

Educating in the shadow of colonial rule.  
Teaching nuns between care, instruction, and social responsibility

Educare all'ombra della colonia.  
Le suore-maestre tra cura, insegnamento e responsabilità sociale

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DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of female teachers in Italian schools in Eritrea during the colonial period, with a specific focus on the educational initiatives led by teaching nuns. The research demonstrates how these nuns performed a pioneering role in cultural and social mediation, navigating a complex dialectic between evangelical missions and the political-administrative requirements of the colonial context. Through the analysis of archival sources, the article reconstructs school life during this period. It contributes to a deeper understanding of the nexus between education, religion, and colonialism, highlighting how teaching nuns embodied the contradictions of an era marked by the entanglement of spiritual ideals and political interests.

### KEYWORDS

**Italian schools abroad, colonization, eritrea, catholic mission, teaching nuns.**  
**Scuole italiane all'estero, colonizzazione, eritrea, missione cattolica, suore-maestre.**

Il contributo analizza il ruolo delle maestre nelle scuole italiane dell'Eritrea durante il periodo coloniale, con particolare attenzione all'azione educativa promossa dalle suore-maestre. La ricerca mostra come le religiose abbiano svolto una funzione pionieristica di mediazione culturale e sociale, muovendosi in una dialettica complessa tra finalità evangelizzatrici ed esigenze politiche nella colonia. Attraverso l'analisi di fonti inedite, lo studio ricostruisce la vita scolastica del periodo considerato, presentando un contributo per una comprensione più profonda del rapporto tra educazione, religione e colonialismo evidenziando come le suore-maestre abbiano incarnato le contraddizioni di un'epoca segnata dalla commistione di ideali spirituali e interessi politici.

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## 1. Introduction

During the nineteenth century, missionary expansion both converged with and contested the dynamics of modern colonialism and the transformations brought about by the Industrial Revolution, thereby shaping a model of action no longer comparable to that of the fifteenth century (Prudhomme, 2007, pp. 68-69). This paradigmatic shift extended beyond institutional reconfiguration and significantly affected demographic and social dimensions. In particular, whereas women had historically constituted a marginal presence within missionary enterprises, by the end of the century this trend had reversed, and women came to represent the majority of the missionary workforce (Curtis, 2010, pp. 6-7). Missionary engagement opened unprecedented spaces of agency for religious women, gradually eroding entrenched ecclesiastical prejudices that had previously restricted their participation in transnational contexts (Loparco, 2008, pp. 64-65).

Within this renewed framework, missionary sisters constituted one of the earliest Italian female vanguards in colonial territories. Their congregations established themselves in the Horn of Africa in conjunction with the beginning of Italian expansion during the Liberal era, engaging extensively in the creation of sanitary stations, orphanages, and educational institutions (Di Barbora, 2015, p. 304). The presence of religious women in *missio ad gentes* contexts exceeded a merely auxiliary function in relation to priestly ministry. As Loparco (2002, p. 61) has observed, they possessed a distinctive capacity to enter the social and familial fabric of local communities, gaining access to relational spheres often inaccessible to male clergy. Through a “pedagogy of tenderness” grounded in proximity and care, the missionaries enacted a crucial form of cultural mediation, aimed at preparing the ground for subsequent direct evangelization.

Within the colonial context of Eritrea, the school institution consequently emerged as a privileged site of missionary activity. Education also acquired strategic relevance for the colonial government, which – after an initial phase of relative indifference toward indigenous schooling – gradually recognized the potential of the educational system as an instrument for inculcating national ideological values and for training a skilled labor force aligned with the economic requirements of the colony (Yi, 2025, *passim*). Notwithstanding the centrality of this function, the specific nature of missionary educational work and the concrete articulation of the activities undertaken by these women remain only partially explored within official historiography.

This study seeks to examine the role of missionary sisters within the school institutions of colonial Eritrea, with particular analytical attention devoted to the pedagogical practices promoted by the teaching nuns. The research draws upon largely unpublished archival materials preserved in the “Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri Italiani” (ASDMAE), “Archivio Centrale dello Stato” [ACS] and “Archivio Provinciale dei Cappuccini Lombardi” (APCL). Specific emphasis is placed on testimonial sources, reconstructed through a systematic examination of periodicals issued by the congregations of the Daughters of Saint Anne (Figlie di Sant’Anna) and the Pious Mothers of Nigrizia (Pie Madri della Nigrizia).

This study aims to move beyond a general description of the conditions of religious missionaries working in Eritrean schools during the period under examination, seeking instead to reconstruct the realities of school life and the pedagogical roles performed by sister-teachers. Its broader objective is to provide a more nuanced understanding the intersection between pedagogy, religion, and the colonial system, highlighting how the figure of the teaching nun embodied the inherent tensions of a historical season marked by the complex interplay between spiritual aspiration and political imperatives.

## 2. Religious mission, educational institutions, and colonial dynamics in Italian Eritrea

The establishment of Eritrea as an Italian colony, formally proclaimed in 1890, was preceded by intense missionary activity led by the Capuchins and the Daughters of Saint Anne, who had already settled in Assab in 1886 (Puglisi, 1953, pp. 70-71). This pioneering mission, promoted by the “Società Africana d’Italia” and authorized by “Propaganda Fide”, sought to combine evangelization with a broader civilizing mission in the region (Cordovani, 1997, p. 13). The missionary landscape gradually expanded with the arrival of the Pious Mothers of the Nigrizia in 1914, followed by the Brothers of the Christian Schools and the Ursuline Sisters of Gandino in 1938 (Puglisi, 1953, pp. 71-72). At the height of colonization, in 1940, the religious presence displayed a marked gender imbalance: alongside 67 male missionaries, there were as many as 261 religious sisters, confirming the preponderant role of the female component in Eritrea<sup>1</sup>.

Within the apostolic strategy, the school institution functioned as a fundamental catalyst for evangelization. It

1 Extract from the statistical report of the Apostolic Vicariate of Eritrea to the Sacred Congregation *pro Ecclesia Orientali*. Annual report from 30 June 1939 to 1 July 1940, in APCL, Sezione XIII, Cass. 01, fasc. 04, docc. 30. Typewritten manuscript signed by mons. Marinoni, Apostolic Vicar of Eritrea.

not only ensured direct interaction with local youth but also operated as a strategic relational node through which connections could be established with their families (Da Nembro, 1953, p. 177). This orientation was vigorously supported by Monsignor Camillo Carrara, Apostolic Vicar from 1911 to 1924, who advocated the establishment of a school in every predominantly Catholic village. In his view, each settlement was to be equipped not only with a place of worship but also with a school, conceived as an indispensable instrument for combating ignorance and superstition (Da Iseo, 1937, p. 95).

In accordance with this vision, a considerable number of religious sisters assumed responsibility for the management of confessional schools. At the same time, their activity extended to government institutions, compensating for the shortage of lay personnel that the colonial administration struggled to recruit. In 1923, the colonial authorities unified elementary education in government schools for Europeans and entrusted their administration to Daughters of Saint Anne, recognizing their established pedagogical expertise (Carini, La Cordara, 2014, p. 78). Similarly, in 1927, the Pious Mothers of the Nigrizia were selected to provide the teacher for the “Vittorio Emanuele III” school, intended for the local population (Fusari, 2016, p. 53).

During the early years of the colonial period, however, the pedagogical practices and teaching competencies of the nuns were subjected to severe criticism, particularly by the first civilian governor, Ferdinando Martini (Martini, [1946], pp. 164-165). The governor raised doubts not only regarding the sisters’ instructional abilities but also concerning the textbooks and teaching materials they adopted, implicitly questioning their capacity for critical discernment in the selection of pedagogical tools<sup>2</sup>. In defense of the sisters, Fedele Lampertico, president of the “Associazione Nazionale per Soccorrere i Missionari Italiani”, addressed a letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in which he emphasized that the congregation was not specifically devoted to teaching and that not all the sisters possessed formal academic training. Moreover, the criteria for missionary assignment required that educational qualifications be subordinated to physical resilience and moral integrity – qualities deemed essential for confronting the hazards of an unhealthy climate<sup>3</sup>.

Despite such adversities, the zeal, dedication, and commitment demonstrated by the nuns in their educational work are clearly documented in contemporary correspondence. These letters reveal not only the physical hardships of missionary life but also the complex challenges of linguistic and cultural mediation, for example:

It has now been a year since we arrived in this mission, and we have successively had several hundred indigenous children. We now have about sixty new ones, to whom we must teach the first elements of the Italian language and of civilization, and... it requires lungs of iron! Poor little ones, at first they look at us without understanding anything; but then, through effort, patience, and the help of God, something can be achieved... (Vita..., 1938, p. 131)<sup>4</sup>.

Their dedication fostered a warm reception among the local population. The case of Asmara is particularly illustrative: despite the coexistence of a secular government school and a confessional institution, pupils clearly favored the latter. In 1907, while 176 students were enrolled in the missionaries’ school, the government school recorded only 68, with attendance rates that were moreover irregular. According to the Government Regent’s analysis, this disparity was attributable to logistical and custodial factors. Unlike the secular institution, which required children to return home during breaks, the sisters ensured supervision and care throughout the entire school day<sup>5</sup>.

Despite their substantial commitment, most of the teaching nuns did not receive remuneration commensurate with their responsibilities and often worked without formal compensation. In the commissariat of Acchelè Guzai, for instance, no structured salary system existed for the schools in the region. Contemporary reports indicate that government support was limited to occasional subsidies ranging between 300 and 400 lire<sup>6</sup>. A similar practice prevailed in Assab, where the regional commissioner explicitly stated: “I am unaware of the conditions granted to the teachers; according to the Mission Superior, the sisters assigned to teaching have no special obligations and render their service *gratis et amore Dei*”<sup>7</sup>.

The living conditions and operational flexibility of the mission also merit attention. In its early phases, the sisters’ material circumstances were extremely precarious. Many adopted a mode of subsistence comparable to that of the local population, residing in *tukul* huts and adapting to indigenous dietary practices (La visita..., 1935, p.

2 Report by Ferdinando Martini, Massaua, 11 February 1898, in ASDMAE, EMAI, AE, b. 145. Signed manuscript.

3 Report no. 2230 by Fedele Lampertico to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Florence, 20 February 1899, in ASDMAE, EMAI, MAI I, p. 33/3. Signed manuscript.

4 My translation.

5 Report no. 17/8 by the Acting Governor of Eritrea to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Asmara, 5 January 1907, in ASDMAE, EMAI, MAI I, p. 33/3. Signed typescript.

6 Report by the Regional Commissioner of the Commissariat of Achelè Guzai, Adi Caieh, 14 October 1910, in ASDMAE, EMAI, MAI III, b. 37. Signed manuscript.

7 Report no. 1033 by the Regional Commissioner of the Commissariat of Assab to the Directorate of Civil Affairs, Assab, 22 October 1910, in ASDMAE, EMAI, MAI III, b. 37. Signed manuscript. My translation.

200). In locations such as Massawa and Assab, the harsh climatic conditions posed significant health risks, often making annual missionary rotation necessary<sup>8</sup>.

At the same time, chronic shortages of teaching personnel required the sisters to manage multiple grade levels simultaneously. A notable example is the elementary school in Massawa, where reports from 1909<sup>9</sup> and 1913<sup>10</sup> indicate that the entire five-grade cycle was entrusted to a single teacher, Sister Potamiena.

Moreover, the colonial context demanded a high degree of institutional adaptability. With the outbreak of war in 1935, such flexibility became essential: numerous schools were converted into hospital facilities, compelling teaching nuns to assume nursing responsibilities in the care of wounded soldiers (Dall'Eritrea..., 1935, p. 277).

### 3. Colonial education under Fascism

The rise of Fascism brought about a profound reconfiguration of colonial educational policy, formalized through the promulgation of D.G. no. 5226 of 8 April 1931 and, subsequently, following the proclamation of the Empire, R.D.L. no. 1737 of 24 July 1936 (Negash, 1987, p. 81). This legislative intervention was marked by a significant contraction of educational pathways available to the indigenous population, deliberately restricting provision to elementary literacy and low-level vocational training, designed to produce a labor force functional to the colonial productive apparatus.

At the same time, school curricula were supplemented with ideological directives aimed at glorifying the nation and the Duce, with the explicit intention of inculcating Fascist principles among local students (Palma, 2007, *passim*). Within this framework, missionary congregations were compelled to conform to the new regulatory and ideological orientations in order to ensure the continuity of their activities within the colony.

From an administrative standpoint, schools managed by or entrusted to congregations were placed under strict Fascist supervision, with authorities continuously monitoring their compliance with central directives. The nature and modalities of this inspection regime emerge clearly from the sisters' correspondence, which documents visits by state officials. One letter describes an inspection in Asmara: "The Royal School Superintendent, Prof. Carlo Gerevini, had arrived in Asmara. [...] He instructed that the lesson continue, examined several registers, and questioned the pupils about the syllabus covered – particularly its fascist components – and about the work they were carrying out" (A.D.U., 1939, p. 186)<sup>11</sup>. This account reveals that teaching activity was assessed not only on its pedagogical quality but also subjected to scrutiny for ideological conformity.

Particularly noteworthy are documents attesting to instances of open anti-Fascist dissent within certain religious communities. A significant episode occurred in Cheren, where some sisters opposed the entrance into church of young Italian girls wearing the Fascist uniform. The tension reached its peak during the celebration of *Corpus Domini*, when the sisters reproached the girls in uniform, asking whether they were "not ashamed to wear, before the Lord of Heaven, a disgraceful and immoral uniform"<sup>12</sup>. This conduct led to the outbreak of a bitter conflict with the local authorities. The deputy federal secretary, Augusto Barnabai, attributed such hostility to the lack of certified qualifications and formal diplomas among the missionaries, urging their replacement with lay personnel in order to ensure instruction fully aligned with the nationalist precepts of Fascism<sup>13</sup>.

This requirement for oversight found normative expression in R.D.L. no. 1737 of 24 September 1936 (art. 3), which required religious congregations to employ exclusively teacher certified in accordance with governmental criteria. The impact of this provision was both immediate and structural. The Congregation of the Daughters of Saint Anne, for example, was compelled to remove seventeen sisters from teaching duties because they lacked the formal qualifications required by the colonial administration<sup>14</sup>.

8 General and statistical report concerning the residences, typescript; first page missing; [n.p.], [n.d.], 1934, in APCL, Sez. XIII, Cass. 01, fasc.03, docc. 25. Typescript; Copy of the Report on the Mission in Eritrea sent by Fr. Egidio da Verano Brianza to the Minister General, Asmara, 14 February 1940, in APCL, Sez. XIII, Cass. 01, fasc. 04, docc. 32. Signed typescript.

9 Report no. 1847 by the Regional Commissioner of the Commissariat of Massawa to the Governor of the Colony of Eritrea, in ASDMAE, EMAI, MAI III, b. 37. Signed typescript.

10 Report no. 4174 by the Acting Regional Commissioner of the Commissariat of Massawa to the Directorate of Foreign Affairs of the Colony of Eritrea, Massawa, 27 November 1913, in ASDMAE, EMAI, MAI III, b. 37. Signed manuscript.

11 Translated by the author.

12 Translated by the author.

13 Copy of report, protocol no. 550 R., by Augusto Barnabai to the Secretary of the P.N.F., Asmara, 30 June 1931, in ACS, MAI, DG Affari Civili, IS, b. 161. Typescript.

14 Letter drafted by the Superior General of the "Daughter of St. Anne" to the Governor of Eritrea, Rome, 23 June 1936, in ACS, MAI, DG Affari Civili, IS, b. 161. Typescript.

## 4. Conclusion

The nuns' work fostered a profound proximity to the local population, establishing a privileged relationship with its female component. One of the most significant outcomes of their activity was the school integration of indigenous girls, who had until then been largely confined within the domestic sphere. Although a 1912 report by the Apostolic Vicar noted that Abyssinian girls showed little interest in education and remained in a condition of illiteracy<sup>15</sup>, by 1935 a reversal of this trend had occurred: in that year, 231 local female pupils were recorded (Ministero delle Colonie, 1935, pp. 33-34).

In the sisters' institutions, the girls not only acquired basic literacy and skills in domestic work, but also benefited from spaces of sociability and recreation under the guidance of the missionaries (Niccolini, 1937). The school thus functioned not merely as a site of instruction, but also as an environment of moral formation and regulated social interaction.

In parallel, for Italian immigrant youth, the presence of the sisters assumed a central role not only on the pedagogical level, but also in terms of identity formation. They functioned as centers of moral education and transmission of Catholic values, contributing decisively to the preservation and reinforcement of national identity within the colonial context.

The position of the missionary sisters, however, was characterized by a complex and at times strained balance between universal religious vocation and the political contingencies of the period. While their confessional identity oriented them toward charitable and evangelizing engagement with the indigenous population, they were simultaneously embedded within a colonial bureaucratic apparatus that imposed stringent regulatory constraints.

Convinced of their role as bearers of faith and civilization, the sisters sought to reconcile this tension through a deeply internalized sense of mission, interpreting hardships and sacrifices in spiritual terms. This dimension is clearly reflected in contemporary correspondence: "We work for the Lord and for Him alone; we know that He, the good Father, does not reward according to success, but according to the work accomplished and, above all, according to the love with which it is done; and we willingly renounce every earthly satisfaction, content with that which awaits us in Heaven" (Figlie della..., 1939, p. 110)<sup>16</sup>.

In conclusion, within the constraints of ecclesiastical obedience and colonial regulation, the sisters confronted environmental, logistical, and institutional challenges in pursuit of a mission they understood as vocational. Through their efforts, they made a substantial contribution to female education in Eritrea, while simultaneously reinforcing a symbolic model of religious maternity grounded in care, assistance, and moral guidance.

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