La cultura scolastica coloniale: insegnare nelle scuole indigene in Libia

Colonial school culture: teaching in indigenous schools in Libya

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ABSTRACT

This essay reconstructs the school culture overseas by analysing the work carried out by teachers at the vocational school in Tripoli and the industrial school in Benghazi. The methodology used is inspired by the heuristic suggestions developed by Nóvoa (2009) to understand how synergies, or disconnections, operate between different discourses, languages, histories and times in creating new communities. The article aims to verify the presence of these hybrid spaces within colonial school culture. The objective, therefore, is to explore the oscillating relationship between repulsion and integration, functional to the regime's projects, that existed between Italian teachers and the colonial context in which they operated.

Questo contributo ricostruisce la cultura scolastica d'Oltremare analizzando l'opera prestata dagli insegnanti nella scuola di avviamento professionale di Tripoli e nella scuola industriale di Bengasi. La metodologia adoperata si ispira alle suggestioni euristiche sviluppate da Nóvoa (2009) per comprendere come agiscono le sinergie, ovvero le disconnessioni, operanti fra discorsi, lingue, storie e tempi diversi, nel creare comunità nuove. L'articolo intende verificare la presenza di questi spazi ibridi all'interno della cultura scolastica coloniale. L'obiettivo, dunque, è quello di approfondire il rapporto oscillante fra il polo della repulsione e quello dell'integrazione, funzionale ai progetti del regime, esistente fra i docenti italiani e il contesto coloniale nel quale operarono.

Keywords: Libya, colonialism, school culture, teachers, fascism

Parole chiave: Libia, colonialismo, cultura scolastica, insegnanti, fascismo

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1. Studies on colonial school culture: objectives and state of the art

In the diachronic reconstruction of the Italian school system, recent historical-educational literature has largely overlooked colonial education, a topic that continues to remain marginal within this field of study (Elia, 2025, p. 64).

In Italy, the heuristic suggestions from the XV ISCHE Conference in 1993 remain largely unaddressed. These suggestions could have inspired scholars to provide convincing answers, grounded in original archival sources, to the following questions:

> what was the educational policy of the 'motherland' in the colony and how was it reflected in the education offered? What educational processes were started among the autochthons through what channels? What educational effects ultimately resulted from the large-scale civilizing work? (Depaepe, 1995, p. 17).

Therefore, this intervention aims to contribute to the reconstruction of the teacher's role in the colonies, a topic that has long been neglected in educational historiography, which has instead concentrated more on the representation of the Overseas Territories in the metropolitan school curricula (Gabrielli, 2015). Hence, we agree with Labanca's written observations regarding the studies conducted on Italian overseas territories:

> however, the merit gained in developing these lines of research on the "mother country" with respect to the Empire [...] risks running aground when faced with the simple question: colonials, yes, but from which colonies? If the study of the "mother country" is not accompanied by a study of the overseas colonial societies, there is a danger of considering coloniality as an abstraction, something that is the same for all countries and for all times (2024, p. 41).

In terms of historical research, instead, this risk that ought to be avoided, and specific features originating from African contexts must be taken into account (Odugu, 2023, p. 221). The scientific literature on Italian overseas territories includes the papers by Palma (2007, pp. 211-238), Minuto (2020, pp. 699-713) and Yi (2025, pp. 9-30) on Eritrean schools; the essays on Italian educational policy during the interwar period (Pretelli, 2011, pp. 275-93), and those about the Horn of Africa (Siebetcheu, 2023, pp. 311-330) and the Mediterranean area (Montalbano, 2024; Pongiluppi, Serrao, 2024). However, there are fewer studies in this field than those relating to the narration of the colonies in Italy (Scalvedi, 2025, pp. 238-239).

The methodology used will be inspired by the guidelines formulated by Nóvoa "to understand how different discourses, languages, histories and times are connected, where they are disconnected, and how they ultimately create 'new' communities and societies" (2009, p. 818).

Hence, the aim of the research is to verify the possible presence of hybrid spaces that were created within colonial school culture. This contribution will attempt to offer an initial response regarding the relationship between Italian teachers and the colonial context in which they operated, a relationship that oscillated between repulsion and functional integration into the regime's projects.

Within these temporal-spatial continuities/discontinuities, it is crucial to understand whether teachers were able to navigate within an educational model based on *borrowing*, essentially the exportation of school rules proper of the metropolitan territory (Zedda, 2023, p. 3).

In particular, this analysis will examine the annual reports of schools in Tripoli and Benghazi open to indigenous students, with the purpose of understanding the specificities of a professional career pursued in the overseas territories, as well as the differing perceptions that teachers had of their roles in the colony compared to those in their home country.

The frustrated ambitions of teachers employed overseas, alongside the initiative shown by those who adapted more easily to the new context, proved fundamental in contributing to the formation of the local school culture. This can be defined as a set of *standards* that define the knowledge to be taught and the behaviours to be instilled, and *practices* that enable the transmission of this knowledge and the incorporation of these behaviours, norms and practices, ordered according to purposes that may vary depending

on the era (Julia, 1995, p. 354). Teachers were an integral part of school culture (Julia, 1996, pp. 119-147), being called upon to comply with these rules and "therefore, to implement educational measures designed to facilitate their application". Research conducted in this area, despite the success achieved over the last thirty years in the Italian sphere (Paciaroni, 2024, pp. 903-904), which has allowed scholars "to highlight the social dynamics [...] and the tangible teaching activities that constituted the actual school culture promoted by the teacher," (Andreassi, 2020, p. 262), have only marginally involved studies on overseas territories, as a consequence of the belated interest shown by historical-education research in colonial educational institutions (Elia, 2025, pp. 63-66).

The first Italian study on colonial education dates back to 1989, when the conference *Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana* was held in Rome. On that occasion, a report was presented which, confirming the suggestions of American historiography (De Marco, 1943; Appleton, 1979), supported the presence of an education system that aimed to assimilate the indigenous population. It was also stated that, at least until the advent of fascism, "the relationship between Italians and indigenous peoples oscillated between an explicit imperialist affirmation – the myth of white superiority – and recognition of the value of Muslim culture" (Ciampi, 1996, p. 690).

However, the main volume that explores the historical events of colonial education in Libya is the doctoral thesis of Francesca Di Pasquale entitled *La Scuola per l'impero: politiche educative per gli arabi di Libia in epoca fascista (1922-1940)* (2003), which should be read in order to reconstruct the historical evolution of the local school system. The same author has also written on the reconstruction of the events regarding teachers in Libya: although its approach is mainly based on political history, the essay highlights a premise which appears entirely reasonable, in light of the elements that will be analysed below: "overall, the relationship between the administration and teachers reveals the government's difficulty in managing the economic and social tensions that were unsettling the teaching staff in the colony" (2013, p. 120).

The scientific literature also includes a series of contributions dedicated to education in Libya during the years of Italian rule (Al-Tahir al-Jarari, 2000, pp. 61-74), examining the education of the Libyan elites during Western colonisation (Cresti, 2000, pp. 121-158), the coeval education received by Muslims (Di Pasquale, 2012, pp. 1-14; Younis, 2018, pp. 1-25) and the market for school textbooks adopted in the colonies – including Libya – which "aimed to erase pre- or anti-colonial loyalties and replace them with an Italy-centred imagined community" (Scalvedi, 2025, p. 237).

This analysis will rely on the study of unpublished archival sources, stored in the Ministry Fund of Italian Africa at the recently reorganized Central State Archive (Petraglia, 2022, pp. 1-8). The ability to access this documentation more easily has proven useful to overcome the traditional challenges posed by the incompleteness of sources in this field of study (Negash, 2005, p. 109).

2. The establishment of the role of colonial teachers

> An advanced sentinel of the distant homeland, he [the teacher] has renounced many habits of comfortable living, and must fulfil his mission with the same spirit as the soldier in the trenches. Above all, he must contribute to arousing in young people the cult of Italy and keeping its memory alive through the most varied difficulties, such as the composition of the school group, which differs in lineage, religion and language; the natural distrust of pupils, their prejudices and ill-will (Mininni Caracciolo, 1930, pp. 20-21).

This long quotation demonstrates quite clearly the role attributed by fascism to teachers working overseas: to become agents of nationalisation, without, however, activating those mechanisms of equalisation between Arab and Italian pupils that were considered undesirable, as will be seen below, by the Regime.

The representation of the ideal figure of the colonial teacher did not correspond to the real state of his condition.

In the Overseas Territories, in fact, the expectations of teachers, who came from the lower and middle classes, were inevitably destined to clash with the disappointment caused by a job that required a cultural and educational approach that differed from that adopted in Italy.

The first measure adopted by Italian liberal governments regarding colonial teachers was already in

place in 1920, when Royal Decree No. 68 of 4 January led to the establishment of the role of overseas teacher, stipulating that their appointment would be the responsibility of the Ministry of Colonies and no longer, as was previously the case, of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

One of the main critical issues of the aforementioned Royal Decree was the complete lack of attention paid to the training of teaching staff, who therefore remained unaware of the social and legal peculiarities of the colonies in which they would be working (Di Pasquale, 2003, p. 154). For this reason, a training course was established in the following school year to help colonial teachers learn a range of information, from comparative school legislation to general knowledge about Libya. The course, to be concluded with an exam, together with a two-year probationary period, as a prerequisite for the permanent employment of teachers (Piccioli, 1933, p. 1130), failed due to lack of funds. The situation remained precarious until the beginning of the following decade, even though the abolition of colonial role in 1924 had offered the Libyan government the opportunity to send teachers who were deemed unsuitable for their profession overseas back to Italy. It was not until 1933 that a teacher training college began operating in Tripoli, but it did not produce its first graduates until 1937, a few years before the end of Italian colonial rule (Cerbella, 1938, p. 45).

The training of indigenous teachers presented even more disconcerting features that revealed the failure of overseas education policies: however, this did not happen by chance, as it was the Italian government itself that had undermined the confidence of indigenous teachers, expressing concern about their supposed harmful actions against Italian interests, which were said to have been implemented through the spread of nationalist and pan-Islamic ideologies (Labanca, 2002, p. 337). In 1928, following the closure of Arab middle schools opened in 1922, only the vocational school in Benghazi remained active to train future teachers, although its objectives were mainly aimed at training professionals other than teachers. The other training channel, the Islamic High School in Tripoli, was inaugurated in 1936, and the first teachers graduated in 1940, the same year that Italy entered the war alongside Germany.

The introduction of compulsory examinations in 1928 to assess the skills and aptitude of Arab candidates for teaching positions made evident the real effects of the fascist government's lack of interest in the indigenous teaching body. In 1930, the first year in which these tests were held, only 22 of the 56 candidates passed (De Marco, 1943, pp. 63-65): "it was clear that the Arabs' lack of preparation was linked to a general cultural impoverishment of Libya's Muslim community caused by Italian education policy itself" (Di Pasquale, 2003, p. 157).

However, reconstructing the main stages and critical issues that characterised the training of the Italian and indigenous teaching staff in Libya provides only partial answers to the research question posed at the beginning of this article, namely understanding the complex relationships that developed in colonial schools between the colonised and the colonisers. It is, therefore, necessary to focus efforts on analysing certain archival sources that provide a better understanding of the complex conditions in which a "hybrid" school culture was being built, within which Italians and Libyans coexisted.

3. Analysis of archival sources: teachers between disappointment and integration

In the impossibility of examining the numerous reports, which refer mainly to primary schools, we wanted to identify a few specific case studies, relating to the Vocational Training School in Tripoli (Di Pasquale, 2007, pp. 399-428) and the Industrial School in Benghazi, among the few institutes with a similar character to the higher school reserved for metropolitan students. As mentioned above, the aetiology of this choice can be found not only in the attempt to define the areas of hybridisation in which colonial school culture was established, but also in the particular nature of these institutions. In addition to the previously highlighted characteristics, they also sought to satisfy the main objective pursued by the fascist government, namely the training of Libyans who were obedient to the Italian authorities and educated in a range of work activities useful to the colonisers (Palma, 2007, p. 231).

In the final report for the 1934-1935 school year addressed to the Superintendent of Schools of Tripolitania, the headmaster of the Tripoli School complained that "the poor educational performance of a large

number of pupils can be explained by the lack of necessary textbooks"[1], which can be attributed to the low socio-economic conditions of the families of origin.

A second reason was to be attributed to the teaching programmes, which were based on a set of cultural notions that, according to the director, "our pupils, heterogeneous elements of the lowest Italian, Muslim and Israelite classes, find it more difficult than elsewhere to grasp"[2], although it was believed that these difficulties would soon be overcome

> with the new reform recently approved by the Council of Ministers which, by establishing specialisation beginning in the first year of the course and reducing cultural subjects to a minimum, will tend to give maximum development to practical exercises in the various specialisations, for the best possible start for students in the professional field[3].

This quote highlights the fascist government's tendency to reduce the cultural aspect in favour of practical teaching:

> The new course, reduced to three years and approved in 1935, provided for a drastic cut in the number of hours devoted to theoretical courses: there were exactly two hours per week of general culture and four hours of mathematics, science and technology; on the other hand, the total number of hours devoted to practical exercises by all three classes rose to 34 per week (Di Pasquale, 2003, p. 131).

This is a very interesting point, which had already been anticipated by the Benghazi Industrial School, whose report will be presented later.

It confirms the fascist government's intention to favour vocational training over theoretical education based on the acquisition of general knowledge, which was reserved for Italian schools (Di Pasquale, 2007, p. 42).

A third reason, more interesting for the purposes of the research undertaken here, was to be found in "the unfamiliarity that the teachers in charge had in this first year of the new programmes and the pupils that attended the Secondary School of Advancement"[4]. In future years, the director hoped that the teaching staff could, with the experience gained, "refine and perfect the teaching methods so as to make them more suitable for this type of school"[5]. Confirming what has been observed regarding the expectations that teachers often vainly had regarding their professional commitment overseas, the director complained that:

> In this regard, it should be noted that the teaching staff from the middle schools, accustomed to dealing with pupils from a much higher social class, has been excessively strict in this first year in judging the conduct of the school's pupils, which has resulted in frequent disciplinary reports for minor and, I would say, natural failings in pupils who receive very little education in their own families[6].

The contemporary report compiled by the director of the Benghazi Industrial School, however, was very different. It emphasised the often overlooked importance of a teaching staff that was well integrated into local civil and political life, which testified – at least in this case and in relation to teachers of Italian origin – to their role as advance sentinels of their distant homeland.

This institute, founded in June 1919, aimed to introduce "young indigenous people to the most important local trades and to perfect the related crafts" (Di Pasquale, 2003, pp. 132-133).

The vocational school in Benghazi also trained a limited number of Libyan teachers, although the ed-

1 Central State Archives (henceforth CSA), Ministry of Italian Africa (henceforth MIA), Directorate General for Civil Affairs (henceforth DGCA), School Inspectorate Series (henceforth SIE), bundle (henceforth b.) 16, file (henceforth f.) 1: "Report of the Director of the Industrial School attached to the School of Arts and Crafts for the Superintendent of Schools of Tripolitania", undated [but post 1934].
2 Ivi, p. 2.
3 Ivi, pp. 2-3.
4 Ivi, p. 3.
5 *Ibidem*.
6 CSA, MIA, DGCA, SIE, b. 16, f. 1: "Report of the Director", cit., p. 4.

ucational objectives of this institution were not specifically aimed at this type of preparation, in fact it filled the same role as that previously exercised by the secondary schools.

In the "General Report on Educational and Disciplinary Progress"[7] of the A.S. 1934/35, it is noted that during that year there were the following sections: a secondary vocational school of the metropolitan type (with one section for men and one for women) and a three-year vocational course in handicrafts for Muslims (of a secondary nature).

According to the director, "the teaching staff showed themselves to be, on the whole, up to the task entrusted to them"[8].

It appears evident that the minor inconveniences highlighted during the school year depended, among other factors, on the teachers' greater integration into the public civic life of the colony, as confirmed by the absence of the teacher Giacalone Sestilio from the handicrafts course for Muslims, who "was absent from 26 to 30 October 1934 to participate, duly authorised, in the inauguration of the Casa del Mutilato in Tripoli, in his capacity as president of the indigenous mutilated of Cyrenaica"[9].

4. Conclusions: a hybrid school culture?

In conclusion, this intervention aims to assess the gap between the narrative of colonial school culture developed during Fascism – which still tended in the second post-war period to exalt the methods adopted by teachers, regarded as superior to those used by the English and Americans[10] – and the archival documentation produced in the 1930s.

These reports reveal the lack of a unified system, with two distinct levels: one aimed at subordinating the indigenous population to the needs of the motherland (Whitehead, 2005, p. 442), and the other, dedicated to the children of colonists, having an elitist character and focused on a literature-based education (Myers, Ramsey, Proctor, 2018, p. 680).

The research undertaken in this contribution has barely scratched the surface of the investigation needed to shed light on the school culture that developed in the Libyan colony during the Fascist era. However, some elements have already emerged that should be considered in future research: contacts between Italian and indigenous students, and between Italian and Arab teaching staff, favoured the development of a hybrid school culture in which a series of attitudes covering a wide range of orientations overlapped. These ranged from disappointment and resentment – because teachers were dissatisfied with a job that they considered unattractive in terms of financial gain and career prospects – to a greater ability to integrate into local cultural and political activities, which made their years of service in the colony more acceptable. Teachers in Libya thus remained a weak category, "far removed from the propagandised image of proud agents of civilisation" (Di Pasquale, 2013, p. 124).

The heuristic suggestions that have emerged in these pages will need to be addressed in future studies: in particular, it will be important to assess whether hybridisation survived in the second half of the 1930s, during the years of state racism (Del Boca, 1995, pp. 329-351), caused by the regime's racialist drift (Capristo, 2011, 243). An answer to this question may be found in the annual reports compiled by teachers and the management of the Muslim School in Tripoli (Cresti, 2000, pp. 149-150; 157-158; Younis, 2022, pp. 98-110), which was inaugurated during that phase and represented a fundamental turning point in the construction of a colonial school culture.

A heuristic approach inspired by the suggestions described above will also provide valuable support in understanding the relationships between teachers and students, both of whom are involved, albeit in different ways, in the black box of schooling (Braster, Grosvenor, del Mar del Pozo Andrés, 2011, pp. 16-17).

The importance of continuing studies on colonial school culture, with particular attention to the role

7 CSA, MIA, DGCA, SIE, b. 156, f. 1: "General Report on Academic and Disciplinary Progress (Article 12 of Royal Decree 30 April 1924, No. 965). Academic Year 1934-1935", November 7, 1935.

8 Ivi, p. 2.

9 *Ibidem*.

10 CSA, MIA, DGCA, SIE, b. 152, f. 1: "Introduction – School Policy and General Criteria Followed by Italy for the Education of Natives in Africa", undated [but post 1952].

played by teachers in overseas schools, can be understood in light of the need to emphasise the political project of fascism, which sought to limit "the education of the local population to only the initial levels of schooling: those sufficient to hold a subordinate position in society" (Deplano, Pes, 2024, p. 99).

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