* and *La Domenica del Corriere* used to depict the battles that the Italians were fighting overseas, often including the indigenous troops in their narrations and illustrations:

⁹ Barbara Sòrgoni, *Etnografia e Colonialismo: l'Eritrea e l'Etiopia di Alberto Pollera 1873-1939*, (Torino, 2001), p.22

¹⁰See Paolo Marrassini, Gli studi di filologia e storia e i militari italiani in Eritrea, in *Militari italiani in Africa*, cit., pp.187-210

¹¹ Giulia Barrera, The Construction of Racial Hierarchies in Colonial Eritrea: the Liberal and Early Fascist Period (1897-1934), in Palumbo, *A place in the Sun: cit.*, pp.87-88

“Appearing on *Illustrazione Italiana* the indigenous irregulars ceased to be just a military appendix of the colonial expedition and they started to be part of the Italian cultural imagery.”¹²

This pervasive image of the black soldier can be found in many other popular media, for example in advertising: a brand of Italian wine used an illustration with an askari to promote its product in 1912-1913, an advertisement that was also used as cover by an issue of the *Touring Club Italiano*, a famous touristic magazine¹³; the same happened for a brand of shoes, again on the cover of the touring club¹⁴. Another example is the children’s book *Fantasie e Concerti in A.O.*¹⁵, written in 1936 by Nonno Ebe, pseudonymous of Ettore Boschi. This book is a propagandistic narration of the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, and its cover and the illustrations inside depict some askari fighting and dancing. The four sources that I am going to analyse represent a sample of this literature about the askari, a sample of how the colonizer viewed the colonized, evidence of how the white man observed “his” black man, differentiating him from the “rest”, creating a social hierarchy based on who was part of “his” colonial world, and who was outside, who was friend and who was foe.

A topic scarcely explored

If we look at the literature and research about the askari, we are not going to find much. This has to be linked to the fact that for a great part of Italian history colonial studies were never really cultivated, and even after the collapse of the colonial empire, Italy seemed uninterested in studying and researching the effects and development of its colonialism. For political and social reasons, the colonial past was removed or idealised.

¹² Marco Scardigli, *Il Braccio Indigeno: Ascari, Irregolari e Bande nella Conquista dell’Eritrea 1885-1911*, (Milano, 1996), p.33

¹³ See Catalogue of the exposition 2004-2005 *Ascari d’Eritrea: Volontari Eritrei nelle Forze Armate Italiane 1889-1941*, by Ascanio Guerriero, (Firenze, 2005), p.87; and Raffaele Girlando, *Marzo 1896- La Battaglia di Adua*, in *Immagini di Storia*, (Campobasso, 1996), p.132

¹⁴ Massimo Zaccaria, *Anch’io per la tua bandiera: il V battaglione Ascari in missione sul Fronte Libico*, (Ravenna, 2012), p.208

¹⁵ Nonno Ebe, *Fantasie e Concerti in A.O.*, (Milano, 1936). Ettore Boschi was a fascist from the very beginning, and a prolific writer of children’s book for the series *Bibliotechina Bambini d’Italia*. This series was an instrument of the fascist colonial propaganda, and Boschi wrote many books that took place in the A. O. I., *Africa Orientale Italiana*. Even if I am not going to talk about the fascist period, the permanence of the askari’s image is an important element to underline.

In Italy originated a complex of refusal to deal with the past that linked with the old “Italians, good-people” myth, *italiani, brava gente*, the idea that Italians, unlike other Europeans, naturally possess good qualities, polite characters, refuse violence and have altruistic tendencies¹⁶.

Angelo Del Boca has explored this myth, criticising it as completely false in the book *Italiani, Brava Gente? Un mito duro a morire*¹⁷, first of all analysing how it originated, but also showing how Italians have been able to commit terrible crimes after the Unification, especially during the colonial expansion and during the Second World War. This myth is going to surface in my sources, in the form of the good Italian officer, benign and sympathetic towards the colonized populations, elements completely false and forged by the Italians.

Plagued by the desire to forget the past, by the hostility of the authorities and by the difficulty in looking at documents in the state archives, Italian colonial studies remained silent or very apologetic for a long time. Italian authorities and the general population built up a masquerade, “...suppressing knowledge of Italian atrocities and fostering strain of popular memory that perpetuated the image of Italian colonizers as benign”¹⁸.

Only since the end of the '70s, thanks to the work of authors like Del Boca¹⁹ and Rochat, Italian colonialism became a topic of interest. From the late 80's that colonialism gained pace as a topic of research, attracting the interest of not only Italian historians and anthropologists, like Nicola Labanca and Irma Taddia, but also foreign ones coming from the ex-colonies or from the Anglo-Saxon world. The archive system was starting to mitigate its rigidity and impenetrability, allowing easier access to the documents. Two recent collections of articles about Italian colonialism, *A Place in the Sun*, by Patrizia Palumbo and *Italian Colonialism*, by Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, used during my research, represent the actual extent of how the colonial memory is finally becoming an argument of academic interest, both in Italy and abroad.

This scenario of lack of interest and manipulation of the past has to be kept in mind when we look at the askari: not only Italian colonialism lacked the large analysis that had interested the colonial endeavours of other countries, but precise and peculiar elements are very often scarcely considered and explored even by the new wave of colonial studies. This created a deficiency of literature about the askari, as I have previously affirmed and as I am going to show later in this introduction. First, it is necessary to define how I am going to carry out and structure my research.

¹⁶ About the memory of Italian colonialism, see Angelo del Boca, “The Myths, Suppressions, Denials and Defaults of Italian Colonialism”, in Palumbo, *A Place in the Sun*, cit. (2003), p.17

¹⁷ Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani, Brava Gente? Un mito duro a morire*, (Vicenza, 2005)

¹⁸ Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, Introduction, in *Italian Colonialism*, cit., p.2

¹⁹ See for example the monumental series wrote by Del Boca about the Italians in Africa consisting of *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale I: Dall'Unità alla Marcia su Roma (1976)*; *II: La Conquista dell'Impero (1979)*; *III: La Caduta dell'Impero (1982)*; *IV: Nostalgia delle Colonie (1984)*; and of *Gli Italiani in Libia I: Tripoli Bel suol d'Amore (1986)*; *II: Dal Fascismo a Gheddafi (1986)*

Sources and methods

I am going to analyse the characters, values, deficiencies and qualities that my chosen sources ascribe to the askari. I am going to create a research template made up of all these elements, not to make a mere list, but a sort of diagram divided between the aspects of the soldier and the aspect of the man. A concept that is going to surface often and that I take as a conceptual guideline is the one of “martial race”²⁰, the idea that some groups of man possess a greater inclination, an innate talent to be warriors and soldiers, as if nature had naturally structured their bodies and societies to wage war.

This concept has been already largely explored in other colonial contexts²¹ and it has been defined as “a colonial construct”²², useful to create systems where groups of people were categorised not only according to their warlike nature, but also their willingness to put their qualities under the command of the Europeans. The questions I am going to investigate in my sources focus on the idea of the creation of a coherent model of the askari, something that was not only a completely invented construction, but the elaboration of the realities the Italians found in the colony: my aim is to dissect these products and offer an elaborate description of their structure. Furthermore, in my search for the image of the real askari provided by the sources, I am also going to look for their “material” image, describing their uniforms and how they used to appear on the battlefield. A soldier is not only made by training and fighting, but also by how he materially appears to the exterior and to himself. In this regard, one source of information is going to be *Istruzione sulla Divisa e sull'Uniforme del R. Corpo di Truppe Coloniali di Eritrea* edited by the Italian War Ministry in 1913, a regulation about the uniforms of colonial soldiers with a part about the askari.

Before proceeding, I have to make some aspects of my research clear. First of all, I am not going to cover the entire chronology of Italian colonialism, but only the conquest of Eritrea and finally the invasion of Libya, the period from circa 1882 to 1912. This geographical and chronological

²⁰ The term “race” is going to appear often in this research, even if I recognize its scientific inconsistency and fallacy. However, I’m going to use in the retrograde acceptance of my sources, to remain faithful to their idea of “humanity’s classification”.

²¹ An exhaustive list about this topic will take too long. For some concise example, see Joe Lunn, ‘Les Races Guerrieres’: Racial Preconceptions in the French Military about West African Soldiers during the First World War, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 34, no. 4 (Oct., 1999), pp. 517-536; Philip Constable, The Marginalization of a Dalit Martial Race in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Western India, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 60, no. 2 (May, 2001), pp. 439-478; Risto Marjomaa, The Martial Spirit: Yao Soldiers in British Service in Nyasaland (Malawi), 1895-1939, *The Journal of African History*, vol. 44, no. 3 (2003), pp. 413-432; Gavin Rand and Kim A. Wagner, Recruiting the “martial Races”: Identities and Military Service in Colonial India, *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 43, issues 3-4 (July 2012); Heather Streets, *Martial Races: the Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914* (Manchester 2004); Timothy H. Parsons, “Wakamba Warriors Are Soldiers of the Queen”: The Evolution of the Kamba as a Martial Race, 1890-1970, *Ethnohistory*, vol. 46, no. 4, Warfare and Violence in Ethnohistorical Perspective (Autumn, 1999), pp. 671-701; Lionel Caplan, ‘Bravest of the Brave’: Representations of ‘The Gurkha’ in British Military Writings, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Jul., 1991), pp.571-597

²² Killingray and Omissi, *Guardians of Empire*, cit., p.15

delimitation covers the most important operative theaters of the askari, and the fascist phase of colonialism is not going to be part of my research. My sources do not cover this late period, when a great degree of change appeared in the relationship with the askari. Secondly, the group of indigenous troops on which I am going to focus my attention is only the *askari eritrei*, whose battalions were mostly recruited in Eritrea and that are largely covered in my sources. Other local indigenous troops, like the *dubat*, Somali elite shock troopers, or the meharist camel raiders are not going to be described.

The specialised literature about the Eritrean askari is not very vast. Military studies in Italy have, for a long period, been almost only studies of tactics, diplomacy and technology, and most of them were carried out by men who were part of the military establishment. This situation placed an emphasis on the conquest and the glorification thereof, while there have been very few studies of the social composition of the colonial army, the interaction with the natives and other similar aspects²³. The changes in the historiography of the last decades has finally moved the attention onto more varied topics, finally lacking the colonial and racist trammels that have influenced Italian approaches to its own colonial past for so long.

Two books can be considered fundamental for a research about the askari: Marco Scardigli's *Il Braccio Indigeno: Ascari, Irregolari e bande nella conquista dell'Eritrea, 1885-1911*, Massimo Zaccaria's *Anch'io per la tua Bandiera: il V battaglione Ascari sul fronte Libico (1912)*. These works, edited respectively in 1996 and in 2012, are the most updated and recent researches about the askari. Scardigli's book is an exhaustive description of how the Italians organised their first core of indigenous recruitment and how it evolved in the formation of askari's battalion; Zaccaria's work is a research about the use of the askari on the Libyan front, and about the first direct meetings between the Italian populations and the indigenous troops.

I am also going to use documents coming from the archives of Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, the Italian ministry of foreign affairs, whose archive *Archivio Storico Diplomatico*²⁴ holds documents coming from the ex-colonial institutions. The part of this archive I have explored, *Archivio Eritrea 1880-1945*, includes a large and varied array of documents, both civilian and military, and the parts I have explored were those about the period of colonial consolidation in Eritrea and the invasion of Libya.

Structure

The structure of my thesis is going to be composed of three chapters after this introduction, and the conclusions. Chapter One is going to furnish the historical context of Italian colonial expansion in

²³ Labanca, Premessa, in *Militari italiani in Africa*, cit., p.8

²⁴ From now ASMAE, Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri.

Eritrea, the origins of the askari corps and its deployment on the battlefield. A source that I am going to use during this digression is *Contributo alla Storia delle Truppe Indigene della Colonia Eritrea e della Somalia Italiana* written by Cesare Cesari in 1913. After that, the second and third chapters are going to finally open the gates of the barracks and encampments, and show us the “real” askari as he was depicted by his trainers and commanders, following the framework I have previously described. The divisions between material and immaterial are going to be the main analytic devices of these two chapters. Chapter Two is going to show the askari as a soldier, as a war instrument in the hands of Italy, while Chapter Three is going to look at the askari as a man, with all his ensemble of virtues and daily behaviour as viewed through the prism of the eye of the colonizer.

As a final note, all my primary sources are in Italian, and for this reason I have translated all the quotations present in this thesis into English. I have tried to remain faithful to the language and the meanings of the sources, which for the most part are written in archaic Italian.

Chapter one: how Italians met the askari

This chapter is going to briefly describe the first Italian penetration in East Africa and the origin of the askari corps. Two events are going to be fundamental: the battle of Adwa of 1896 and the invasion of Libya of 1911-1912. What I am going to provide here is the background and context that saw two elements on the stage: the birth of the askari corps and the extreme predominance of the military elements in Italian colonialism.

A small country that wanted to be great

Italian colonial expansionism moved quite late compared to other colonial powers like Great Britain and France. The main reason was that until 1861 Italy did not exist as a single country, but was fragmented in independent states and foreign domains²⁵. The new unified country was eager for pride and international recognition and looked soon at the colonial “card” to fulfill these needs. We have to frame Italian colonialism in the wider phenomenon of colonial imperialism during the second half of the XIX^o century, a period when the great European powers were struggling to grab as much land as they could in Africa and the Far East. The so called Scramble for Africa, the race to explore and settle in the continent before other competitors, inflamed the last thirty years of the XIX^o century, in a disastrous international competition that culminated in the First World War.

The reasons why almost the whole of Europe at the time was involved in a frenzy of conquest over Africa are many. For instance, there were economic reasons, regarding the creation of markets for European industrial surplus in newly colonized lands; there were diplomatic reasons, to use the colony as a field of indirect clash far from Europe; finally there were prestige reasons, revolving around the idea that the conquest could bolster the nation’s pride and international recognition²⁶. Italy was lacking a florid economy and a pressing internal market, but however its ruling class was sure that colonial expansion would have been the answer to the many problems of the new nations:

“Unlike British or French imperialism, Italy’s African gamble was motivated by her desire to rank as a Great Power rather than by economic, strategic or geopolitical calculations.”²⁷

²⁵ The Italian unification process, the Risorgimento, is a topic too broad to be completely discussed here. For concise dissertations, see Giorgio Candeloro, *Storia dell’Italia Moderna: dalla Rivoluzione Nazionale all’Unità 1849-1860*, (1977); Edgar Holt, *Risorgimento: The Making of Italy 1815-1870*, (1970); John A. Davis and Paul Ginsborg, *Society and Politics in the Age of Risorgimento*, (1991); and John Gooch, *The Unification of Italy*, (1986).

²⁶ Tomas Pakenam, *The Scramble for Africa 1876-1912*, (New York, 1991), pp. xxii-xxiii

²⁷ John Gooch, *Army, State and Society in Italy, 1870-1915*, (Basingstoke, 1989), p.73

After an initial fruitless attempt on Tunisia, in 1879 Italy acquired the concession of Assab on the Red Sea from the ship owner Raffaele Rubattino. After initial friction with England and Egypt, the latter being the formal ruler of the region, on the 16th of February 1882 London recognized *de facto* the Italian possession, that the following July was declared an Italian Colony. The 5th of February 1885 saw an initial expansion of the colony: with the pretext of the massacre of a scientific party, Italy sent a military expedition under Tancredi Saletta to occupy Massaua, a city north of Assab. The city was under Egyptian control, but the British intercession, London being interested in having a local European ally, allowed the Italians to occupy the city without problems. It was in Massaua that the Italians met those who would have become the askari.

Recruiting unwanted elements: from bashi-bazouk to askari

The Italian situation was uncertain and complicated by the absence of a real knowledge of the objectives of the mission. This ignorance and lack of preparation became the curse of Italian presence in Africa, continuously affecting the performances of the army, in some cases dramatically. Saletta tried to occupy the inland city of Saati, but the protestation of Ras Alula of Tigray made the Italian expeditionary force march back to Massaua. The Italians, reinforced after a month by a new contingent, attested their position in the villages of Archico, Moncullo e Otumlo, in the surroundings of Massaua. However they were left alone by the British, with only the suspicious company of the Egyptian garrison. It is precisely in the ranks of this garrison that the story of our askari began.

After the occupation of Massaua, the Italians found themselves in an uneasy cohabitation with the local Egyptian troops: these were formed of a battalion of the Egyptian army and by five hundred *bashi-bazouk*²⁸. The *bashi-bazouk*, “hasty” or “mad heads” in Turkish²⁹, were irregular soldiers usually recruited in all the Ottoman Empire and used especially as local police force, tax collectors and escorts. Their recruitment depended on local chiefs that provided a certain number of them to the authorities, or also on veteran *bashi-bazouk* that promoted the enrolment when they returned to their homes³⁰. Their reputation of unreliable soldiers was well known by the Egyptians, and almost immediately the Italians noted the scarce qualities of these men.

Nevertheless it seems that Saletta saw something in the *bashi-bazouk*. In a report to the Italian parliament, he described them in all their unreliability, especially pointing out that, coming mostly from Sudan and the Red Sea shores, their Muslim religion made the Italians immediate enemies of

²⁸ Scardigli, *Il Braccio Indigeno*, cit., p.13

²⁹ Ibid., p.13

³⁰ Ibid., p.13

the Faith. In the end of the report however, he affirmed that something good could come from these dodgy soldiers:

*“It is observed how these irregular militias possess some good qualities, that in some circumstances could be to our advantage. For their habitude to resist the climate, to live on only the durrâh [a poor cereal], for the knowledge that many of them have of the Arab language and also Amharic, for the experience they have of these lands, the best ones could be useful for us as guides, scouts, and interpreters.”*³¹

The Italian feelings towards these troops were too mixed to really consider their large recruitment, and during the first months in Massaua, the government was still thinking about sending large contingents of metropolitan troops to Africa.

This appeared completely unrealistic and too expansive: the fast deterioration of living conditions in Massaua was terribly afflicting the health and morale of the Italian soldiers, not used to live in the harsh conditions of East Africa³². The recruitment of indigenous soldiers appeared as the only possible way to reinforce the military presence in the area. To test the “field of recruitment”, on the 30th of April 1885 one hundred *bashi-bazouk* were recruited, armed with Remington rifles and paid as they used to be under the Egyptians³³. They proved immediately to be the worst investment, being surrounded and disarmed without opposition by the local population during a patrol. However the conditions would not have allowed doing differently than trying to recruit and train these terrible soldiers.

We have to remark again that the recruitment of indigenous troops was not the result of a precise strategy, but instead the umpteenth accident, a clumsy adaptation to the local situation. The army needed forces and these forces had to be found in a way or another, independently from their real efficiency and reliability. Italy started to direct projects of expansion against the Ethiopian region of Tigray and the southern part of Sudan occupied by the Dervishes insurrection. When on the 2nd of December the Egyptians completely demobilised, leaving officially the area to Italy, almost all their remaining *bashi-bazouk* passed with the Italians, increasing the number of the irregulars up to nine hundred and twenty-seven³⁴. With the *bashi-bazouk*, the Italians were also absorbing the Ottoman-

³¹ Ibid., p.15

³² Stephen C. Bruner, ‘At Least So Long As We Are Talking About Marching, the Inferior Is Not the Black, It’s the White’: Italian Debate over the Use of Indigenous Troops in the Scramble for Africa, *European History Quarterly*, vol. 44 (I), (2014), p.36

³³ Cesare Cesari, *Contributo alla Storia delle Truppe Indigene della Colonia Eritrea e della Somalia Italiana*, (Città di Castello, 1913), p.4

³⁴ Scardigli, *Il braccio Indigeno*, cit., p.22

Egyptian hierarchical organization, literally maintaining the same names and ranks for the indigenous troops: ranks such as *sangiak* (major), *jusbasci* (second lieutenant), *bimbasci* (captain) and *buluk-basci* (platoon commander) remained in the military structure, so too the names *buluk*, (platoon),³⁵, *halai*, (battalion) and *tabur*, (company)³⁶.

From now the recruitment of indigenous soldiers grew continuously, with the Italians trying to improve their efficiency in the field as much as possible. These soldiers took part in almost all the battles waged by the Italians from now until the catastrophe of Adowa. Even if the Italians were defeated at Dogali on the 26th of January 1887 by the Ethiopians and many criticisms arose about the real efficiency of the *bashi-bazouk*³⁷, the army men started to appreciate and prize the indigenous soldiers. Dogali became immediately a symbol of heroism and manly pride, exaggerating the facts and creating one of the many myths of Italian colonialism³⁸.

In June the numbers of the indigenous irregulars under Italian command grew: two *sangiak*, two *bimbasci*, four-teen *jusbasci*, sixty-seven *buluk-basci*, one thousand nine hundred and eighty-one *bashi-bazouk* and nine scribes³⁹. They were organized in two *halai*, each one divided in three *tabur*⁴⁰. At the same time was finally decided to give the command of these men to a single Italian officer, the colonel Begni, to “...elevate the Italian prestige in front of the indigenous”⁴¹. The truth was that Begni had already great experience in Africa, having served in Egypt for many years, and that he was able to speak Arabic.

On the 3rd of May 1888 General Antonio Baldissera arrived with new ideas to improve the efficiency of the indigenous soldiers in mind. As he openly declared in his reports to the Ministry of War, the Italian officers were to blame for the inefficiency of the indigenous troops, especially for their lack of linguistic skills and commitment to the colonial endeavour⁴². His proposals were to improve the quality of the soldiers sent to the colony, looking for young non-commissioned officers able to speak Arab or Amharic; he proposed to increase the number of indigenous soldiers, especially recruiting from those “races” talented with warlike qualities; wages had to be increased but also discipline had to be extremely hardened; mixed battalions had to be created, especially for reconnaissance roles. In the end, the service had to be absolutely voluntary, counting on how high wages and dreams of conquest could attract the local population.

³⁵ Ibid., p.13

³⁶ Cesari, *Contributo alla Storia*, cit., p.6

³⁷ Scardigli, *Il braccio Indigeno*, cit., pp.26-27

³⁸ See *Del Boca: Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale I*, cit., pp. 240-276

³⁹ Scardigli, *Il braccio Indigeno*, cit., p. 34

⁴⁰ Cesari, *Contributo alla Storia*, cit., pp.6-8

⁴¹ Ibid., p.5

⁴² Scardigli, *Il braccio Indigeno*, cit., p.42

The Ministry did not accept all the Baldissera's suggestions, starting a diatribe with him about the costs and benefits of such a reform. With some adjustments and modification, a project of reorganization was finally approved by the government. On the day 28th September 1888 the the *I° Battaglione Fanteria Indigena* was created. After a while three other battalions were created, the II°, III° and IV°, bringing the number of indigenous troops to one thousand and nine-hundred at the end of the year⁴³. These dates can be considered the birth of the askari as he was perceived in the following years: no more *bashi-bazouk*, unruly and incapable, but askari, from the Arab *ascar* meaning soldier, a well trained and hardened infantryman, perfect to fulfill the Italian expectation of the colony.

Hope and trust in the indigenous soldiers started to grow, motivated largely by the aforementioned material condition of the colony: such confidence remained unaffected even by the defeat of Saganeiti, when the 4th August 1888 four hundred askari were attacked by the Abyssinians, losing two hundred and fifty of them⁴⁴. The reorganization of the colonial matters was not only directed at the military dimension: on the 1st of January 1890 the Italian possessions on the Red Sea were named "*Colonia Eritrea*".

Rise, fall, and again rise of the askari

A new period of aggressive colonialism had begun under the Italian champions of imperialism: first minister Francesco Crispi (1818-1901), who enthusiastically supported and planned the national conquest of Africa through the new colonial Military Governor Oreste Baratieri (1841-1901). In the same period the Dervishes were crossing the unclear borders of the colony with more daring raids and movement of troops. The askari were immediately used as a powerful mobile force when on the 24th of June 1890 they defeated the Dervish marauders at the first battle of Agordat. One year later, indigenous and Italian soldiers were merged in a single colonial corps, the *Regie Truppe d'Africa*, numbering in 1892 two thousand one hundred and fifteen Italian soldiers and four thousand four hundred and sixteen askari⁴⁵.

This period, that saw the expansion of Italy towards Ethiopia and Sudan, was halted by the catastrophic defeat of Adua in 1896. I'm not going to describe this battle completely, this has already been largely described in the past⁴⁶. The askari were not completely deployed during this terrible battle, being instead scattered throughout the entire colony, defending the northern border or

⁴³ Ibid., p.47

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.10

⁴⁵ Cesari, *Contributo alla Storia*, cit., p.13

⁴⁶ See Nicola Labanca, *In Marcia Verso Adua*, (Torino, 1993); and Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale I*, cit., pp.617-718

garrisoning the defensive line. In the battle of Adua only four of the eight askari battalions, the I°, VI°, VII° and VIII° fought against the massive army of emperor Menelik II° of Ethiopia, while only parts of the III° and V° battalions were in the field⁴⁷. The Italian army, numbering twenty thousand soldiers, faced a force that approximately counted one hundred thousand men, “...an army that no colonial history remembered until then”⁴⁸. The battle was a bloodbath that cost Italy around four thousand eight hundred metropolitan soldiers and two thousand askari⁴⁹. The prisoners were many, and the askari captured were often mutilated of hands and feet as traitors⁵⁰.

After a period of colonial emergency, the colony saw the arrival of Ferdinando Martini, the first civilian governor of Eritrea, who had a task: “put to sleep”⁵¹ the colony. He literally wiped out the military organization, trying to create an efficient and inexpensive civil administration. The army was his first victim and with repatriations of metropolitan soldiers and furloughs of askari, he reduced the military effectives in the colony. In 1902 he reduced the seven askari battalions to four, the askari’s wage was reduced and the *jusbasci* grade was eliminated, only to be reintroduced in 1906 as *sciumbasci*. The ensemble of troops operating in Africa was renamed *Regio Corpo di Truppe Coloniali*.

The imperialist dreams of Italy were abruptly stopped, its project of expansion reshaped, and the trusty askari relegated to police operations and garrisoning of sleepy outposts. For around fifteen years colonialism was a page to forget for Italy. These dreams were newly inflamed when in 1911, after a period of “colonial tranquility”, Italy decided to revive its desire of expansion in the Mediterranean Sea, this time against the Ottoman Empire in Libya.

The conquest of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica would have boosted the national pride, and especially avenged the defeat of Adua. Nationalistic circles and industrial interests were demanding a new colonial expansion. Also the Italian population, always more and more turbulent, could have been distracted with a new exotic adventure. On the 28th of September 1911 Italy sent an ultimatum to Istanbul, and the day after war was declared.

Italy deployed its army with the most advanced weaponry and initially the Ottoman garrisons were rapidly defeated. Unfortunately for Italy, the expectation that the local Berber and Bedouin populations would have saluted the Italians as liberators and supported them proved to be wrong. Turkish officers, religious leaders and Bedouin chieftains started immediately to organize the popular resistance and guerrilla attacks: at the end of October, at Sciara Sciat, near Tripoli, and at El-Messri, Italian divisions were ambushed by the Libyans and Turkish, and six hundred Italians

⁴⁷ Scardigli, *Il braccio Indigeno*, cit., p.154 and Cesari, *Contributo alla Storia*, cit., pp.20-21

⁴⁸ Cesari, *Contributo alla Storia*, cit., p.18

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp.21-22

⁵⁰ Scardigli, *Il braccio Indigeno*, cit. p.160

⁵¹ Labanca, *Oltremare*, cit., p.101

died⁵². The Italians closed themselves in the coastal cities, leaving the rest of the country to the resistance bands⁵³. It was immediately clear that the Italian army lacked the mobility of the Libyans and Bedouins, and that somehow this handicap had to be solved. The askari seemed the most useful way to fulfill this necessity.

The colonial administration started in the beginning of 1912 to recruit new askari and on the 1st February of 1912 the recreated V° Eritrean battalion left Massaua for Tripoli, while new battalions were recruited up to the VIII°. In 1913 other four battalions were raised in Eritrea⁵⁴ to be used in Libya. They were employed efficiently against the resistance.

The V° battalion, with one thousand one hundred men⁵⁵, was not only the first to be deployed in Libya: it was also the first indigenous battalion to reach Italy⁵⁶. The Libyan War brought the askari closer to the Italian attention, exciting the population and the media. The askari, both during the period of expansion in East Africa and during the conquest of Libya, showed their Italian officers to deserve all their respect and appreciation. In this regard, it is interesting to report the words used by Cesare Cesari to close his chapter about the indigenous troops of Eritrea:

“Twenty-three years of history, marked without interruptions by constant proof of valour, also where victory was not with us, represent already a glorious tradition, that these indigenous units have been able to form and that Italy, with conviction and pride, has to record between the splendours of its armies.

And since the life of an African colony is always marked by a series of names that remain like Stations of the Cross in a painful Via Crucis, the Italians will connect, with the compassionate remembrance of brothers fallen during those glorious stages, also a thought of gratitude and faith towards the marvelous Eritrean battalions, squadrons and batteries, to which our officers in Africa dedicated and dedicate now, with great love, every care.”⁵⁷

⁵² Labanca, *Oltremare*, cit., p.115

⁵³ About guerrilla and insurrections, see Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia*, I, cit., pp.108-123, 157-202, 261-317

⁵⁴ Zaccaria, *Anch'io per la tua bandiera*, cit., pp.31-32

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.34

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.81-134

⁵⁷ Cesari, *Contributo alla Storia*, cit., p.31

Chapter two: the askari as an army man

This chapter is going to explore how the Italian officers looked upon the askari during marches and during war. I am going to examine how they described the model of indigenous soldiers, in an elaborative and utilitarian process deeply rooted in their army men's mentality. While they were describing, they were actually elaborating their idea of the real askari, based on their experiences with those soldiers.

Which ones were the constitutive elements of these models and roles? I want to demonstrate that they were made by immaterial aspects, like valour, pride, attitude to fight and to obey; and material aspects like weapons, uniforms and military customs. Both these groups of elements concurred in the creation of the model of askari as a soldier, and as we are going to see later, as a man. Before starting with the analysis, I think it is necessary to provide a brief conceptualization of the officers behind my sources.

Different officers for different times

The Italian military establishment had a series of objectives during the colonial expansion: secure as much land as possible and create a way to maintain, control and defend it. As we have seen, to fulfill both of these tasks, the Italians could not rely on metropolitan troops, but instead on the recruitment of local soldiers. Initially they were recruited from the local Egyptian garrisons, later from a larger basin of populations, sometimes crossing the borders between the colony and the "outside Africa".

However recruiting an army is a more complex matter than just finding the right men, training, arming and sending them to death. A soldier has to be built up; he has to be brought from one status or situation to another. A soldier needs to receive not only orders, at least the most trivial part of his identity, but instead a purpose to be a soldier, to fight and die for his commanders. If money and the prospect of plunder have always been of great appeal during history, other aspects can be considered fundamental means of attraction for possible soldiers. These aspects were used and manipulated by the rulers or commanders to create a model of conformity and rules to emulate.

In the case of our askari the situation that my sources indicate is an evolutionary process, where the word evolution does not have a qualitative connotation *per se*, but it does in the words of the officers that wrote about the askari. The different stages of this evolution are going to be exposed in this chapter and in the following one, but before that we have to frame my sources, and their

authors, in this historical evolutionary process. They all wrote in different periods of the colonization, bringing different aspects of their experience with the Eritrean askari.

Giovanni Gamerra was an officer of the old guard, one of the pioneers of early colonialism, one of those who actually took part in the early recruitment of the askari, the early Italian victories and the catastrophe of Adua. He gave a mixed image of the black soldiers, something not homogenous and not very distinct, and he painted his memories with a romantic and nostalgic approach. His relationship with the askari was something imbued with an “*enthusiastic human adhesion*”⁵⁸, something that can be easily observed when he talks about his attendant Mohammed-Idris, a Sudanese fugitive slave who became an askari. For these reasons his account can be considered the most peculiar of my sources.

The case of Errardo Di Aichelburg is different. He did indeed directly encounter the askari, but not on the battlefield: during his service in the army he was a trainer and an officer of the Eritrean soldiers, but he never saw them in any theatres of war. He was also one of those army men that experienced the army after the Martini civil government and the early re-organization of the askari battalions in view of their deployment in Libya. His approach is more detached, critical and negatively prejudiced compared to the other authors.

Tito Piccirilli, writing in 1936 about his experience in Eritrea and on the Libyan front during the counter-insurgency war, reflects not only his great experience of combat with the askari, but also a change in perspective about them. His words about the askari are indeed the most enthusiastic, flattering and prideful, but also the askari he speaks about is someone very distinct, defined, precise, a product of a process of evolution and refining.

This evolution is not something directly and consciously described by my source, but it can be traced in the modulation of the image of the askari that each author gave. This modulation responded to the precise necessity of recruitment and instauration of trust and dependency between the colonizer and the colonized. The role of the latter cannot be merely relegated to that of the victim, but has to be seen as an active actor, even if subaltern, in the process. The askari appears as a manifestation of this process of “collaborative manipulation”, we can say, and the evolution of his descriptions, as depicted by those officers who improvised themselves as anthropologists, is a process of construction of models and roles.

⁵⁸ Scardigli, *Il Braccio Indigeno*, cit., p.79

Flattering the pride of the soldier

Pride and valour are fundamental aspects for the identity of the warrior: they distinguish him from the general and anonymous man that wages war without great qualities and ambitions. In the case of the soldier the situation is slightly different, because they cannot refer anymore to the quality of the single man, but instead to the entire corps, battalion or army. The reason is simple: the warrior is usually someone who fights, kills and structures his warlike aptitude as a single individualistic entity, even when he does it for a king or a lord; the soldier instead is one among many, no more a single man but part of a multitude, a cell of a large organism that needs to be fed and reinforced. The askari's multitude indeed needed to be identified with a more or less cohesive set of warlike and positive attitudes, and valour and pride were some of them. Where did this pride come from? Its source, according to the officers was loyalty and trust: the askari was a real askari, a good askari, first of all because he was loyal and devoted to the Italians.

Giovanni Gamerra, talking about his askari friend Mohamed-Idris, made him the general model of the valourous indigenous soldier, completely committed to the Italian cause:

*"...he is more than anybody else the kind of valourous and loyal askari, the kind of askari who at Agordat for two times, at Coatit, at Senafè and Cassala, at Debra-Ailà, at Amba Alagi, at Macallè and Adua, held high the sacred name of Italy, this Italy unknown to him and for which he got killed, or had a hand or a foot chopped off without making a single lament."*⁵⁹

The warlike valour was not only proven by their actual proficiency in battle, as testified by officers like Gamerra, but also by their dedication to the colonial endeavours of a distant power like Italy. This identification with the Italian military pride, transmitted as a concession, as a "generous gift" of the white man towards the African, is a *trait d'union* that can be noticed in the entire narrative about the askari.

Being an askari trusted by the Italians was something to be proud of, something that created precise boundaries and symbols. Again Gamerra brings a striking example of this *mélange* of pride and trust: he remembers that during a diplomatic mission in Abyssinia, Mohammed-Idris had the misfortune of finding some relatives of his old master, from the times when he was a slave. Surrounded by these men, he remained adamant and steady, repeating only "Askari Italia" as his badge of pride. Only when he was able to move away, from a safe distance he released all his malicious hatred against the Abyssinians:

⁵⁹ Giovanni Gamerra, *Fra Gli Ascari d'Italia: i ricordi di Mohammed-Idris*, (Bologna, 1899), p. 2

“Infidel dogs, I am Mohammed-Idris of Ghedaref ... bring my salutations to that ugly mangy donkey of Derar Sabatù [his former master] ...tell him I am askari of Italy and that at Dogali I have killed three Amhara!”⁶⁰

An ex-slave, now a free man, was shouting all his rage against his despicable enemies, identifying his freedom with the pride of being an askari of a foreign colonial power. Of course, we have to take these facts as something reported by the colonizer, not the colonized, with all their corollary of justification and self-reference; they are however a sign that the idea of a proud exemplary model was present in the officers' minds.

My sources state that the askari was proud of his identity, and he had no problem in using it as a contraposition against the other Africans, against those who did not have the luck of being fully trusted by the Italians. Battles were always fundamental to confirm this model and to enforce it in the mind of the Italians. The fact that the askari were serving well, even when the stakes were not completely favourable for Italy, was the proof that the road taken was right and fruitful:

“After Coatit the fame of the indigenous troops was assured, and with good reason, because not only in those two days of sustained fight did their valour and firmness shine, but also because their devotion for Italy and the love for the officers became manifest.”⁶¹

The askari in the mind of the Italians officers became the “...most beautiful example of loyalty and devotion to the Nations...”⁶², an efficient instrument to conquer more lands, and to consolidate the power on those already acquired. However the Italian trust had to be grounded on more than the simple security of loyalty: even the most loyal army, if it does not kill and fight and conquer efficiently, is not worth of the complete consideration of its commanders.

Those who love war

A characteristic that the Italian officers stressed strongly was the warlike attitude of the askari, their love for waging war and fighting. According to the colonial view, war was something that was codified in their nature by centuries of fights and struggles, and the intentions of the Italians were to exploit these “natural” attitudes as much as possible.

However the process was not only the exploitation of a local “resource” but again the creation of a paradigm of belonging: the answer to the question “who is an askari?” would have been “the man

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.23

⁶¹ Ibid., p.97

⁶² Tito Piccirilli, *Fra gli Ascari Eritrei: ricordi dal taccuino di un coloniale*, (Empoli, 1936), p.3

who likes war more than anything else”. Writing about Mohamed-Idris, Gamerra affirms that he enlisted as a *bashi-bazouk* because “...making war was his favourite profession, especially if he could practice it to the detriment of his natural enemies [the Abyssinians]”⁶³.

According to this view, being a soldier was the best job possible for the local populations, especially if it could have been inserted in the dynamics of social, religious and ethnic rivalries present in East Africa. The preponderance of the military dimension, as we have seen the main aspect of Italian colonialism, was so deep that it also affected the perception that the askari had of the civil life, of everything that was not military. A curious demonstration of this attitude can be found again in the description of Mohamed-Idris:

*“For everything that was not military he had, if not absolute disregard, supreme indifference. He found the cavaggia [master, lord], the bourgeois, being by far inferior to the soldier. One time, Lieutenant Vecchi asked him what he had done with his mule, because he was not using it anymore; and he, who sold the animal for few thalers since it was old and lame, said: it has passed borghise [sic]...”*⁶⁴

Being an askari could also overcome all of life’s other occupations, literally putting aside civilian life. The army men were a higher rank compared to the civilians, and for this reason the askari way of life was not only a system to express the warlike potentiality of the indigenous, but also to elevate their status from the civil life. When the War in Libya required the Eritrean battalions, the call-up for voluntary recruitment literally triggered a wave of enthusiasm:

*“At first it was a continuous rush of men that wanted to enlist both to serve under our flag and to fight, and those who were recruited for this purpose were considered lucky. Those who left showed an immense joy, not thinking about the sorrow they were causing to their families, wives and mothers with their departure. Those who remained were full of envy and jealousy for the glory that would have occurred to the others.”*⁶⁵

It could be possible to dismiss this description as the flattered opinion of the colonial establishment, who overrated the economic interests of the recruits as a passion for war; however this warlike passion of the askari appeared constantly on the battlefield. This excitement for the war remained

⁶³ Gamerra, *Fra Gli Ascari d'Italia*, cit., p.22

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.49

⁶⁵ Piccirilli, *Fra gli Ascari Eritrei*, cit., p.30

steady during the military campaigns, even during the most difficult situations, and the Italian officers described it with great admiration:

*“I cannot describe entirely the epic and beautiful passion of that troop: but the memory is alive in me. The enemy fire was raging; and our adversaries, having excellent German machine guns, were unleashing a storm of bullets upon us. Nevertheless we advanced without caring. The askari were eager for booty, they craved hand-to-hand combat with that enemy that instead was retreating and stepping back.”*⁶⁶

The willingness to fight, to look for the clash of arms and the joy of killing, so deeply rooted in the askari, could have been both a resource and a danger during war. For the first case Gamerra brings examples of great heroism, like when during the siege of Macallè the askari Cassa Ailù shuttled back and forth between the fort and the Italian lines as dispatch rider. Running the risk of being shot by the Abyssinians and by the garrison, he did his duty without fear and was promoted to *muntaz*⁶⁷.

However these feelings towards war and duty could also become quite dangerous, and get out of hand with unexpected effects. After the siege of Cassala, Gamerra commented that luckily most of the civilian population had escaped because:

*“...we could not expect or demand that the askari, having many outstanding balances to settle with the Dervishes, would have behaved differently in the conquest of the city compared with the possible behaviour of European soldiers in similar circumstances.”*⁶⁸

The conquest of Cassala was a massacre of civilians perpetrated by the askari under the orders of Baratieri⁶⁹, and Gamerra's attempt to reduce or motivate the dimension of this bloodbath seems more an unrequested defence of the askari's martial virtues and honour, than a real explanation of the circumstances. This brings us to maybe the most important aspect of the askari's relationships with the Italians: the total dependence of the indigenous soldier on the Italian officers.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p.44

⁶⁷ Gamerra, *Fra Gli Ascari d'Italia*, cit., pp.119-120

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.87

⁶⁹ See Scardigli, *Il braccio Indigeno*, cit., p. 118

Impulsive and ingenuous soldiers

Given the fact that Italian officers were envisioning the askari with such a combination of valour, warlike attitude, craving for battle and absence of fear, we have also to consider that they were reserving the supreme control of the troops for themselves. What can be considered as obvious and blatant was instead in the minds and in the words of the Italian officers an indisputable necessity: the white officer was in fact the only one able to control and properly direct the nature of the askari.

However, this was not the only interesting aspect of the relations between the askari and their officers: in the source I am analyzing, the Italians reiterate the idea that the askari were developing an attitude to see the officer as a paternal figure, benevolent but uncompromising.

Regarding the idea of control, Gamera is the only one of my sources to openly write against the idea that the askari were unruly and apt to lose control during the fight. He criticizes how a writer depicted him during the battle of Adua, using his revolver to threaten the askari to remain in position under heavy enemy fire. According to Gamera this was not the truth, because to reorganise his askari and keep them steady under fire “...was sufficient my command – 8° battalion *alt! Askari alt!* – and to call by name those askari I knew well”⁷⁰. Gamera seems to be the more sympathetic about this aspect, always defending his actions with the askari against all the criticism that the military establishment received after Adua.

What can be noticed in my other sources is that, to the Italian officers, the askari were not lacking obedience and reliability, but exactly the warlike nature previously exposed was something that had to be controlled with maximum attention. This idea of control and command was often articulated with paradigms that reduced the askari to someone not completely human, someone still struggling with a savage atavistic nature more common to the beasts. This was a classic figure of the colonial age, which in the askari case was used both to describe the positive characters of the indigenous soldiers, but also to restate that, if the askari was partly animal, the officers had to be somehow tamers of men.

This figure of the tamer who has to live with fearsome but proud beasts and educate them, discovering their great qualities at the same time, is reported with poignant rhetoric by Di Aichelburg:

“And also in those people there is something that my poor pen cannot express: there is, also in the usual tranquility, something of the battle, like an atmosphere where the fumes of the dust endure.

⁷⁰ Gamera, *Fra Gli Ascari d'Italia*, cit., p.3

These askari have something of the wild beasts that seem subjugated to the dominance of the tamer, but that with the smell of the raw meat, their natural ferocity starts to ooze from their eyes; they flail slowly with their claws, they stiffen their tails, they gather and it seems they are attacking.”⁷¹

Given this situation, the Italian officers had to use all their ability and sangfroid to keep these animal-soldiers under control: they had to literally use a leash. This instrument was not easy to use, because *“The leashes, gripped in the strong hand of the hunter, are tense in the pinned impetus of the beasts: all that impetus weighs on and shakes that hand”⁷²*. This leash, as a concept of supreme and rational control in battle was reputedly fundamental to prevent the askari from being victims of their own impetuosity, especially during close combat actions:

“And what can I say about the excitement that catches them during such fights, when the greater difficulty for their commander is exactly to hold them down and guide them, so that they do not launch in isolated actions, which could be hasty and detrimental.”⁷³

These comparisons with animal ferocity were not always made in negative terms. Sometimes they had also positive connotations; for example when the VI^o battalion became so famous for its success in Libya that *“... various nicknames were given to the officers and the askari, like those of jackals and lions”⁷⁴*. The soldier, if he really was part animal, could also be a proud and roaring beast.

The Italian officers were showing that commanding the askari was a hard job, because they always had to contain soldiers that were not able to do so by themselves. The askari were perceived as very sensitive and to improve their warrior qualities the officers had to know them well, to be able to *“...guess the weak point to stimulate and excite them as much as possible for battle”⁷⁵*.

In which way were the Italians effectively holding the leashes of the askari and at the same time stimulating their sensitive spots? All my sources stress an aspect that the officers had to play for the askari: they have to act as fair and honest fathers, as confidants, as examples of justice and valour. In doing so, the Italian colonial establishment was carrying on a process of infantilisation of the askari, considering him ingenuous and in constant need of a leader that knows his necessities and capacities.

⁷¹ Errardo Di Aichelburg, *Gli Ascari d'Italia*, from *Rivista Militare Italiana* IV, (Roma, 1914), p.23

⁷² Ibid., p.24

⁷³ Piccirilli, *Fra gli Ascari Eritrei*, cit., p.38

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.42

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.35

Describing the Africans as a “child race”, easy to exploit but also easy to teach and direct was a widespread ideology of the Age of Imperialism across all the colonial powers. Victor Kiernan pointed out this ideology, affirming that “*a theory came to be fashionable that mental growth in the African ceased early, that childhood was never left behind*”⁷⁶ and that the Europeans looked at the different behaviours of Africans as proof of this assumption. They were perceived by the Europeans as people that were not grown up, still entangled by the trammels of the past, condemned to remain eternal youth compared to the white race.

This process was part of the device of dominance used by the colonial establishment in many different contexts, and the Italians were not an exception; they were justifying their superior position over the askari not only because the latter were considered in a lower evolutionary position, but also because only the Italian guidance could improve their ability as soldiers and “support” them. Through my sources, this aspect is exposed in a dual form, one centred on the need of an officer that is also a father to the askari, and the other on how the askari were continuously showing their devotion and dependence to the Italians.

Gamerra is, in this regard, again the most romantic and touching when he describes relationships between askari and Italian officers. In the very first pages of his memorandum, he remembers with paternal emotion how he used to live with the askari “*...always listening to them with attention, smiling at their childlike candour*”⁷⁷. The fact that this benevolent attitude of the Italians was reported by themselves could instigate many objections about its veracity, but I am not interested in considering the veracity of the words of Gamerra. The Italian officers were creating a model of the askari based also on their self-perception, and I have already said how the myth of “Italians good people” was accompanying colonialism since the beginning.

With this aptitude, the Italians were developing special bonds with the askari, bonds that were perceived as proof of these soldiers’ devotion to their masters. Examples of this kind are abundant in the pages of Gamerra, most of them about the beloved askari Mohamed-Idris. One case is very interesting because it shows both the devotion of the askari to the officers, but also his initiative. One night Gamerra went on patrol alone, with only the company of his horse, and after a short time he was reached by Mohamed-Idris. The askari went beyond him with nonchalance, loading his rifle and sentencing “*Captain, not good going alone at night out of the camp; I came without you calling [sic]*”⁷⁸. The officer was surprised that an indigenous soldier, not an Italian, showed such admirable dedication.

⁷⁶ Victor G. Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind: European attitudes to the outside world in the imperial age*, (Harmondsworth, 1972), p.243

⁷⁷ Gamerra, *Fra Gli Ascari d'Italia*, cit., p.1

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.42, The words of Mohamed-Idris are reported in a pidgin Italian, to which I have tried to remain faithful

Gamerra reports other examples of dedication, like when the cavalry askari Arèi, mourning the death of his beloved officer, scarred his forehead with a fire brand and affirmed dramatically “...I will always weep for my captain, so good and so valiant”⁷⁹. Another example that contains, perhaps involuntarily, the nature of this device of fatherhood, is that of the askari interpreter Garè Sghear, nursed since he was a child by an Italian officer, who “...loved him as his own child, educated and taught him to make him good and well-behaved”⁸⁰. At a certain point Gamerra becomes explicit in his description of the paternal role of the officer. In fact he affirms that the askari:

*“...wants to be treated well, want to be loved, advised and protected by his officer, he wants to be considered like a son; and when he obtains this, only at that moment he would love the officer as a father.”*⁸¹

Di Aichelburg pushes this paternalistic image even further. He remarks upon the subject role of the askari and the irreplaceable role of the officer, which has to take care of the needs and expectations of the black soldiers. The Italian officer is leader and advisor of the askari, and he is fully aware of his role in elevating the indigenous soldier from his natural conditions:

*“In this way such a complicated, reciprocal harmony that provokes in the inferiors the absolute need of the officers is generated, and in these latter that intimate, pleasant and relished satisfaction that comes from being aware of being useful in the work, appreciating when they were given advice. And for sure, the task of the officers between the indigenous troops is charming, complicated, variegated; the officer is superior, medic, lawyer, conciliator; he is everything!”*⁸²

The author, perhaps to defend such an arrogant position, demonstrates that being a central and important figure was explicitly asked by the askari, perceived as fundamental to keep the peace in the ranks and the harmony between the Italians and the indigenous. The Italian officers had to be more than a simple graduate, more than a father; he had to always listen with stoic patience to the lamentations of the askari. He cannot send away the black soldier without listening, because the askari has, according to Di Aichelburg, a precise opinion of what the officer has to do. This function is expressed by the words that an askari said to him for not receiving the expected attention: “I

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp.54-55

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.56

⁸¹ Ibid., p.65

⁸² Di Aichelburg, *Gli Ascari d'Italia*, cit., p.17

*came to you for advice, for an opinion; you owe me that advice or opinion, otherwise it is useless for you to be my superior”*⁸³.

The Italians were creating a device, whose role was to chain the askari with binds of fidelity and admiration to their superiors, and at the same time to give the officers the excuse to behave like supreme masters: according to their view, they were that way because the askari demanded it and because the askari looked at them as prideful examples.

This mélange of admiration and need to be commanded and supported in every situation brought the askari to become very protective of their Italian officers. Remembering the times of the first expansion in Eritrea, Di Aichelburg brings to mind an episode to show the devotion of the askari. During the rebellion of Bata Agos in 1894, the officer of an askari battalion surrounded by enemies, put himself in the line of fire to shoot, but he was immediately stopped by his black soldiers with the words “*No shooting guitana; askari shooting; you dies, we all die: how we doing if you die[sic]*”⁸⁴. The askari was aware that without the officer, he was nothing.

Piccirilli seems to gather both the paternalistic approach of Gamerra and the attitude to supremacy of Di Aichelburg. He affirms that commanding the askari flatters the pride of the officers, because they are splendid soldiers completely devoted to their master. This devotion seems to reach peaks of real idolatry:

*“...he [the officer] seems effectively a master and a commander clad with every authority, which is recognized to him without limit. The officer, in fact, is called guitana, meaning master; he can do everything: in the gradient of authority, he comes immediately after God. And if the ascario [sic] has to show his satisfaction for something that he likes, he always accompanies his words with this phrase «Thanks God, thanks Masters Officers, thanks Italian Government... »”*⁸⁵

The sources make clear that the reverence that the askari had for the officers was something that exceeded the usual relationship between the superiors and the subalterns. In these cases in my analysis the importance given to their subjection and devotion may seem exaggerated and illogical, but the Italian officers were always interested in justifying the colonial endeavour under the bright light of the askari’s devotion. This devotion, this attachment, united with the good war performances of the askari, were taken as proof that Italian colonialism was producing positive results that it had a reason to exist and expand. Piccirilli completely embraces this auto-referential

⁸³ Ibid., p.17

⁸⁴ Ibid., p.25,. I have tried remain faithful to the pidgin Italian spoken by the askari, as it was reported by Di Aichelburg

⁸⁵ Piccirilli, *Fra gli Ascari Eritrei*, cit., p.4

approach, even reaching the point of repeating almost the same words as those of Di Aichelburg, enriching them with an even more terrible and racist parallelism:

*“For them [the askari] the officer is everything: commander, leader, father, advisor, medic, confidant...They want to find in the person of the officer all the qualities that concur to really make him their leader. [...] The attachment that we have from the askari towards their officer is without limits; it is not an exaggeration that such loyalty resembles the loyalty of the dog.”*⁸⁶

The Italian officer was supposed to exist all around the askari, not only commanding and training them but also being an important part of their life outside the military routine. They looked at him to settle disputes with other askari, to ask advice about their economy and families and also to officially complain if they felt that the administration was not paying what was due. The admiration of the askari for the authority of the officer is pushed in a triumphal comparison, when Piccirilli affirms that the indigenous soldier looked with astonishment at Benito Mussolini, the supreme ruler of Italy, “...for them he is something majestic, especially for the strong manner he uses to rule and for the prestige that surround him”⁸⁷.

Even though this position of the author is anachronistic regarding his experience with the askari in Libya, it is important: it expresses how the concept of authority was not only a method to actually enforce the rule over the askari, but also a way to attract their respect and admiration. They wanted a strong and sympathetic leader, and who could fit the comparison better than the Dux of Italy?

Weapons were the askari’s best friends

I am now going to move on to the “material” dimension of the askari identity as it has been remembered and described by the officers. One of the aspects that has interested me during the analysis of my sources, has been the great attention dedicated to the relationship between the askari and his rifle. The rifle is indeed the main tool of the infantryman, the instrument around which revolves his function in the army. What my sources point out is that the askari were particularly committed to their rifles and extremely proficient in their use.

Gamerra reported that one of his askari, during the dramatic hours of the battle of Adua, remained calm and focused; he was the hostler of Gamerra, and even if he had to take care of a mule, he was able to score some long shots:

⁸⁶ Ibid., p.69

⁸⁷ Ibid., p69

*“...Bakit, with incredible phlegm for those moments, placed his foot on the mule’s rein, blocking it on the ground, and then he slowly loaded the musket and shot six times standing on his feet, aiming with all the tranquility he could have had in a lesson on the shooting range.”*⁸⁸

The askari were slow shooters, they aimed at their target with the intention to deliver a single, precise shot; they were not, at least initially, very at ease with the idea of sustained fire by formations of riflemen. According to the opinion of Mohamed-Idris, such a strategy was not only useless against the Ethiopians, but was also very expensive regarding ammunitions, goods always scarce in the area. Narrating his first battle experience with the Italian to Gamerra, he remembered the defeat of Dogali:

*“...I did not understand why, instead of scattering, your brothers came closer to each other; I did not understand why everybody was doing the same thing all together. I was thinking about this when, after a blunt, quivered command, I heard like the roar of a thunder. It was a company who had released its first volley. I looked at the Abyssinians that were not shooting back, and I saw very few of them falling on the ground. Then I thought that you Italians have so many bullets if you can waste them, while in Abyssinia they are very scarce and we keep them as precious.”*⁸⁹

It was in this situation of scarcity of ammunition and necessity of good sharpshooters that the Italians transformed the weapons they gave to the askari in a sort of donation, resembling the pride and the valour of the soldier. According to my sources the rifle symbolised the trust of the Italian officers and the askari became completely committed to his instrument. Italy gave him the rifle and plenty of ammunition and he has to be worthy of such an investment.

The askari are described with something resembling veneration, a devoted passion for firearms that entirely absorbed their life, because *“They polished them continuously and provide they never get rust. After a march, after a shooting exercise, after a fight, the first thing they do is cleaning the weapons”*⁹⁰.

According to Di Aichelburg, the askari used to take everything that regarded the rifle personally, and they considered it the materialisation of their pride:

⁸⁸ Gamerra, *Fra Gli Ascari d'Italia*, cit., p. 111

⁸⁹ Ibid., p.20

⁹⁰ Piccirilli, *Fra gli Ascari Eritrei*, cit., p.100

*“The rifle is for the askari the appeal that reinvigourates his pride. The care with which they surround it is incredible, as it is incredible their depression when they became convinced that their rifle is not working properly.”*⁹¹

Easily tired during marches by the weight of his equipment, according to Di Aichelburg, the askari did not like to carry too much. He only made an exception for the armament:

*“The askari does not like what tires him; the weight of the rifle and the cartridges ennobles him, makes him proud; he does not avoid or reduce it, and instead, giving him more cartridges will make him happy, because on their number are measured the virtues, the good skills of he who carries them.”*⁹²

Armed in this way, rendered proud by the weight of a superior firepower, the askari were ready to fight for Italy.

Regarding the shooting skills of the askari, Di Aichelburg brings some interesting reasons to explain them. First of all he ascribes them to the physical constitution of the askari, repeating in this way the argument of the warlike nature of the soldiers. The askari was gifted with perfect sight, a fact that the author finds incredible, given the bad health condition he used to live in before entering the army⁹³. More than sight, he had his sturdy legs to thank for being such a good rifleman, as opposed to the very frail and weak structure of his arms. In fact Di Aichelburg describes how the askari used to crouch, laying the backs of his thighs perfectly on the ground behind his feet⁹⁴. In this curious way he gained four “foothold”, becoming like a “human tripods” for the rifle:

*“...he can wedge in his arms between the knees and hold them gripped like in a vise: the incredible visual power makes easy to him to aim at targets placed beyond the average distance.”*⁹⁵

Di Aichelburg is my only source that describes this peculiar way of shooting, furthermore ascribing this practice generally to the Abyssinian askari. We cannot be sure how, and if, it was really and largely used. Even though it is an interesting attempt to search the origins of the shooting skills in the body structure of the indigenous troops.

⁹¹ Di Aichelburg, *Gli Ascari d'Italia*, cit., p.21

⁹² Ibid., p.7

⁹³ Ibid., p.10

⁹⁴ Ibid., p.7

⁹⁵ Ibid., p.21

According to the colonial view, if the origin of the shooting skills was in the nature of the askari, their complete fulfillment and development was something that only the supervision of the Italian officers could have provided. The role of a great teacher performed by the colonial organisation seemed to work in an emulative way. In fact, the askari is described as very easily tired and also swift to ascribe his shooting faults to a malfunctioning rifle. To improve their proficiency and their confidence with the use of the rifle in the ranks, the Italian officers started to show them their own ability, to organise shooting contests with monetary prizes. The results were positive and brought an even greater confidence in the armament of the soldier:

“...the shooting lessons became a challenge revealing badly repressed anxieties, the strong will to succeed, the typical movements of the rifleman that proves and proves again the unloaded weapon and aim towards hypothetical targets (the best gymnastics for the arms), the examinations of the cartridges and their slot in the magazine; in other words, the large majority put such a learning fever in the firing instructions that became a habit, and it made of many askari skillful marksmen, able to compete with our best ones.”⁹⁶

The emulative nature of the askari is a recurring element in the narrative about them. Together with this politic of emulation towards the use of firearms, there was also the use of prizes to excite the warrior enthusiasm of the askari. The gift of a pistol or another firearm as a reward was the best an askari could get from the Italians:

“...their real passion is towards firearms: and they make every effort to have them. The officers, knowing how pressing this desire is, donate them as a prize in the circumstances of a reward. And when they have them, they become proud and superb, while the officer that provided the firearms becomes for them the greatest man on earth.”⁹⁷

This quotation welds together two elements of the Italian attitude towards the askari. The first one is the idea of the gift, something that came from a superior and honoured the subordinate as a reward or a gentle concession: in a system of *do ut des*, better and more appealing weapons, symbol of pride and warrior valour, were provided in exchange of obedience, reliability and proficiency during war. The second element is the increase of dedication and attachment with the officer that provided the weapons. He acted as a transfigured representation of the colonial government, he had

⁹⁶ Ibid., p.21

⁹⁷ Piccirilli, *Fra gli Ascari Eritrei*, cit., p.100

to be loved by the askari because he was the one who recognised and prized their valour, he was the one who really know them well.

Finally, I have to say something about another aspect of the askari's armament, which is their use of traditional sabers, swords and close quarter weapons. In fact Piccirilli often describes the askari wielding traditional blades instead of using bayonets: they carried and kept with great consideration daggers and curved scimitars called *scitol*, and sometimes even a small shield made of hippopotamus hide called *ualtà*. All these weapons were left to the askari by the Italian officers, even during a modern conflict like the invasion of Libya, apparently because “...we know that depriving them of the weapons would cause a real pain”⁹⁸ .

These weapons were regarded as symbol of prestige and power by the soldiers, like in the case of a shield inlaid with gold and silver, that was given as a gift to the Colony in 1908 by the Duchess of Aosta. The shield was given every year to the askari battalion that won the shooting competition, and paraded with pride during marches and even during battles⁹⁹ . It could be considered anachronistic and curious that the indigenous troops were left with such an old armament, but we have to remember that the Italian officers considered the askari extremely proficient in close combat. The Italians were not interested in denaturizing the warlike qualities of the askari, and the acceptance of swords and sabers was a tacit acknowledgment of their ability and willingness to use them.

Piccirilli tells about two events that illustrate the great and bloody use that the askari made of their blades. One time, his attendant Gheresghier Burru surprised a group of Bedouins and immediately rushed upon them; they fled, but Gheresghier was able to disarm one of them and “...drew the dagger he had on his side, he beheaded him with a single slash”¹⁰⁰ . After this fight he was lauded as a hero by his comrades. Swords were also interpreted as part of the excitable nature of the askari, always ready to spring into action. The other example referred by Piccirilli features as a protagonist an askari who went to the Arab market in Libya. During his stroll he was taunted by a Bedouin, who called him “slave” and “betrayed”: the soldier, without hesitation “...drew his dagger and, delivering a precise single blow, separated him in two parts in an instant”¹⁰¹ .

We can see from these anecdotes that the use of these weapons by the askari was also accepted because reinforced their image of bloodthirsty warriors, easy to enter the fray and start close combat with the enemy. The sword was a symbol of the ambivalence of the askari: for the Italians he was a

⁹⁸ Ibid., p.100

⁹⁹ Ibid., p.100

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p.45

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p.98

fantastic warrior and soldier, but a spark of savagery and backwardness has to be kept alive in him at any cost.

Sparkling uniform for the askari

To conclude my description of the “material constitution” of the askari, some words have to be spent in describing their uniform, an element that largely defines the model of the indigenous soldier. The uniform and the exterior appearance are described by my sources as fundamental for the askari, being in some case the materialisation of the evolutionary process that the soldier were passing through, under the Italian supervision.

An interesting example is given by Gamerra, when he tells of the motivation that pushed Mohamed-Idris to become a *bashi-bazouk* for the Italians. The future askari witnessed the march of the Anglo-Indian forces that attacked Theodore II at Maqdala¹⁰² and remained marvelled by “...*the British with their beautiful uniforms, and especially with their pounds ...*”¹⁰³; astonished by that parade of imperial power, he decided to find a way to have such a beautiful, and wealthy, uniform.

However, the first uniform that Mohamed-Idris was able to wear as a *bashi-bazouk* was not very impressive. Gamerra ironically describes the two *bashi-bazouk* attendants, including Mohamed-Idris, that he received in 1887:

“...*they introduced themselves dressed as required by the circumstances, in grand style, with a long white shirt that reached their knees, and with a pair of large white breeches. A wool belt with Scottish colour wrapped their hips, and on their head they had the traditional tarbusc.*”¹⁰⁴

Mohamed-Idris completed his distressing attire with a pair of “...*yellow slippers that had to date back to the Hijra...*”¹⁰⁵, with “*manners of a shambling boy*” and “*moves of a monkey*”¹⁰⁶. Even if this description is not very encouraging, it includes all the elements of the future regular uniform of the askari, first of all the *tarbusc*, a tall hat similar to a fez, the predominance of white in the clothes and the presence of colourful elements like belts and ribbons.

With the growth and the consolidation of the colony, and the consequent birth and improvement of the askari corps, regular soldiers like Mohamed-Idris changed radically in their appearance. Gamerra, after a period in Italy, met him again in 1892, and found a completely different soldier.

¹⁰² About Theodore II°, see Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991*, (Addis Ababa, 2001), pp.31-45

¹⁰³ Gamerra, *Fra Gli Ascari d'Italia*, cit., p.16

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.10

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pp.10-11

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p.64

He found Mohamed-Idris changed in behaviour and professionalism, but also in his dressing and posture; he was no more the badly dressed *bashi-bazouk*, but an elegant askari instead:

*“The long white shirt has left the place to an elegant zouave jacket, and the famous slippers have been substituted with a pair of brand new sandals. Aware of the importance and of the valour of his grade, he was serious and calm in each of his actions, insomuch as you could say about him: he is a beautiful and respectable buluk-bashi.”*¹⁰⁷

The elevation from the *bashi-bazouk* to the proud askari also passed through the institution of a regular uniform, which was intended to attract the imagination and the desires of the possible recruits.

The attire of the askari was another symbol, like the weapons, of the appreciation of the colonial government towards them. The Italians, according to Di Aichelburg, could have saved a lot of resources if they had not provided a regular uniform to all the askari; however they preferred to furnish their askari with clothes apt to strike deep in their imagination, especially giving each battalion a garish emblem. The askari seemed to grow attached to this distinctive feature, which *“...has influence on the Abyssinian fantasy and is translated in a continuous caress to their vanity”*¹⁰⁸.

This attraction and appreciation for the uniform evolved in great dedication and care, similar to what happened toward weapons: the colours of the battalion, the white shirt and trousers became a recognisable symbol of belonging. Again, the opinion of Di Aichelburg is remarkably precise, even if quite prejudicial:

*“Who have never lived with those troops cannot imagine how and how much the askari (who by nature is very dirty) cares for his pure white jacket, very short, for the trousers tight on the knee, and for the distinctive badge of his own unit or corps.”*¹⁰⁹

The idea of the Africans as easy impressionable children resurfaces, according to my sources: they looked for beautiful colours and clothes, they were vain and easy to be tempted and attracted by an elegant hat and some colourful stripes. They needed to be lured in recruitment with elegant uniforms, symbols of wealth and success.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p.64

¹⁰⁸ Di Aichelburg, *Gli Ascari d'Italia*, cit., p.20

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.20

How was the uniform of the askari composed? It is interesting to give a brief description of this attire. It was a reworked version of what the Italian officers found during their first contact with the *bashi-bazouk*. The colour white became the standard base for the uniform in 1893¹¹⁰, and the *tarbusc* remained the same of the old Egyptian soldiers, but it was provided with a bow, representing the colour of the battalion.

According to the official regulation of 1913, the uniform of the Eritrean indigenous infantryman comprised of a *tarbusc* made of red felt with coloured bow, a belt with the colours of the battalion, a jacket of white canvas, a khaki coat, a white shirt, a pair of white short trousers and a pair of khaki ones, while sandals were not provided and considered optional¹¹¹.

Of the ten askari battalions that Italy had in 1913, each had a different colour for the bow and the belt; from the first to the tenth, they wore red, blue, crimson, black, scottish/tartan, green, red and black, red and blue, red and white, blue and white respectively¹¹². To complete the pictures, the ranks were worn on the *tarbusc* and on the sleeves of the jacket, together with the specialisation and promotion badges¹¹³. All the costs of the uniforms and emblems were sustained by the colonial administration. A document from October 1915 reports the names, characteristics and expenses for the askari who embarked at Massaua for Libya: besides the basic equipment of haversacks, covers and canteens, the aforementioned *tarbusc*, shirt, and trousers were provided to these recruits¹¹⁴.

The *tarbusc* was regarded with great consideration and the askari spared no effort in caring for this beloved hat. Piccirilli for example affirms that a large group of askari on the march was surprised by a storm: the soldiers were not afraid of marching under the rain, but they put great efforts in covering and keeping dry their *tarbusc*, “...that they loved so much”¹¹⁵. The red hat, tall and sturdy with its coloured bow, represented a scenic element of the askari’s appearance, a signal that immediately identified who they were. This impressive appearance also became an alarm for those who were hasty to attack the askari.

Again Piccirilli tells us that the askari of the V° battalion, the green battalion, fought so heroically against the Libyans, that the enemies “...were afraid of just their sight and recognised them exactly from the colour of the bow over the *tarbusc*”¹¹⁶. The colonial device had produced a

¹¹⁰ Piccirilli, *Fra gli Ascari Eritrei*, cit., p. 27

¹¹¹ Ministero della Guerra, Comando del R. Corpo di Truppe coloniali di Eritrea, *Istruzione sulla Divisa e sull’Uniforme del R. Corpo di Truppe Coloniali di Eritrea*, (Roma, 1913), pp. 55-56

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p.56

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p.57

¹¹⁴ ASMAE, Archivio Eritrea, Envelope 694 “Pratiche Ascari”, Arruolamenti per la Libia fatti nel centro di ingaggio di Massaua, Nota nominativa per gli indigeni arruolati per la Libia, 28 ottobre 1915

¹¹⁵ Piccirilli, *Fra gli Ascari Eritrei*, cit., p.61

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.41

kind of soldier that was not only a fearless warrior, but was also able to strike fear in the hearts of his enemies by his appearance alone.

In this chapter I have shown how various elements were listed by the Italian officers as part of the identity of the askari: immaterial and material intermixed to create a colonial product able to answer precise necessities. The Italian officers were both the builders of this model and the judges of the results. Description and prescription were completely in their hands. The model of the askari was the litmus test of Italian colonialism, and this is why the officers in my sources were so interested in describing all the aspects of the military life of these soldiers. The askari they were creating was not just a mere man with a rifle and a uniform: he was the result of an elaborative and - in their opinion - evolutionary process they had undertaken to improve the reality of the colony, which in their mind was backward, but full of potential.

The next chapter is going to explore how the descriptive and prescriptive endeavour of the Italian officers was not only concentrated on the askari as a soldier, but completely embraced his life as a human being. The improvised anthropologists I have previously talked about had an entire world around the askari to describe, explore, and in the end regulate and transform.

Chapter three: beyond the uniform: the askari as a man

We have seen how all the aspects of the military life of the askari were described and catalogued by the Italian officers; they were telling their readers and the distant national audiences that in the colony they were able to manufacture, from raw local resources, a good soldier, faithful and efficient. However these indigenous soldiers also existed outside barracks and battles. This chapter is going to explore how the Italian officers described the askari identity including many elements that were not immediately related to the army. They lived daily with their askari, so they got in contact with them beyond the training in the shooting range and the marches. Their vocation of improvised ethnographers and anthropologists produced, together with reports of battles and eulogies of the askari, cross-sections of the cultural and material realities that revolved around the indigenous troops.

To explore this description, I am going to resort again to the devices of immaterial and material, but this time I am going to invert them: firstly the material elements, and then the immaterial ones. The reason is that the first are more abundant and more characterised compared to the latter. The objective here is to see how the Italian officers were including many exterior elements in the identity of the askari. I have said that he was not only made by valour and pride, but also by weapons and uniforms. Now I am going to show that the model of askari was also composed by religion, family, feelings, body structure and traditions.

The men under the uniform: body and “race”

The Italian officers showed particular interest in the physical structure of their black soldiers. Of course this could be explained with the military necessity of having men able to perform efficiently during war, but my sources in some cases show that this interest transcends the immediate needs of the army. Looking at the bodies of the Africans with a mix of curiosity and scientific thoroughness was not a novelty for Europeans, at least since the case of Sarah Baartman, the Hottentot Venus, who was paraded as an attraction around Europe in the first part of the XIX^o century¹¹⁷. My Italian officers did the same with their askari, with different degrees of accuracy and generalisation. They looked for a model of body structure typical to the askari, inscribing it in boundaries like race, geographical provenience and sometimes religious belonging. Race and body were considered

¹¹⁷ About the Hottentot Venus, see Sadiah Qureshi , Displaying Sarah Bartmaan, the “Hottentot Venus”, *History of Science*, vol. 42(2), (June,2004), pp. 233-257

indissolubly bounded, even though in my sources race takes on different and sometimes barely consistent meanings.

Gamerra is again the officer that applies the minimum degree of stereotypes and generalisation about the physical aspects of the askari. He describes many body types of askari, not restricting them in rigid definitions, but his attraction and dedication to the different features is always evident. We have already seen how he described the attire of the first *bashi-bazouk* he met. He also immediately pointed out their “racial” belonging and their physical structure. According to Gamerra, Mohamed-Osman and Mohamed-Idris were very different from each other. The first was part of a noble family, the Red Maria, “...*beautiful, delicate, with kind and refined manners*”; while our ex-slave Mohamed-Idris had “...*face features typical of the Sudanese race, was tall and robust, with legs lightly herculean, and his movements were more like those of a monkey than those of a man*”¹¹⁸.

Gamerra does not exceed in cataloguing and describing races and body, but sometimes he had interesting encounters with askari coming from all around East Africa. For example he describes Hassan-Fori, “...*a beautiful and young Somali, with a tall and slim figure, agile and swift like a leopard and a very elegant askari*”¹¹⁹. The characterisation of the askari as beautiful is often recurrent in Gamerra, and when the soldier was not physically attractive, he pointed it out without issue. This is the case of the askari Bakit that we have already encountered, a man of Arab origin, who was not very beautiful¹²⁰. Between the many askari he describes we can also find Habab and Tigray people, so men actually coming from the outside of the colony, and again Sudanese soldiers “...*of gigantic height and extremely brawny structure*”¹²¹.

What can be traced from these scarce but variegated descriptions of races, bodies and belonging, is that in the beginning, the askari corps was attracting men from many different places. What the officers of that time could find in the ranks was a colourful variety of bodies and types. This becomes extremely evident if we compare it with the other two sources, especially with Piccirilli. I am going to show that the range of bodies and races shrinks with time, but it acquires more characterisation and definition.

Di Aichelburg begins his dissertation about the askari literally disassembling the body of the soldier and describing each part he considers important. Like the medical commission that was entitled to examine the recruits and decide if they were suitable to become askari, he went through

¹¹⁸ Gamerra, *Fra Gli Ascari d'Italia, cit.*, p.12

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.105

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.108

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p.121

the physical features and geographical origins of the soldier. In his opinion, the indigenous soldiers, “...whichever the religion they belong to, made a strange and pleasant first impression”¹²².

His initial description of this first impression is peculiar, because it contains an entire set of striking opinions about the bodies of the askari; this initial sum of what the officer could find in Eritrea is not very positive, almost discouraging:

*“The defined contrast between the white of the cornea and the dark colour of the complexion is softened from the mobility characteristic of the eye; ready, of course, but sweet like those of someone that instill in it the desire of gaining generosity and favour. The voice has a peculiar timbre, caressing, almost feminine, broken by guttural aspirations that seem dull sobs; the way they walk is feminine, with the bust erected and with a light swinging of hips, paired with a customary slowness that reveal the atavic indolence of the race.”*¹²³

These indeed do not seem men suitable to become the professional soldiers that Italy craved so passionately. However Di Aichelburg was fully aware that exceptions existed, and immediately after this description, he starts to make some distinctions based on “race” and belonging.

In fact for example he describes the Abyssinian and Coptic askari as extremely skinny, thanks to “...their scarce nutriment and abuse of red pepper that they put without economy in any food”¹²⁴; they also often showed the signs of an excessive use of bloodletting and copious scars of syphilis. Only the Muslim askari, especially Somali, Beni Amer and Sudanese, are described with an excellent body structure, thanks to their better diet. This last element could be ascribed in a widespread tendency to look more positively at Muslim recruits.

What is very important is that if the bodies of the askari seemed they were not in the best shape, Di Aichelburg warns against being misled by their frail appearance, because sometimes there is more than meets the eye. In fact the commission appointed to see if the askari volunteers were physically valid, operated in two ways: “at sight” and “with facts”¹²⁵. Firstly, medical officers looked at the bodies of the recruits, but it was here they could mistake a thin askari for an unable soldier. To better analyse the potential of his body, the volunteer had to cover a course of sixty kilometers in less than eight hours. Di Aichelburg affirms that often volunteers discharged after the medical examination, showed to be worthy of recruitment by voluntarily submitting to the long march, sometimes proving to be incredible walkers, fast and resilient. Again this idea resurfaces,

¹²² Di Aichelburg, *Gli Ascari d'Italia*, cit., p.4

¹²³ Ibid., p.5

¹²⁴ Ibid., p.5

¹²⁵ Ibid., p.5

that only the Italian control and support could have shown the indigenous population how to use their natural qualities properly, literally putting them under stress tests to expose their skills.

Influenced by a large deterministic view, Di Aichelburg affirms that the resilience of the Abyssinian askari is the fruit of centuries of walking in the rough and tough environment of East Africa: here the villages were few and very distant from each other, the population scattered, the mountain reliefs irregular, and poverty so widespread that not many could afford to possess a horse or a mule.

Because of this, travelling by foot was the rule in Abyssinia for centuries, and this exercise “...contributed to preserve in these people the thin structure, making the obese an absolute rarity”¹²⁶. Gifted with natural thinness and resilience, the askari coming from Abyssinia could also count on their tendency to crouch on the ground, in the peculiar configuration I have described in the previous chapter. The Abyssinians were literally characterised by this tendency to crouch, and not only during battles, because “...they take it as soon as the reason or the need to stand ceases, and they keep themselves in that way for many hours to discuss, to eat and especially to rest properly”¹²⁷. Even if they could have terrible bodies, they possessed those natural qualities that make for good askari.

If we compare these descriptions with the words of Piccirilli, we will find no place for poor bodies and thin limbs. Instead this author is completely committed to the idealisation of the askari, as we can see from his first description of their appearance:

*“Quick, slim, with a good posture of his body, elegant in himself, with lineaments almost ephobic, with a colour between bronzed and the reddish (the Eritreans are offended by being called blacks: they want to be red), relatively moderated about drinking and eating...”*¹²⁸

The askari, with passing years and the tightening of the colonial grip, lost their physical negative connotations, became simply “Eritrean askari”, to such an extent that the skin tone became a clear distinction from the rest of the Africans.

Even though they were different from the other blacks, the askari were all very similar, affirms Piccirilli, and one method to distinguish one askari from another, is to rely on their “identification signs”, the scars that we have already found in Di Aichelburg’s narration. In this case, however, these scars are not given a negative connotation; rather, they are considered a normal part of the askari appearance and serve a purpose:

¹²⁶ Ibid., p.6

¹²⁷ Ibid., p.8

¹²⁸ Piccirilli, *Fra gli Ascari Eritrei*, cit., p.4

*“...faces and especially foreheads are covered by various scars, produced in cases of illness for the practice of bloodletting (they say to let the devil go outside); and the number or the position of those marks is used as a way to identify them.”*¹²⁹

Here we can see a shift of meaning of the scars and body features: for Di Aichelburg they were the signs of poor health conditions and endemic illness, while for Piccirilli the moral judgment about their appearance seems only reduced to a curious notation about the devil, and the scars serve to distinguish a soldier from another in a very practical way.

Bodies were a fundamental element of how the Italian officers looked at the askari, but as we have seen we cannot find a unique pattern in my sources. Instead we can trace, once again, an evolution in the appearance of the askari. On one hand we have the time when Gamera served in Africa, when askari were heterogeneous and very different in provenience and appearance, they came from all around the colony, and the “Eritrean askari” did not exist as a univocal definition. On the other hand we have the instances of Di Aichelburg and especially of Piccirilli, when the attention on the physical appearance of the askari grew and became more focused. For Di Aichelburg it seems that the miserable appearance of the askari was just another reminder of the hard work that the officers had to do to produce good soldiers from the valuable, but raw, local resources. The reason was that after the “closure of the colony”, local recruiters had to focus more on the local population and at least on those men coming from beyond the nearest border with Ethiopia/Abyssinia. The Italians were forced to not be picky when they arrived in Eritrea, and after the Martini administration they confirmed this tendency. Finally with Piccirilli the evolution is complete: the body of the askari, not black but bronze-red like an ancient statue, became a distinctive element to separate him from the rest of the Africans, with the help and direction of the Italian officers. The body was a label, and this case is more proof of the incredible utilitarian behaviours that the colonial military had in Africa, even after they temporarily lost their predominance.

How the body was cared for: medicine and pain

We have seen, in the case of bloodletting and illness, how the Italian officers were aware that their indigenous soldier came from realities characterised by poor health conditions. The relationship between medicine and pain is often present in my sources, in the form of anecdotes and description

¹²⁹ Ibid., p.111

of practices. Now I'm going to take these dimensions into consideration. The bodies that we have just described had an interesting aspect in common throughout all my sources: the askari had an incredible tolerance of pain, and that became often clear in the event of surgical operations on the battlefield.

Moving chronologically, in his heroic and romantic book, Gamera brings some examples of these physical resistance; one case is that of the askari Amtsa-Hassin who was wounded multiple time during the battle of Agordat, including a gunshot to the throat, but he remained steady and kept fighting. He was brought to the field hospital, where he had a comical talk with the doctor:

“Even if he was seriously wounded, insomuch as he was barely able to articulate some words, he did not lose the natural cheerfulness of his character, and to the doctor, who jokingly told him while he was medicating his throat, «Amtsa, now you have two mouths» he promptly replied «Captain, you are going to give me double rations».”¹³⁰

This was the askari, impassive and able to be in a merry mood even under strong medication. They seemed to be able to ignore the pain, remain faithful to their duty and fight to the finish. A similar situation was that of the indigenous artilleryman Acmed-Abubaker, appointed to carry ammunition at the battle of Adua:

“While, with a shell in his hands, he was waiting the moment to introduce it in the cannon, a musket ball hit him in the right arm, and him, without a shock that betrayed him, without emitting a single lament, kept holding the projectile, he looked at his officer, as he was asking him what to do, and only when he received the order to retreat, he left the shell and bandaged the wound.”¹³¹

These were the kind of askari that had to be raised as examples of the incredible reliability of the indigenous corps. If their fidelity as soldiers and their dedication to Italy were not enough, their ability to ignore pain and remain lucid even if wounded completed the picture of a great soldier, blessed by nature with steel nerves and “armoured” senses. Even though their steel constitutions were perhaps more a myth than a reality, it is interesting to see how this idea rooted deeply in the Italian mentality.

About the “painless” nature of the askari, Di Aichelburg again plays the role of the rational and cautious officer. He affirms indeed that many askari took on painful situations like wounds and

¹³⁰ Gamera, *Fra Gli Ascari d'Italia, cit.*, p.111

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p.123

tortures without fainting or lamenting, but he immediately reminds us that many Italian soldiers did the same, and that nobody ever asserted that “...*the Italian people, rather even the Latin people, are encased in hippopotamus hide*”¹³². According to Di Aichelburg, the real reasons of the askari resistance to pain, and especially that of the Abyssinians, were grounded more in moral and mental attitudes, than in physical bases:

*“The Abyssinian suffers but he does not show his suffering because,[...], an incommensurable haughtiness sustains him, reinforces him, suffocates in him any external expressions that could confess his weakness or could charge him of being an inferior man.”*¹³³

Again Di Aichelburg brings his opinion about the askari that is hardly balanced between disregard and a subtle appreciation for the effects that, in the end, the peculiar nature of the indigenous brought to the colonial army. The peculiarity of his account is that he reaffirms a subaltern position of the askari, who had nothing more special than the Italians apart from a massive pride; this pride pushed the askari beyond even extreme pain and suffering, so as to not betray the superb image that he, the other soldiers, the officers and even the population, had of him.

After this description of the askari’s body resilience, it is interesting to show how they were quite handy with improvised medicine, results of the mix between traditional medicine and the novelty brought by the Italians. The colony, according to Di Aichelburg, had an environment characterised by thorny vegetation, and splinters and thorns were everywhere. If the askari did not mind having scratches and wounds all over their bodies, a thorn under a foot could have been a disaster, considering that they used to always walk without sandals or shoes. No need to despair however, because “*the askari, when one of these misfortunes occurs, extracts a pair of tweezers and a needle of whom he is always furnished and he becomes his own surgeon*”¹³⁴.

For other emergencies and for the daily health care however the askari relied greatly upon the Italian officers. In fact the soldiers used to bring their families to the routine medical examinations, and asked always for sublimates (of potassium or sulfur, the sources do not specify) and quinine, largely used to disinfect the lesion of “...*the Celtic syphilis and for the widespread ophthalmia, or against the small fevers that rage in some places*”¹³⁵.

European medicine is shown to be an improvement brought by the colonizers, who arrived in a region where endemic illness ravaged the population. It seems that again this dynamic of the “gift

¹³² Di Aichelburg, *Gli Ascari d’Italia*, cit., p.8

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p.9

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.8

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.18

coming from the white man” is repeated, cementing the relationship between the askari and the officers. For example Di Aichelburg explains that one time, one of his askari was bitten by a snake, and that he tried to save the life of the soldier. When it became clear that the medication was useless, the officer realised that the rest of the soldiers, their families, serfs and civilians were looking at him:

*“Around the bed all the layabouts of the village and their women, all the women of the askari, their relatives and the serfs were clamoring and murmuring, looking at me with astonishment. I saw in those eyes the supplicant pray, the mute scolding and I felt in my soul the discouragement coming from the shaken trust and the wavering faith.”*¹³⁶

The “great Italian officer” was not able to save one of his soldiers, and the situation got worse when an old woman moved on to the agonising askari and covered his mouth and nose, ready to proclaim his death. This was too much for the Italian officer, who saw not only an intromission in his role of supreme supervisor of the askari, but also a threat for his authority and even his safety:

*“I saw in that action an insult to my suffering, an insult to the feeling of humanity that resides in the heart of a soldier of Italy and, pushed away the crone, I faced even more the responsibility of that death shouting «askari Uolde Mariam dying[sic] when I want!»”*¹³⁷

This reaffirmation of the centrality of Di Aichelburg, even in a delicate situation like the agony of a soldier, is a supreme example of what the Italian officers thought about the dependence relationship between them and the askari: if the officer had to also be the medic, as we have previously seen, he had to perform that role efficiently, and face all the responsibility and effects with maximum pride and authority. It seems that he obtained the desired results, because when the askari died, Di Aichelburg shouted “*You can cry now: Uolde Mariam is dead!*”, and the surrounding crowd exploded in grief and lamentations.

Regarding Piccirilli’s writing, the author repeats the idea of the complete trust that the askari had for the health officer, but he also points out the difficulty in convincing the soldier of the superior qualities of European medicine:

¹³⁶ Ibid., p.19

¹³⁷ Ibid., p.19. We found again the pidgin Italian, this time curiously used by a metropolitan officer.

“Usually it is practised by a health officer, in whom the askari put their blind and enlightened trust. However there are some of them that do not want to detach from their own habits, and they prefer to do according to the old beliefs, instead of following the advice and the prescriptions of the health officer.”¹³⁸

He tells the story of two askari: one preferred to deal with a large wound on his leg by covering it with dust and dirt coming from a church of the colony, renowned to administer miraculous healing; the other was affected by lymphadenitis, but even if the doctor told him to leave it growing a little more before operating, he preferred to cut it himself with a rusty blade, resulting in being hospitalised for months.

So resurges the pattern of the Italian officers’ necessity to deal with the nature of the askari - which they considered retrograde, still numbed by superstition - as well as with their impatience and their ignorance of the “modern medical” procedures. The “enlightened guide” of the Italian officers was there “just” to help them to improve their health and become even better soldiers. All this attention to the body and health of the askari certainly came from the interest in having an efficient colonial army, but is also interesting to see how it intertwined with deterministic ideas. The Italian officers were looking at the environment and at culture and religion, to find an explanation of why the askari were a certain way or behaved in another.

Askari: a good husband or not?

To go deeper in the daily material reality of the askari, I am going now to expose an element that recurs in my sources with a great degree of ambiguity and ambivalence: the relationship between askari and their families. This topic is important for two reasons: firstly because it shows how the askari were allowed to have their family and relatives with them during their service; secondly and most importantly because it shows the ethnographic interest of the officers in describing customs and manners of the indigenous soldiers. Moreover what I found during my research has been that this topic was described with large discrepancy between my sources.

Family does not seem to be one of the main concerns of the askari Mohamed-Idris for example. Gamerra in fact affirms that he married a Sudanese girl after the battle of Dogali. Unfortunately the merrymaking of the marriage went too far, and Mohamed-Idris ended up completely drunk, even though he was a faithful Muslim, and was unable to perform his military duties the days after. He was whipped by his officer and he lost his respectability. The curiosity of Gamerra about what

¹³⁸Piccirilli, *Fra gli Ascari Eritrei*, cit., p.107

really happened during the marriage works as a pretext to describe how people married in Abyssinia and how the askari viewed women.

In fact, instead of answering his officer's questions about the marriage, the Sudanese askari tells him to ask the other attendant, Mohamed-Osman, about the meaning of the sentence: "*The woman is for the man hyena or lioness*"¹³⁹. The phlegmatic and austere askari, firstly affirmed that he never had much experience with women and family affairs, then he linked these words to the traditional chant of the Bileni and the Maria people, affirming that for the first the woman is a hyena, and for the second, a lioness. The real meaning was however that the woman is always a threat, because:

*"...hyena or lioness, she always does harm and it is convenient to run away from her, even when she says that she loves, even when she gazes with the big wide open eyes of a gazelle that promises love and gives treachery and death."*¹⁴⁰

Mohamed-Osman continues describing how marriage works for the Maria, the Bileni and the Habab people, and Gamerra scrupulously reports these rituals. Most of these are centred on the new *tukul*, a hut, of the bride and groom, the discussion of the heritage and the dowry, and in particular a certain degree of the woman's submission. From this point of view it seems that the askari was not a family man, but rather more interested in war than in dealing with wives and relatives.

Confirmation of this attitude comes from when Mohamed-Idris returned to Massaua after the campaign of 1888 and he was unable to find his wife, whom he supposedly had left there. The good askari however seems to not be impressed at all:

*"Where the treacherous woman was gone, nobody was able to tell him; neither had he insisted too much to know it; and he comforted himself thinking that if the original cause of his misfortune was the wife, now, after the loss of her, the good fortune would have surely smiled again upon him."*¹⁴¹

Indeed, Mohamed-Idris blamed his wife and his desire for her as the reason why he lost his place and prestige as *bashi-bazouk* in Massaua, and had to find another occupation to remain in the army without the shame of punishment. The askari seemed to have not time for mundane affairs: they only craved war and pride.

The problem - if we can call it that - with Gamerra is that in this case he does not define a precise pattern or tendency. A peculiar case comes to mind, when, during a march of the askari to reach an

¹³⁹ Gamerra, *Fra Gli Ascari d'Italia, cit.*, p.26

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.27

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.45

advanced position Gamera spotted a woman following the column, looking for someone. He later discovered she was the young wife of one of the soldiers of the column, the Somali askari Hassan-Fori. The two rejoined with the authorisation of Gamera, and the woman started to follow the battalion. The officer describes a familiar and almost romantic scene, quite different from what the two Mohameds had told him:

“It was Hassan who firstly recognised her, and nodding to her he told me «Major, this is Fatma, my woman». [...] They two were spending the entire day laughing and joking, and also the moment of their separation, when the battalion left for Mai Megheltà, was very pleasant.”¹⁴²

Here we see that the case proposed by Gamera was completely different from the approach of the other two askari: here we have a happy couple that was able to spend time together even during the harsh times of war. Of course the fact that Gamera does not furnish us with the same background of the other two askari does not tell us much about this young couple, but rather shows us that there was no generalisation of askari behaviour regarding family.

Sometimes these behaviours surface in different setting, and imply that if the askari could also care for his family, there was something that he could have cared for even more: his role as a soldier of Italy. This is the case of the *buluk-bashi* Burrù aga Sechiel, a Tigrayan askari, who after the defeat of Amba Alagi, was dispatched with a little platoon to occupy an inaccessible amba. When the plateau was surrounded by the Abyssinian forces, he held his position against any menaces and demands to surrender. He remained faithful and steady even when the “treacherous” Abyssinian used a terrible expedient:

“...those chiefs resorted to the most terrible attempt, and one day they showed to Burrù his father, tied tightly and threatened with immediate death; but the fortitude and the iron will of Burrù did not fail, and instead that proud buluk-bashi, worthy of the heroic times of Sparta, declared to cut short any negotiation, that he would have never ceased the amba until when a single Italian would have been present in the colony.”¹⁴³

What could have been better than a soldier who completely disregarded his own father’s safety to remain faithful to his duty? The askari could resist any threat to his former family, because now, as

¹⁴² Ibid., pp.107-108

¹⁴³ Ibid., p.118

a new hero of the Thermopylae, he had a greater family to be faithful and committed to, a family made by Italy and the Colonial Government.

Gamerra is largely apologetic and celebratory of the colonial rhetoric, and he does not say too much about the real relationship between soldiers and their relatives and parents; but on the other hand it shows that the recruitment in the colonial army could create a detachment from the origins and the heritage, considering also that Burrù was from Tigray, not from the colonial domain.

To see a univocal and defined description of how the askari saw and interact with their families, we have to look again at Di Aichelburg, and again we are going to see a judgment that is anything but positive. In his opinion, the familiar relationships of the Abyssinian askari were dominated by a despicable morality:

“The young ones are born and grow with the only school of venality, idleness and abandonment. The filial love, around which revolves the life and the future of every human being, is to them completely unknown; nobody instills them in their soul because morality is unknown to the father and the mother; this last one, victim of secular pride, is condemned to be disdained for the entire life. The Abyssinian man despises the woman because the feeling of love seems to him a weakness, he does not want to appear petty.”¹⁴⁴

These words depict a civil life for the askari not characterised by familial warmth or a strong bond with his parents. Also, the woman is again considered more as a burden to avoid at all costs. We do not know how much of this picture about the Abyssinian customs is true, but if it is, we can include it in the more general and widespread disdain and prejudice against people coming from Ethiopia. They were of course needed to complete the recruitment of the askari battalions, given the small population of the colony, but they were perceived negatively, and this description seems to be the proof of a general aversion towards those who lived beyond the border.

The degree of ambiguity towards this topic reaches its peak if we confront what I have said until now with the words of Piccirilli, an officer who brings a completely opposite vision of the askari as a family man. The topic indeed appears quite late in his book, but it is interesting to see not only how he describes it positively, but also how some events affected his perception and his own feelings. For example, during a march, one of the askari came out of the ranks to meet an old woman who was waiting on the street. The two embraced and kissed, and Piccirilli remembers the event with touching words:

¹⁴⁴ Di Aichelburg, *Gli Ascari d'Italia*, cit., p.15

“I was looking at that moving scene, in those abandoned places, between those people described and considered barbaric and uncivilised. Another askari that was looking at me and was certainly observing my emotion, came closer and told me: «That one being his mother [sic], sir Lieutenant». Then the emotion grew in me; with difficulty I choked back tears; and my minds ran to my distant mom that certainly in that moment was thinking about me.”¹⁴⁵

The filial love demonstrated by the black soldier was so strong then the Italian officers found him touched on the inside and reminded of his distant mother: what Piccirilli is putting down here is that even if different, the Eritrean askari and the Italians both recognise as central the love and devotion for the mother. Quite an opposite approach compared to Di Aichelburg; here we have a clear demonstration of how the askari had great consideration for his family. This consideration and affection is even more stressed and glorified during the narration, if Piccirilli for example, affirms that *“nobody can imagine how much familial love and affection is rooted in those people”¹⁴⁶*.

The wives of the askari also seem to have enjoyed a higher degree of respect, because the black soldier could become very protective of his woman. She was something precious to be protected, because *“Sacred is for them the honour of their women: and who offends them will be in trouble! In that case any reaction is personal, because in them egoism and individualism are strongly felt”¹⁴⁷*. It seems that the askari’s wife enjoyed a higher respect and higher standard of life in comparison with the rest of the population.

“Unlike what happens to the rest of the population, the wife of the askari finds herself in a privileged condition, since she is not forced, as the Abyssinian woman, to the hard strain of the fields, but she just has to take care of the family, since it is the husband, that with his service, gains what is necessary to live.”¹⁴⁸

Living near the barracks in a nice *tukul*, with a small vegetable garden, enjoying all the benefits of her husband’s salary: the askari’s wife was indeed living a good life if we take the words of Piccirilli as truth. According to his view we can say that the familial love of the askari was proof that the Italians were recruiting good men besides good soldiers, men that had something in common with the officers, not just immoral brutes, as Di Aichelburg seems to have suggested. Moreover, the greater wealth coming from the colonization – or at least this is what Piccirilli seems

¹⁴⁵ Piccirilli, *Fra gli Ascari Eritrei*, cit., p.60

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p.63

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p.96

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p.102

to affirm - was also interesting the family of the askari, because they love their families so much that they want to bring them around their place of work, literally elevating them over the rest of the population.

We have seen that the different ways in which familial relationships are described by my sources do not allow us to trace an homogenous pattern; in this case, the evolutionary dimension seems unbalanced, starting from the various descriptions of Gamera, passing through the negative approach of Di Aichelburg, and ending with the pathetic and moving point of view of Piccirilli. What we can see here is the colonial attempt to generalise, force and close all the different elements of the colony in discernible closed boxes, where things remain exactly how they are described, symbols of the material qualities or the deficiencies of a “race”.

Now I am going to leave the “material dimension” and move on the “immaterial” one, focusing especially on two aspects: the sense of personal honour and the sense of religion.

The askari always guards his honour

When I was looking at the metaphysical dimension of the askari, one of the elements that often recurred is the idea that the askari always looked for rightful treatment of his honour. It seems that he always wanted his honourability recognised and respected, both by his companions and by the officers. This attention stretched outside the battlefield, and was an important element for the identity of the soldiers.

In this regard Gamera tells of a curious episode, regarding an old askari, Mabruc Adum, who was interested in being reaffirmed in the mobile artillery just before the battle of Adua. However, an Italian officer told him directly “*You are too old*”. The askari was incredibly offended by this assertion, but he did not give up, and obtained his objective. It was during the terrible days of Adua that his wounded pride resurfaced. He kept carrying ammunition and loading the guns under heavy fire, and when the officer who told him he was too old complimented his action, he responded with all his bruised self-regard:

“...but that expression – you are too old – dug in his soul, insomuch as he could never forgot it, and he remembered it to Caruso in the solemn and terrible moments that preceded the catastrophe of the indigenous brigade. [...] Lieutenant Caruso saw him and shout «Well done Mabruc!», but the Sudanese was not touched by that praise, and gazing at his officer he exclaimed in his own language «I am old, sir Lieutenant, I am old»”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Gamera, *Fra Gli Ascari d'Italia, cit.*, p.122

This episode shows how the askari perceived his pride as something that could never be called into question. A good askari remained the same for his entire life, and questioning this would have offended what he held most precious: his honour and his pride. No matter whether the Abyssinians were near to killing them all, the Italian officer had to always remember that the askari was prideful and jealous of his consideration.

Along with what we have seen until now, Di Aichelburg's judgment about the pride of the askari is not only negative, but vague and not deeply analysed. He generally says that the young Abyssinians that are going to be askari are characterised by a soul "*bugged by pride, by appearance and by the exaggerated egoism*"¹⁵⁰ that make them dream of weapons, honour and fame.

Piccirilli is not only more complimentary to the sense of honour and pride of the askari, but he is also very descriptive about them. A main component of their honour was the sense of justice, "*innate in the soul of the Eritrean askari*"¹⁵¹. This element is surely linked with what I have previously said about the strong bonds between the askari and the officers, but also covered the effects that could have on the practical life and self-perception of the soldier:

*"An act of injustice made against them, put them in the condition to believe they are under a persecution or to believe that they have lost the consideration of their superiors, losing all the prestige in the confrontations with the colleagues"*¹⁵²

In this way, justice played a fundamental part in the conservation of askari's pride and honour, and the soldier did anything to ensure this justice.

Piccirilli affirms that often the askari used an instrument called *abietto*, a form of strike among the ranks to show their officers that they regarded an unfair treatment. The *abietto* is not described as a real form of insubordination, but more as a visible way to show the discontent of the soldier: they could refuse, *en masse*, to present arms to a high officer; they could make loud demonstrations in the barracks or send the most prestigious of their officers to talk with the Italians. The askari had an instrument to assert their own rights, because those rights were part of their prideful nature.

A component of their honour that Piccirilli considers fundamental is the virile pride they always used to assert: the askari was a soldier and a manly man - nobody was to forget it. They could be extremely offended by misuse of their language, calling them by feminine names and terms instead of masculine:

¹⁵⁰Di Aichelburg, *Gli Ascari d'Italia*, cit., p.16

¹⁵¹Piccirilli, *Fra gli Ascari Eritrei*, cit., p.92

¹⁵²Ibid., p.93

“Talking to an askari conjugating the verbs with the –i desinence, used for women, instead of the desinence –a used for men (for example to ask – how are you?- to a woman you say: Chemèi allochì – while to a man you say Chemèi allocà), it means you seriously offended him, unleashing serious reactions.”¹⁵³

Piccirilli supports this assumption with a case of suicide that happened at Bengasi in 1917, where an askari shot himself because one of his comrades talked to him in front of everybody using the feminine desinences. In another situation, two askari fought because one called the other *uoldesebaiti*, “son of a woman”, a very offensive term¹⁵⁴.

The ASMAE archive holds a sad story that can be linked to the idea of the wounded virile pride. During the Libyan campaign, on the 22nd December 1921, the askari Taclamainot Alai killed his comrades and tent mate Uoldicet Adarà. The official report affirms that the motivation behind the homicide was a case of sexual violence:

“Taclamainot (the killer) waking up in the morning, noticed that his naked backside was wet: from this he supposed that during the night, when he was sleeping, Uoldicet Adarà (the victim), that was near, had abused of him. On the moment he said nothing, and for shame not even to his superiors, and he went regularly to work (stones carrier) with his tent mates as if nothing had happened. After his return however,[...], Taclamainot entered his tent, followed after a while by Uoldicet, whom, without saying anything, bended opposing his shoulders to grab some berberè. Taking advantage of this, and of the absence of the other askari companions, Taklamainot grabbed his rifle, loaded it swiftly, and shot point-blank at Uoldicet.”¹⁵⁵

Uoldicet died immediately, Taclamaiont confessed his crimes and he was referred to the Tripoli’s tribunal. Even though the documents do not say how he motivated his action, it is possible to conclude, according to what Piccirilli says, that Taclamaiont felt not only an abuse of his body perpetrated by his comrade, but also an unbearable offence to his status of askari masculinity.

I have tried to show how the Italian officers were interested in depicting the askari as extremely prideful and easily offended by any lack of respect for him: these characters were in part derived from their military role, but they are also described as part of their cultures, which were, according

¹⁵³ Ibid., p.96

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p.97

¹⁵⁵ ASMAE, Archivio Eritrea, Envelope (pacco) 903 “Eritrei in Italia Fascicoli Individuali”, Uccisione dell’ascari Uoldicet Adarà del X Eritreo, 29 Dicembre 1921

to my sources, naturally inscribed in their identity. For these reasons the officers had to respect and support their pride, sense of honour and masculine identity.

The gods of the soldier

The aspect I am going to describe now is related to the religious spirit of the askari and their commitment to their spiritual beliefs. The two religions of the askari that found the most focus in my sources are the Coptic Christianity and Islam. The pattern is the same one that I have described up to now: an anecdotic, ungeneralised narration by Gamerra, a critical and inconsiderate approach by Di Aichelburg, and in the end a specific, detailed and positive description by Piccirilli.

In fact, for Gamerra religion is more an identity element, like race or nationality, than a set of beliefs and values. However sometimes he charges religion with peculiar characteristic. This is the case of Mohamed-Idris that “...*being a good Muslim he did not warm up his blood*”¹⁵⁶. The Muslims were looked upon with great interest by the early Italian recruiters, because they were considered more reliable than the Coptics, and characterised by phlegm and fatalism that could make them steady soldiers. This fatalistic approach is also evident in the case of the askari Bakit, who during a march in Abyssinian visited the shrine of a Muslim saint along with another Islamic askari. The askari, being a faithful Muslim, left an offer in silver coins on the shrine, and Gamerra told him that such an offer was useless, because the Coptic Abyssinians would have robbed the shrine soon; Bakit however saw no real problems, because “... *he responded that, for his point of view, he had done a good deed and that he had not to worry if someone would have done something evil, robbing the saint Mohammed-Negasce*”¹⁵⁷. We can see that for Gamerra religion was a personal characteristic that influenced the disposition of the askari, making them calm and rarely uneasy.

Di Aichelburg does not give much information about the religiosity of the askari, instead linking spiritual facts to material ones. He often judges the religiosity under a moralist negative lens. One of the cases is when he, talking about the body of the Coptic askari, defines their belief as a “prudent religion”:

*“I said prudent religion because the Abyssinians, all very religious not for sincere belief but because they are superstitious, they obey the precepts and observe the fasting, that in the Coptic religion are, between fixed and mobile, the exact number of two hundred and forty at year!”*¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Gamerra, *Fra Gli Ascari d'Italia, cit.*, p.24

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.110

¹⁵⁸ Di Aichelburg, *Gli Askari d'Italia, cit.*, p.6

The askari were not only described as superstitious; their bodies were also influenced by their acceptance of religious rules that, in the words of Di Aichelburg, seem retrograde and insincere.

The authors add a venal connotation to the religious sentiment of the askari when he talks about punishment in the ranks. Usually the Italians used the *curbasc*, a long and flexible whip made of hippopotamus leather to administer justice upon the askari. This system was considered indigenous, the Italians only “...make it nobler, submitting it to a regime of opportunity, of justice, removing completely any abuse”. What is interesting is that this system could have different impact according to the religions of the askari, and sometimes a deduction of the salary was used as punishment. Whipping was very effective on the Coptic Christians, who:

“...would prefer to compensate the discipline with the other punishment, the reduction of the pay, punishment that, giving the Abyssinian venality would have not been preferred if, for sure, the whip would have not left a mark.

*For the Muslim instead the whipping does not have the same effect of the deduction of the pay that, cutting his revenues would force him to do sacrifices more and more humiliating, being him venal and excessively vicious. ”*¹⁵⁹

In this quite intricate passage, Di Aichelburg seems to believe that religion is ultimately more a matter of economy and pride than something spiritual: according to their belief the askari would switch between different ways of being punished, recognizing the pros and cons of each system. The words of Di Aichelburg seem to relegate the askari again in a dimension of backwardness and venal materialism that “called” for the Italians’ rational and enlightened intervention.

This approach is completely absent in Piccirilli, who instead shows the askari as genuinely religious and incredibly committed to beliefs and values. He dedicates an entire chapter of his book to “*The religious sentiment of the Eritrean Askari*” and uses this chapter to give us a description of their prayers, religious functions and beliefs. He was fully aware that the Eritrean askari were equally divided between Muslims and Coptic, and describes how they used to exercise their religious functions under the army:

*“The Muslims in fact take advantage of any moments of rest they could have, even during marches, to start their prayers pointed towards Orient, doing a combination of bows and genuflections and kissing the ground repeatedly.”*¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p.9

The Coptic are described as very faithful to their priests, called *casçi* and particularly devoted to their cross made of silver and wood, called *masçal*. The priests were so important for the askari that a large number were recruited to be shipped with the troops to Libya, something that, according to Piccirilli, was impossible to do for the Muslims, given the fact that they did not have “*real categories of priests*”¹⁶¹. To Piccirilli, the most important element of the religious dimension of the askari seems to be the great tolerance that reigned in the ranks:

*“In this way Muslims, Coptic Christians and also Catholics live together, the first in their different subdivisions. And between them you can see the biggest harmony and the biggest cordiality. They live completely in common [...]”*¹⁶²

We cannot deny to see in the words of Piccirilli an attempt to affirm that the communality coming from the life in the army was able to smooth out religious differences and create a climate of tolerance and conciliation: another achievement – even if we cannot be sure of its veracity - for the Italian officers and the colonial endeavour, was to be able to bring peace in the ranks by just respecting the genuine faith of the soldiers.

Finally, Piccirilli adds an element that seems to bring back the askari to an archaic dimension: he affirms in fact that “*who finds himself very uncomfortable in an Eritrean platoon is the askari that has the bad reputation of being a jinx (tabib)*”¹⁶³. A soldier like this was disregarded and pushed away by all the other askari: even though religious harmony was the rule between the soldiers, fragments of a superstitious and uncivilised past seemed to linger among the ranks.

In this chapter I have tried to describe how the Italian officers were fully aware that entire worlds existed outside the ranks of the askari: they knew the soldiers were made of flesh and blood; they knew they had familial heritages, traditions and religions; they knew they had values and feelings to be understood. The Italian officers perceived that all these elements had large impact on the identity of the askari, and for this reason they had to be described, catalogued and listed. The ultimate aim was to really understand the nature of the askari, to make it comprehensible and useful for the Italians’ interests.

¹⁶⁰ Piccirilli, *Fra gli Askari Eritrei*, cit., p.78

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.82

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p.86

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.111

What is interesting to glimpse again, as in the previous chapter, is not only the evolution of these descriptions and their tendency to become more homogeneous through time, but also the fact that the Italians were building models in those aspects of life that were not immediately linked to military necessities. It is almost possible, reading the words of my sources, to feel a sense of anxiety, an urge to make the colonial world, and especially the part of that world that fights for the Italians, more comprehensible, more “normal”: still distant and savage, but less so than the rest of the uncolonized world.

Conclusions

During my analysis I have tried to emphasise how the Italian officers built up a model for the askari soldiers. They drew from their experiences in Africa and from the “natural” sources that could have been found in the colony to create not only soldiers in the broad meaning of the word, but also men that would become part of that colonial society. Almost alone and outnumbered by their enemies, be they the Abyssinians or the Dervishes, Italian officers felt the pushing need to find instruments to fight their way in Africa and at the same time “domesticate” a world perceived as totally extraneous. To be victorious, or at least survive in a colonial endeavour that appeared doomed since the beginning, they first had to find local allies, and then create a discourse about them. This is what exactly happened with the askari.

Like plastic toy soldiers, the askari are built piece by piece in the memories of the Italian officers: peculiar arms to carry beloved weapons, swift legs to march without rest, colourful uniforms and hats to bolster pride, heads full of desire to fight and flamboyant honour. These were some of the elements I have previously exposed, which according to the Italian officers made the real askari, the real trusty and efficient indigenous soldier.

However this model is not univocal - not something that is a “given”, or taken as absolute and immutable. What is evident through my sources is that the askari was a creature under evolution and mutation, experiencing a process of manipulation and investigation by an external agency, the Italian colonizers, who changed its perception of the colonial reality over time. As I have tried to show, these changes in description and perspective are quite evident between my authors, following the historical events of the colonial world and the evolution in the perception of the askari.

The narrative and themes of Gamerra, the oldest of my sources, are full of nostalgia for the good old times, when the askari were friends, almost brothers in arms, and the future of the colony would have been bright if the Italians’ greed would have remained satisfied just by Eritrea. Di Aichelburg, as I have often stated, played the role of the rational and suspicious officer, who never fully agreed with all the praise for the askari: he was the incarnation of those officers who, from Martini’s era till the war in Libya, only observed the askari during training and recruitment, never on the battlefield, growing detached and dubious about the real stature of “super-humans” that wrapped the indigenous troops. It is with Piccirilli that the legend of the askari was finally reaffirmed: this author, writing during time of colonial awakening and Italian imperialism, seems to affirm that in

Africa the Italians found the perfect soldiers¹⁶⁴. Remembering the events of the conquest of Libya in a light far more positive than reality, Piccirilli gave the askari a bright place in colonial history. This place, however, was functional to affirming Italian superiority: all my sources agree that the askari possessed the embryo of the great soldier inside their souls and bodies, but the growth, the development, the complete realisation of this core could be achieved only under the supervision of the Italian colonizers.

The change in the approach toward the askari is not only in the form of the different attitudes of the authors, but is translated in the form of an evolutionary process that can be clearly traced in my sources. The askari under Gamerra were heterogeneous - Sudanese, Somali, Tigrayan - different men attracted by the new leases on life offered by the Italian colony; they participated to represent a fluid model of the askari. This model started to solidify at a certain point, aided by the changes in the colonial reality, and so the askari became more defined, more rigid in precise boundaries. The stress that Di Aichelburg puts on the Abyssinian composition of the askari is proof that the times were actually changing: the colony was becoming “dormant” and local recruiters had to rely on the Abyssinians from beyond the border. The result was a new pace in the creation of the model of the askari: human resources were now in small number and variety, but their descriptions, their inclusion in models and structures increased drastically. Finally the evolutionary process reached its apex with the birth of the “real Eritrean Askari”, described retrospectively by an enthusiastic Piccirilli. The model of the askari is officially proclaimed in the celebration of the Eritrean soldiers who fought in Libya. It has no more hesitations and discrepancies; it is exposed as the real and only way to be an askari, with his entire set of spiritual qualities and physical structures.

In this research, my aim was to describe how the Italians were trying, in an uncoordinated and sometimes contradictory way, to create their own personal martial races. They tried to transform the colonial reality, perceived initially as extremely dangerous and alien, into something understandable, domesticated and useful for the imperial project of Italy. As I have previously mentioned and demonstrated in my chapters, meticulous descriptions of the African men in the army were fundamental to the establishment of the martial model of the askari. These descriptions, operated by our improvised anthropologists and ethnographers, represented two aims created by the Italians: to completely embrace their colonial world with their minds and means, and also to create discourse for the indigenous, for the colonized, that could be legitimate and true only under their rule. The title of this thesis, “*the Eritrean askari believes to be the best soldiers in the world*”, is

¹⁶⁴ About askari during the late colonial period, see Alessandro Volterra. *Sudditi Coloniali: Ascari Eritrei 1935-1941*, (Milano, 2005)

comes directly, as a literal translation, from Piccirilli¹⁶⁵, an officer who firmly believed that the recruitment of the askari had been an “*endeavour of civilisation*”¹⁶⁶. Creating a model of a martial race, building the real askari was not only a self-indulgent certificate of the supposed progresses of Italian colonialism, but also a way to establish a reference model for who wanted to be part of it. In the minds of the Italian officers, it was a way to draw a line between a domesticated, trustful and secure “inside”, and a dangerous, treacherous and completely savage “outside”, and my sources, clearly not directed at the askari, were the manifestos of this kind of colonial operation. They included the way to decline a paradigm of imperial possessions that may have fed the Italian perception of the indigenous recruitment: these askari, these indigenous soldiers, were “their” Africans, Abyssinians, Eritreans, who felt the call of the Italians, while the rest, those who were not touched by the pompous and arrogant light of the Italians, remained in the darkness of savagery, where the Europeans used to relegate whoever was different - all the “others”.

In the end I would like to show two emblematic cases of how these distinctions and definitions of the models of the askari remained impressed somehow upon the minds of Italians, mixing with the difficult and troubled memory of the colonial era. In 1966 Paolo Caccia Dominioni, an Italian architect, adventurer, colonial and war veteran, freedom fighter and writer wrote a book about his experience with the indigenous troops during the invasion of Ethiopia of 1935: this book is titled *Askari K7*¹⁶⁷ and it includes many digressions and qualitative considerations about the indigenous troops, mixing admiration and friendship with nostalgia of the good old times, accompanied by elegant illustrations with romantic flavour. Almost ten years later, Antonio Giachi wrote *Truppe Coloniali Italiane: Tradizioni, Colori, Medaglie*¹⁶⁸, a catalogue of the uniforms, decorations and armament of all the indigenous soldiers Italy recruited in Africa. Although it was at that time one of the few of its kind, this work is far from being a serious historical approach to the matter of the askari, being instead a reprisal of old myths and stereotypes. The following words, about the Eritrean askari, seem to arrive directly from Di Aichelburg or Piccirilli:

*“In the indigenous troops the officers had to be primarily a chief in the most oriental and biblical meaning of the term, to indulge, contain and guide the simplicity, the pride, the egoism, the impulses and abilities of the primitives. He had, in other words, to be esteemed from the askari, who used to repeat to the younger officers «You staying my father and my mother [sic] »”*¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ Piccirilli, *Fra gli Ascari Eritrei*, cit., p.4

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.3

¹⁶⁷ Paolo Caccia Dominioni, *Ascari K7, 1935-1936*, (Milano, 1995)

¹⁶⁸ Antonio Giachi, *Truppe Coloniali Italiane: Tradizioni, Colori, Medaglie* (Firenze, 1977)

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.16

Even when decades passed and the Italians had actually buried their colonial past under a curtain of denial and myth, they still regarded the others, even “their faithful” askari, with false and arrogant stereotypes: on one hand, the good but unruly savages that had to be educated, and on the other, the benevolent Italian officer who looks upon them with the eye of a father. The mythical model of the askari was written in stone but left stranded and forgotten on distant shores; and there it lies, immovable and impenetrable, a granite colossus consisting of an entire load of misconceptions, colonial arrogance, heroism, economic interests and flaming red *tarbusc*.

Bibliography

Edited Primary sources

- Cesare Cesari, *Contributo alla Storia delle Truppe Indigene della Colonia Eritrea e della Somalia Italiana* (Città di Castello, 1913)
- Errardo Di Aichelburg, *Gli Ascari d'Italia*, from *Rivista Militare Italiana* (Roma, 1914)
- Giovanni Gamerra, *Fra gli Ascari d'Italia: i ricordi di Mohammed-Idris* (Bologna, 1899)
- Ministero della Guerra, *Istruzione sulla Divisa e sull'Uniforme del R. Corpo di Truppe Coloniali di Eritrea* (Roma, 1913)
- Tito Piccirilli, *Fra gli Ascari Eritrei: Ricordi dal Taccuino di un Coloniale* (Empoli, 1936)

Archives

- Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, Palazzo della Farnesina, Archivio Storico Diplomatico, Archivio Eritrea 1880-1945

Secondary literature.

Books

- Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, *Italian Colonialism*, (New York, 2005)
- Paolo Caccia Dominioni, *Ascari K7, 1935-1936*, (Milano, 1995)
- Antoine Champeaux, Éric Deroo, János Riesz, *Forces noires des puissances coloniales européennes : actes du colloque organisé les 24 et 25 janvier 2008 à Metz*, (Lavauzalle, 2009)
- Giorgio Candeloro, *Storia dell'Italia Moderna, Volume Quarto: Dalla Rivoluzione Nazionale all'Unità 1849-1860* (Milano, 1977)
- *Catalogue of the exhibition Ascari d'Eritrea. Volontari Eritrei nelle Forze Armate Italiane 1889-1941*, (Firenze, 2005)
- Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale I: dall'Unità alla Marcia su Roma* (Roma-Bari, 1976), *II: La Conquista dell'Impero* (Roma, 1979); *III: La Caduta dell'Impero* (Roma, 1982); *IV: Nostalgia delle Colonie* (Roma, 1984);
- Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia I: Tripoli Bel suol d'Amore* (Roma, 1986); *II: Dal Fascismo a Gheddafi* (Roma, 1986)
- Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani Brava Gente? Un Mito Duro a Morire*, (Vicenza, 2005)
- Nonno Ebe, *Fantasie e Concerti in A.O.*, (Milano, 1936)
- Antonio Giachi, *Truppe Coloniali Italiane: Tradizioni, Colori, Medaglie* (Firenze, 1977)

- Raffaele Girlando, *Marzo 1896- La Battaglia di Adua*, in *Immagini di Storia*, (Campobasso, 1996)
- John Gooch, *Army, State and Society on Italy, 1870-1915*, (Basingstoke, 1989)
- John Gooch, *The Unification of Italy*, (London, 1986)
- Edgar Holt, *Risorgimento: The Making of Italy 1815-1870*, (London, 1970);
- Victor Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind: European Attitude towards the outside world in the Imperial Age*, (Harmondsworth, 1972)
- Victor Kiernan, *Colonial Empires and Armies, 1815-1960*, (Stroud, 1998)
- David Killingray and David Omissi, *Guardians of empire: the armed forces of the colonial powers, c.1700-1965*, (Manchester, 1999)
- Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare: Storia dell'Espansione Coloniale Italiana*, (Bologna 2002)
- Nicola Labanca, *In Marcia Verso Adua*, (Torino, 1993)
- Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882-1941*, (Stockholm, 1987)
- Tomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa 1876-1912*, (New York, 1991),
- Patrizia Palumbo, *A place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from post-unification to the present*, (Berkeley, 2003)
- Marco Scardigli, *Il Braccio Indigeno: Ascari, Irregolari e Bande nella Conquista dell'Eritrea 1885-1911*, (Milano, 1996)
- Società Italiana di Storia Militare, *Quaderno 2001-2002: Militari Italiani in Africa per una storia sociale e culturale dell'espansione coloniale: atti del convegno di Firenze 12-14 Dicembre 2002*, by Nicola Labanca, (Napoli, 2004)
- Barbara Sorgoni, *Etnografia e colonialismo. L'Eritrea e l'Etiopia di Alberto Pollera 1873-1939*, (Torino, 2001)
- Alessandro Volterra. *Sudditi Coloniali: Ascari Eritrei 1935-1941*, (Milano, 2005)
- Massimo Zaccaria, *"Anch'io per la tua bandiera": il V battaglione ascari in missione sul fronte libico (1912)*, (Ravenna, 2012)
- Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1885-1991*, (Addis Ababa, 2001)

Articles

- Jacqueline Andall, Italian Colonialism: Historical Perspectives Introduction, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 8:3, (2003) pp.370-374
- Jacqueline Andall, Charles Burdett & Derek Duncan, Introduction, *Modern Italy*, 8:1 (2003), pp.5-7,

- Stephen C. Bruner, 'At Least So Long As We Are Talking About Marching, the Inferior Is Not the Black, It's the White': Italian Debate over the Use of Indigenous Troops in the Scramble for Africa, *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 44(1) 2014, pp.33–54
- Lionel Caplan, 'Bravest of the Brave': Representations of 'The Gurkha' in British Military Writings, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Jul., 1991), pp. 571-597
- R.A. Caulk , Firearms and Princely power in Ethiopia in the Nineteenth Century, *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (1972), pp. 609-630
- Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, From warrior to Urban Dwellers: Ascari and the Military Factor in the Urban Development of Colonial Eritrea, *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, Vol. 44, Cahier 175 (2004), pp. 533-574
- Philip Constable, The Marginalization of a Dalit Martial Race in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Western India, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (May, 2001), pp. 439-478
- Giuseppe Finaldi, Adowa and the Historiography of Italian colonialism, *Modern Italy*, 2:1 (1997), pp.90-98
- Fabienne Le Houérou, Les “Ascari” erythréens creatures de frontières, *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'Histoire*, No. 63 (Jul. - Sep., 1999), pp.17-22
- Joe Lunn, 'Les Races Guerrières': Racial Preconceptions in the French Military about West African Soldiers during the First World War, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 34, no. 4 (Oct., 1999), pp. 517-536
- Risto Marjomaa, The Martial Spirit: Yao Soldiers in British Service in Nyasaland (Malawi), 1895-1939, *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (2003), pp. 413-432
- Silvana Palma, The Seen, the Unseen, the Invented: Misrepresentations of African "Otherness" in the Making of a Colony. Eritrea, 1885-1896, *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, Vol. 45, Cahier 177 (2005), pp. 39-69
- Timothy H. Parsons, "Wakamba Warriors Are Soldiers of the Queen": The Evolution of the Kamba as a Martial Race, 1890-1970, *Ethnohistory*, vol. 46, no. 4, Warfare and Violence in Ethnohistorical Perspective (Autumn, 1999), pp. 671-701
- Sadiyah Qureshi , Displaying Sarah Bartmaan, the “Hottentot Venus”, *History of Science*, vol. 42(2), (June,2004), pp. 233-257
- Gavin Rand and Kim A. Wagner, Recruiting the “martial Races”: Identities and Military Service in Colonial India, *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 43, issues 3-4 (July 2012)

- Heather Streets, *Martial Races: the Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914* (Manchester 2004)
- James Walston, History and Memory of the Italian Concentration Camps, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Mar., 1997), pp. 169-183

Website

- http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Italian_empire_1940.PNG (consulted 17-01-2015)