

Colonial Visual Culture and the Practice of Human Display in 19th Century Italy

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キーワード

イタリア、ヨーロッパ、植民地主義、視覚文化、内国博覧会、人間展示、人類館

Keywords

Italian Colonialism, Colonial Visual Culture, National Exhibition, European Colonialism, Human Display

Quadrante, No.21 (2019), pp.159-172.

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In Italy the practice of human display was introduced as part of the National Exhibitions in the last decades of 19th century and was strictly connected to colonial propaganda. The spectacular displays of African natives coming from the Italian colony entered in the visibility of colonial culture and contributed to the construction of a fictive image of Africans, in accordance with the tropes and stereotypes of colonial discourse. Transmedial representations of human displays will be at the focus of this investigation as part of colonial visual culture. From an art historical perspective, the intent is not to read these images as evidence of the historical events, but instead to emphasize their autonomy and intrinsic power, able to transfigure reality¹. In the last decades of 19th century, photographs together with illustrations were the main instrument of knowledge regarding Africa and the colonial conquest of its territories by European nations. Photographs from the African colony were widely circulated as postcards², but despite the supposed truthfulness of the photographic medium, for the representation of contemporary events, illustrations still played a key role and remained the dominant medium in the printed press³. The National exhibitions produced official posters and dedicated illustrated journals documenting the event. These journals, with their interplay between text and images, constitute a crucial set of documentation to reconstruct the visual and cultural memory generated by the exhibitions.

The public display of living humans has been an established practice in the Western world at least since classical antiquity. In the early modern period, European explorers brought people with them from the newly explored areas to be exhibited in courts and fairs. This practice exploded in the second half of the Nineteenth century, when living human exhibitions started to be controlled by entrepreneurs. Carl Hagenbeck (1844-1913) was a German

I am grateful to Rin Odawara and Naoko Seriu for their invitation to attend the workshop *Colonial Eyes on Indigenous Peoples: Discourses, Representations, Practices* (Tokyo, 18 January 2018) and to contribute to this publication project.

¹ Eric Michaud, *Histoire de l'Art. Une discipline à ses frontières*, Paris 2005, pp. 119-122.

² See: Luigi Goglia, *Nota sulla cartolina fotografica coloniale italiana critica della fotografia*. On Photography in the Italian colony see: Silvana Palma, *The Seen, the Unseen, the Invented: Misrepresentations of African "Otherness" in the Making of a Colony: Eritrea, 1885-1896*, in «Cahiers D'études Africaines», 2005. n. 45, 2005, pp. 39-69 and Massimo Zaccaria, *In posa per una più grande Italia. Considerazioni sulle prime immagini del colonialismo italiano, 1885-1898*, in *Eritrea 1885-1898. Nascita di una colonia attraverso i documenti e le fotografie di Antonio Gandolfi, Ledru Mauro e Federico Guarducci*, a cura di Maria Grazia Bollini, Bologna, Comune di Bologna, 2007, pp. 339-358.

³ Michele Giordano, *La stampa illustrata in Italia. Dalle Origini alla Grande Guerra*, Milano 1983, p. 87. On illustration in modern Italy see: Giorgio Bacci, *Le illustrazioni in Italia tra Otto e Novecento: libri a figure, dinamiche culturali e visive*, Firenze 2009.



businessman of exotic animals, but then in 1874 he organized the first major *Völkerschau* (Human Zoo) and proposed a reenactment of daily life in Lapland for a German audience, displaying Sami people in a fictive village characterized by their tents and everyday objects. Hagenbeck became a model for other businessmen to follow and presented his shows—that involved different populations considered ‘exotic’ or ‘primitive’—, in many cities of Europe as well as in the United States⁴. In Paris similar shows took place starting in 1877 in the zoologic garden, created for the acclimation of exotic animals. The poster advertising the spectacle of the Egyptian caravan at the *Jardin d’Acclimatation* in 1891 [Fig. 1] gives insight into the event, where people on display presented their purported everyday life, simulating battles or celebrations⁵. Natives were expected to become actors of a show embodying existing clichés and stereotypes, corresponding to the public’s expectation and to the fictive image that had been already fixed in their memory. Thus, these performances, firstly organized by single businessmen with commercial purposes, became a popular transnational phenomenon in the mass spectacular culture of the late Nineteenth century. This format also entered in the great Nineteenth and Twentieth century expositions and several European and non-European countries included living human exhibitions in National and International Exhibitions. They became an instrument of nationalist and colonialist propaganda, to legitimize the exploitation of African territories. In any case, European nations engaged in the ‘Scramble for Africa’⁶ had developed their national colonial discourses even before introducing human displays. A fictive image of African people had been spread through colonial practices, literature, political discourses and essays, popular narratives, and not least, with circulating images orienting the public opinion toward colonial conquest and exploitation.



Fig. 1: Poster of the spectacle of the Egyptian caravan at the *Jardin zoologique d’acclimatation* in Paris (1891)

1. The visual culture of Italian colonialism (1885-1896)

⁴ Hilke Thode-Arora, *Hagenbeck e le tournée europea: l’elaborazione dello zoo umano*, in *Zoo umani dalla Venere ottentotta ai reality show*, a cura di Sandrine Lemaire, Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, et alii, pp. 61-69.

⁵ William H. Schneider, *Le esposizioni etnografiche del Giardino zoologico d’acclimatazione*, in *Zoo umani dalla Venere ottentotta ai reality show*, a cura di Sandrine Lemaire, Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, et alii, Verona 2003, (*Zoos humains. De la vénus Hottentote aux réalités shows*, Paris 2002), pp. 70-79. *Exhibitions. L’invention du sauvage*, Catalogue de l’exhibition (Paris, Musée du quai Branly, 2011-2012) sous la dir. de Pascal Blanchard, Gilles Boëtsch, Nanette Jacomijn Snoep et alii, Paris 2011.

⁶ The expression refers to the occupation of African territories by Europeans powers between 1881-1914. Muriel Evelyn Chamberlain, *The scramble for Africa*, Hoboken-Florence, 2014 (London 1974).

In Italy, colonial discourse and the fictive depiction of African Otherness, played a key role in justifying and promoting the colonial undertaking, despite the heavy defeats suffered by the Italian army. Since the early Eighties, Italy had strived for the conquest of the territory of the Red Sea coast of Eritrea, in East Africa. This area was strategically important since after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 it had become a point of intersection between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean.

The Italian nation was politically unified in 1861, but more than twenty years later it was still firmly culturally divided by several dialects and strong economic disparities. However, internal conflicts and social crisis were channeled into the conquest of overseas territories. Dealing with social crisis such as the 'Questione meridionale'⁷, the government considered the conquest of new overseas lands as a possible solution for the phenomenon of emigration, as well as a strategy to bestow credibility on the new state in an international arena⁸. Immediately after the occupation of Massawa Harbor in Eritrea (1885), Italian soldiers tried to push into the interior, toward Ethiopia, but were firmly opposed by the Abyssinians, the local population. The undertaking was therefore marked by two Italian defeats: in the battles of Dogali, Eritrea, in 1887 and in the battle of Adua, Ethiopia, in 1896. Meanwhile, the first defeat in Dogali in 1887 fueled a strong anti-colonial opposition among the populace although, at the same time, encouraged the construction of a colonial epic based on fictive narratives and representations of battles that aimed at praising the heroism of Italian soldiers despite the defeat. Thus, colonial culture pervaded all social strata, and spread through journalistic writings and literature, civic speeches and religious sermons, as well as through monuments, paintings, sculptures, photographs and illustrations⁹. In the high culture, as well as in popular culture, the African population was categorized as 'inferior' in accordance with the racial hierarchy outlined by scientific racism. This belief legitimized colonial politics and presented the occupation as a civilizing mission.

This is a recurring concept in *Guerra d'Africa*¹⁰, a series printed by the publisher Edoardo Perino in 150 illustrated instalments, narrating the ongoing Italian undertaking and colonial battles, together with stories and erotic anecdotes involving Abyssinian women set in the occupied territories. The publication was widely successful, not just because of the low price, but also because the visual narrative developed through the several instalments was accessible to a popular audience, including people who were not able to read. One of the instalments presents an illustration entitled *Civiltà e Barbarie* (Civilization and Barbarism) [Fig. 2], depicting a young half-naked African woman who is about to be liberated from the chains of slavery by an Italian soldier. Configuring a dichotomic and asymmetrical relationship, the image legitimized Italian colonialism as a civilizing mission.

⁷ See: *Italy's 'Southern Question': Orientalism in One Country*, edited by Jane Schneider, Oxford-New York 1998.

⁸ On Italian colonialism in Nineteenth century see: Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare: storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana*, Bologna 2002, pp. 15-94 and Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, 4 voll., I. *Dall'unità alla marcia su Roma*, Milano, Mondadori, 1999 (Roma, Laterza, 1976). On a postcolonial reading of Italian colonialism see: *Italian colonialism*, edited by Ruth Ben-Ghiat e Mia Fuller, New York 2005; *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory* edited by Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan, Oxford; New York 2005.

⁹ Regarding colonial culture in Italy, see Alessandro Triulzi, *La costruzione dell'immagine dell'Africa e degli africani nell'Italia coloniale, in Nel nome della razza. Il razzismo nella storia d'Italia 1870-1945*, a cura di Alberto Burgio, Bologna 1999, 165-81; and Giuseppe Finaldi, *Italian national identity in the scramble for Africa: Italy's African wars in the era of nation-building, 1870-1900*, Bern-New York 2009. On colonial visual culture see: Carmen Belmonte, *Arte e colonialismo in Italia tra Otto e Novecento. Dinamiche politiche e strategie visive nella prima Guerra d'Africa*, Tesi di dottorato, Università di Udine, 2017.

¹⁰ Giuseppe Piccinini, *Guerra D'Africa*, Rome 1887-88.

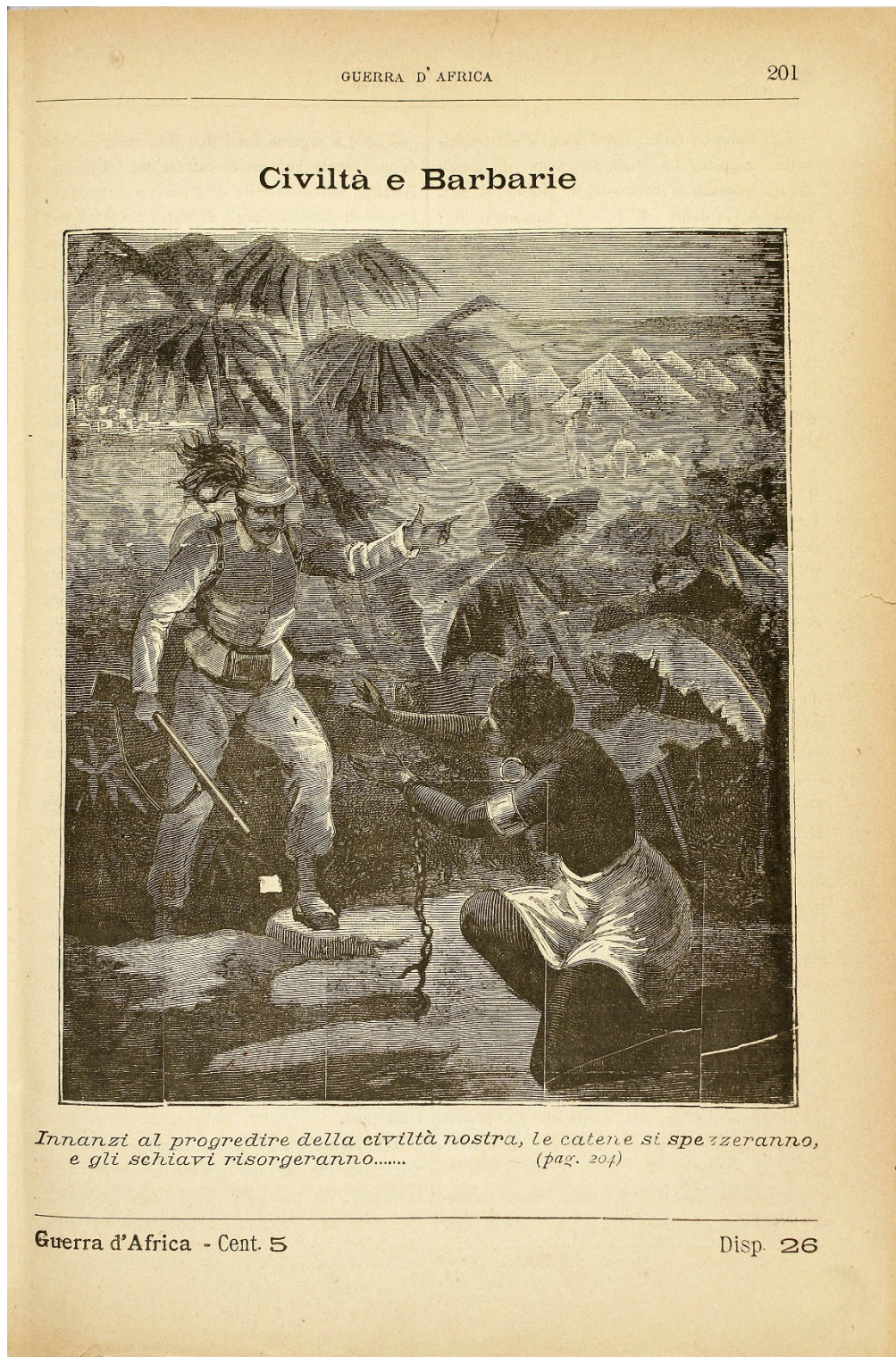


Fig. 2: *Civiltà e Barbarie* (Civilization and Barbarism), in Giuseppe Piccinini, *Guerra d'Africa*, Roma, Perino, 1887-1888, disp. 26.

The discourse concerning Abyssinian women was strictly linked to colonial propaganda that established a comparison between the possession of the female body and the conquests of the African lands. In addition, the depiction of the Abyssinian woman inaugurated a colonial practice that acquired a more complex meaning. After the occupation, the production of pornographic images, censored in Italy since 1861, was transferred to the colony, where a new

freedom in shooting erotic images was permitted. This practice enhanced one of the main *topoi* of Italian imagination: the idea of the purported ‘innate’ sexual availability of the Abyssinian woman, already disseminated by exotic literature. The most recurring depictions feature an alluring sensuality of which the Abyssinian women were almost certainly not aware, judging by their lost gazes. Their bodies are fixed in conventional poses and gestures probably imposed by photographers and inspired by the Italian artistic tradition and the iconographies of the Orientalist painting¹¹. On the other hand, Abyssinian men were represented as the stereotyped image of a cruel enemy. They were caught in rigid, unnatural poses, as fierce warriors and armed with rudimental weapons, such as shields and spears. These circulating photographs were the first ‘real’ representations of indigenous people seen in Italy¹².

2. A Human Display at the National Exhibition of Palermo (1891-1892)

The public display of a group of natives from the colony set in fictive villages as part of the National Exhibitions offered to the Western audience the possibility to meet the supposed fierce warriors and seductive women already imagined through photographs and illustrations. The exhibitions permitted a close, but ‘safe’, observation of their bodies, voices and gestures. The practice of display of human beings acquired by these national and international events re-elaborated the format of Human Zoos in a more complex and polisemantic structure, organized within villages reproducing African landscapes. The purpose went beyond the entertainment and the spectacularization of Otherness. In addition, during the time of the exhibitions (which usually went on for many months) several figures—public authorities, entrepreneurs, spectators, journalist, and not least, the subjects of display—played a relevant, and sometimes unpredictable, role¹³. In Nineteenth century Italy, the most relevant example of display of living human beings was organized as part of the national exhibition held between 1891 and 1892 in Palermo, Sicily¹⁴. It was the first exhibition ever organized in Southern Italy.

The format of 19th century national exhibitions has been defined as ‘meta-media’, since it was one of most relevant means of mass communication incorporating many other communicative technologies and media¹⁵. These events produced a pervading visuality through several networks of images, originating and spreading inside and outside the exhibition. They were visited by a large number of people from different social classes, but they also had a wide echo in the press. The exhibition of Palermo produced a number of publications such as a guide of the exhibition and of Palermo, posters, and flyers. Two of the main Italian publishing houses at the time, Sonzogno and Treves, both dedicated an illustrated journal to the event, printed in several instalments for the entire duration of the exhibition¹⁶. These official journals led the gaze of the public and produced a nationalist narrative based on colonial ambitions and alleged racial hierarchies. Through a critical reading of the official journals that documented the exhibition in an interplay of images and text, I will examine the practice of human display, the visual and cultural dynamics of the event,

¹¹ Silvana Palma, *Fotografia di una colonia: l'Eritrea Di Luigi Naretti (1885-1900)*, in *La colonia: italiani in Eritrea*, «Quaderni storici», Vol. 37, n. 109, 2002, pp. 83-147: 100-105.

¹² Silvana Palma, *The Seen, the Unseen, the Invented: Misrepresentations of African “Otherness” in the Making of a Colony: Eritrea, 1885-1896*, in «Cahiers D’études Africaines», 2005. n. 45, 2005, pp. 39-69.

¹³ Guido Abbattista, *Beyond the ‘Human Zoos’. Exoticism, Ethnic Exhibitions and the Power of the Gaze*, in *Esposizioni Universali in Europa. Attori, pubblici, memorie tra metropoli e colonie, 1851-1939*, a cura di Giovanni Luigi Fontana e Anna Pellegrino, in «Ricerche storiche». XLV, 2015, pp. 207-218: 211. On human display in modern Italy see Guido Abbattista, *Umanità in mostra: esposizioni etniche e invenzioni esotiche in Italia (1880-1940)*, Trieste 2013, and specifically on the Palermo’s Exhibition: pp. 193-199.

¹⁴ On the promotion, the concept, and the organization of the National Exhibition of Palermo see Mariantonietta Picone Petrusa, “1891-’92, Palermo, Esposizione Nazionale”, in: *Le grandi esposizioni in Italia 1861-1911: la competizione culturale con l’Europa e la ricerca dello stile nazionale*, ed. by eadem/Maria Rosaria Pessolano/Ada Bianco, Naples 1988, pp. 96-99. See also the entry on Palermo’s Exhibition by Chiara Marin, in *Esporre l’Italia coloniale. Interpretazioni dell’alterità*, Padova 2017, pp. 119-120.

¹⁵ Alexander C. T. Geppert, *Fleeting Cities: Imperial Expositions in fin-de-siècle Europe*, Basingstoke 2010, pp. 1-15.

¹⁶ The Treves’s journal was entitled *Palermo e l’Esposizione nazionale del 1891-92: cronaca illustrata* (Milan 1892); Sonzogno published the journal *L’Esposizione nazionale illustrata di Palermo 1891-92* (Milan 1892)

and its reception in Italy.

The event in Palermo was held between November 15th, 1891 and June 5th, 1892. To host the exhibition the architect Ernesto Basile designed a monumental ephemeral architectural complex in a site that at the time was included in a peripheral area, where the city was expanding [Fig.3]¹⁷. The architectural project evoked Sicily's historical connection with other Mediterranean cultures and provided testimony for the early presence of Islamic culture on the island, still evident in the cultural heritage of the region. The several pavilions proposed a systematization of knowledge and of modern technological progress in agriculture, science and modern industry, displaying raw materials, machines and technical instruments as well as models reproducing the most relevant example of cultural heritage and a section of contemporary artistic production. The pavilion of the *Società Geografica Italiana* offered wide photographic documentation of Italian exploration in Africa as well as objects and maps of the explored territories.

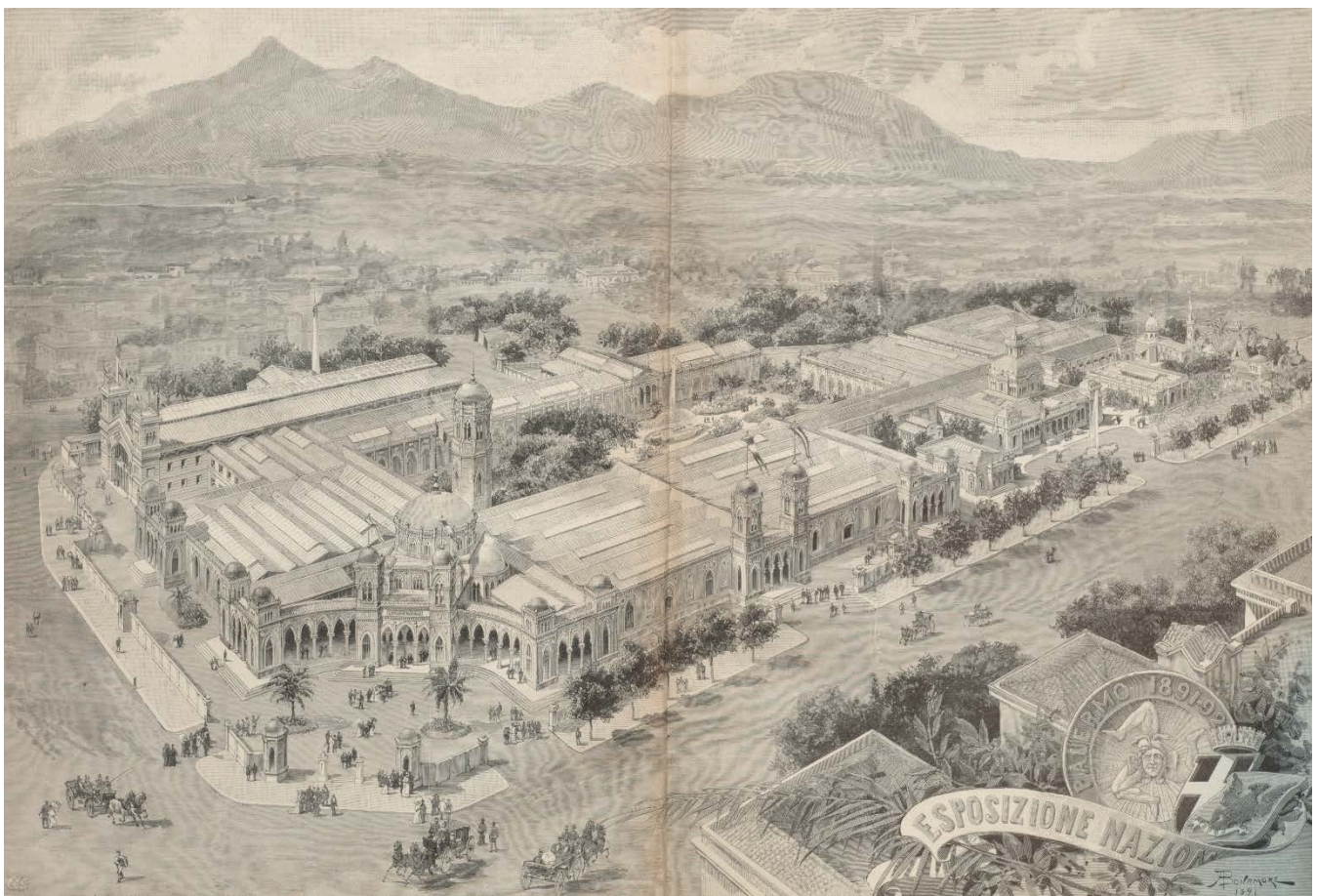


Fig. 3: Panorama of the National Exhibition of Palermo, 1891-1892 (reproduced in *L'Esposizione Nazionale Illustrata di Palermo 1891-1892*, Milano, Sonzogno, 1892).

The display of native people was arranged as part of a specific exhibition entitled *Mostra Eritrea*. It was set in one of the gardens of the exhibition complex, where a fictive village delimited by a fence aimed to reproduce the natural landscape of the colony including several specimens of both the fauna and vegetation imported from East Africa,

¹⁷ The exhibition complex was built along Viale della Libertà, between Piazza Crispi and Piazza Castelnuovo. See: Fabrizio Agnello/Mariangela Licari, "La ricostruzione della città perduta: l'Esposizione Nazionale di Palermo (1891-1892)", in: *La ricostruzione congetturale dell'architettura: storia, metodi, esperienze applicative*, ed. by Nunzio Marsiglia, Palermo 2013, pp. 145-164: 145.

just outside the pavilions celebrating Italian progress and modernity. The human exhibition of the 65 African natives coming from different sites of East Africa was the major attraction of the exhibition. The heterogeneous group of Abyssinians included representatives of different professions, expertise, and social status: a priest, a painter, but also musicians, artisans, and some warriors, accompanied by their relatives and servants. They consisted of sixteen family groups, ten of them Christians and the other ones Muslims. Marcello Gallareto (1853-1922)¹⁸ a journalist and special correspondent from Africa selected and gathered the group to be displayed in the *Mostra Eritrea*¹⁹. To move to Palermo and be part of the exhibition they were offered a daily wage and the organizers asked them to build in the garden a number of *tukuls*, their traditional architecture, and an Abyssinian church²⁰. They remained in Italy for several months, always wearing just their traditional clothes, even during the winter, when they even experienced snow in Palermo.

The exhibition was organized by politicians, military figures, and journalists, who for different reasons had experienced life in East Africa, including the politician Leopoldo Franchetti. No anthropologists or ethnologists were involved in the event. These disciplines were not yet involved in the praxis of Italian colonial policy and their study and expertise were confined to academic research²¹.

However, Sonzogno's official journal published, as a representative illustration of the village and of its inhabitants, a composition of 18 panels in which the Abyssinians appear in small groups in front of their tukuls according to their occupation or belonging to a family unit [Fig. 5]. The illustrations are drawn from photographs and the grammar of representation is as same as the one adopted in these years by anthropological photography, revealing rigid and stereotyped poses, due to the long exposure times of the medium. The journal together with the illustration also published a detailed catalogue of their profiles: the heads of the families were listed with their names and place of birth, registering their skills and crafts, and the presence of their wives, sons or servants. There were also references to their artifacts on display in the same village. Indeed, together with the human display, the *Mostra Eritrea* also included a display of an assortment of raw materials, textiles and craft objects from Eritrea with the aim to encourage commercial interests and exchanges with the colonized territories. These objects, arranged in an orientalist pavilion called *Caffè Arabo*, were presented to the public through a catalogue entitled *Guida alla Mostra Eritrea*, published when the exhibition had already opened²² [Fig. 6]. As the graphic of the cover suggests, the publication aimed to present Abyssinian objects as well as the Abyssinian group of people displayed in the village. Indeed, at the center of the cover a portrait of an Abyssinian warrior, characterized by an aggressive gaze, is framed by the edge of a shield. The illustration partly reveals some Abyssinian weapons around the shield. In the lower part of the cover a panorama of the village with its fictive African landscape recreates the context of the exhibition. Like Sonzogno's journal, the catalogue listed the family group living in the village, connecting their skills with the objects presented in the section of the display called 'Gallareto collection', representative of Abyssinian culture and its artistic tradition. It had been collected by Marcello Gallareto, an army officer, and gathered Abyssinian artefacts such as manuscripts, jewelry, textiles, silver artifacts, musical instruments, weapons, and everyday objects. Gallareto also wrote the related section of the catalogue,

¹⁸ Lucia Ceci, *sub voce*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, LXXIII, Roma, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 2009, pp. 592-594.

¹⁹ Guido Abbattista, *Umanità in mostra. Esposizioni etniche e invenzioni esotiche in Italia (1880-1940)*, Trieste 2013, p. 196.

²⁰ Giulia Fanara, *Il villaggio eritreo all'Esposizione Nazionale di Palermo 1891-1892: narrazioni dell'Alterità e nuova identità nazionale nell'Italia coloniale umbertina*, in «Archivio Storico Siciliano», XXXI (2005), 4, pp. 33-93.

²¹ Barbara Sòrgoni, *Italian Anthropology and the Africans: The Early Colonial Period*, in *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*, ed. Patricia Palumbo (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003) pp. 61-80: 64 (note 40).

²² *Guida alla mostra eritrea: cataloghi delle collezioni esposte*, catalogue of the exhibition, Palermo 1891/92, ed. by Giovanni Di Fede, Città di Castello 1892). In the catalogue, the sections dedicated to the various collections are entitled as follows: "1. Collezione Franchetti: campionario di tessuti; confezioni ed oggetti diversi di completamento vestiario, in commercio a Massaua"; "2. Raccolta esposta dalla Dogana di Massaua"; "3. Campionario dei prodotti agrari della colonia africana raccolti dall'avvocato Mercatelli"; "4. Raccolta di legnami indigeni"; "5. Collezione di Rocce della Colonia Eritrea, raccolta dall'Ingegnere Baldacci"; "6. Collezione Gallareto: vestiario, arredi e piccoli mobili"; "7. Collezione del Ministero della Guerra".

indicating the original name of each object with its translation, adding some short notes regarding the use of these artefacts in Eritrea.

In the introduction to the catalogue a passage describes the collection and its reception:

«The Gallareto collection which attracts the curiosity of the public more than the others, being the one that mostly touches the senses, besides having a special interest for the study of traditions and habits of the indigenes from the colony, might also present, in my opinion, a new import asset in Italy, where apart from the numerous chinoiserie, all the objects having the flavor of the Orient are very much in demand in the salons²³»

This passage demonstrates that the collection was mainly displayed to improve the commerce of ‘exotic’ objects, which had a wide appeal in Italy at the time. There was no real interest in the peculiarities of the Abyssinian artifacts, they were assimilated in an imaginary collection of ‘oriental’ objects, together with *chinoiserie*, and were displayed within an oriental-style building called *Caf  Arabo*²⁴.



²³ Original text: «La collezione Gallareto, infine, la quale attira più delle altre la curiosità del pubblico, perché maggiormente colpisce i sensi, oltre ad avere un interesse speciale per lo studio degli usi e costumi degli indigeni della Colonia, può anche presentare—a mio modo di vedere—un nuovo cespite di importazione in Italia, dove, oltre alle svariatissime *Chinoiseries*, sono molto ricercati per i salotti eleganti, tutti gli oggetti che sentano di *orientale*». Giovanni Di Fede, *La Mostra Eritrea*, in: *Guida della Mostra Eritrea*, pp. V-XVI: XVI (note 44).

²⁴ On the ambiguous meanings attributed to the term ‘orientale’ see the classical study by Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978. On the practice of collecting ethnographical objects the work of James Clifford remains fundamental. See: James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge, Mass., 1988.

Fig. 4: *In the Eritrean Exhibition* (live drawing by Gennaro Amato), in: Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale del 1891-1892: cronaca illustrata, Milan 1892, 15, p. 117.

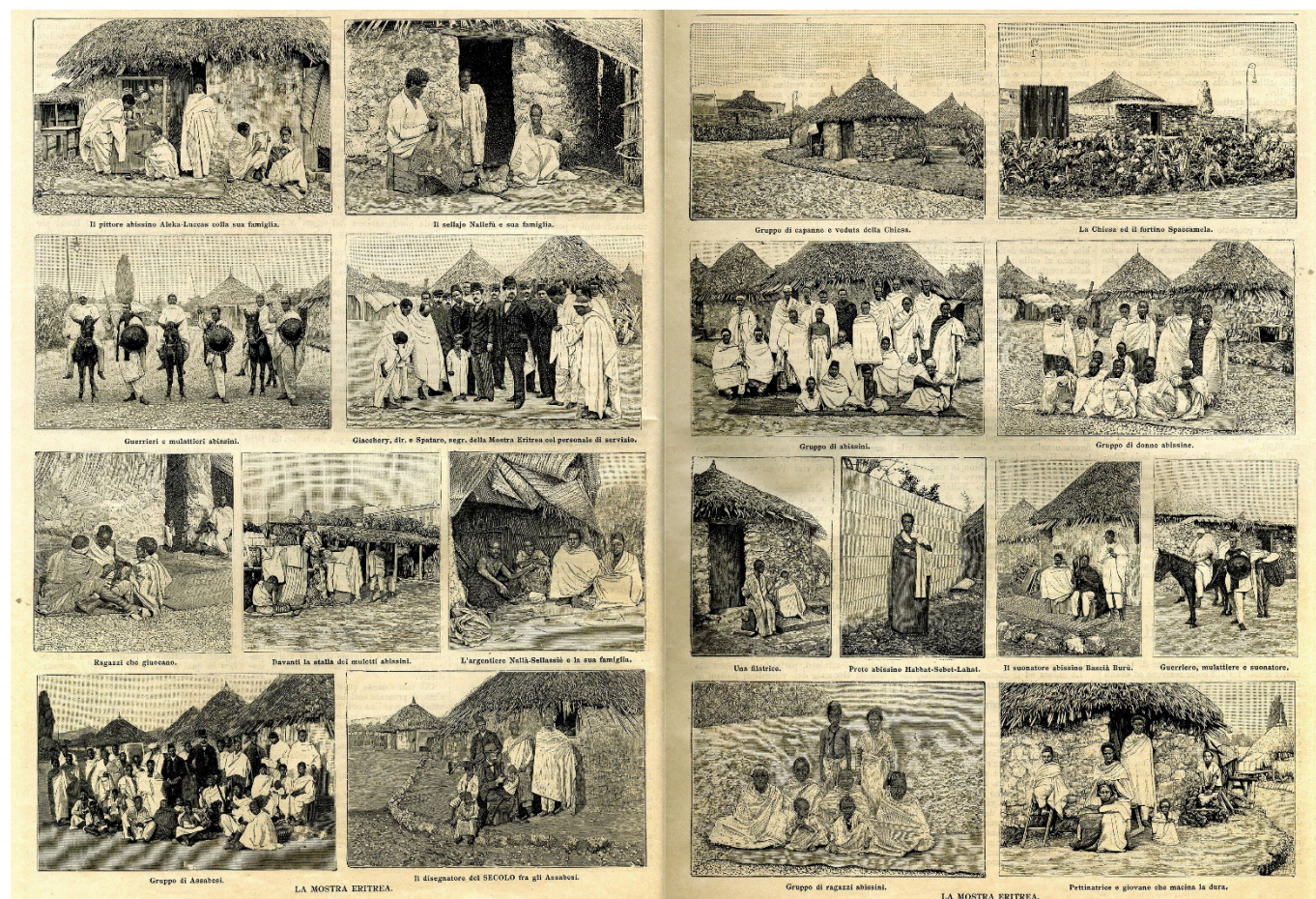


Fig. 5: *The Eritrean Exhibition*, in *L'Esposizione Nazionale Illustrata di Palermo 1891-1892*, Milan, Sonzogno, 1892.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of photographic documentation of the *Mostra Eritrea*²⁵, and it is not possible to examine display strategies, or the single objects exhibited. However, Treves' journal published an illustration by Gennaro Amato summarizing the main topoi of the fictional village of the *Mostra Eritrea* in a visual sequence [Fig. 4]. The caption of the image specified that the illustration was drawn from a still-life drawing, in order to prove a supposed truthfulness of the visual representation. In the upper strip, the first frame shows the human display by sketching some Abyssinian silhouettes in front of a tukul; the second offers an image of the collection of Abyssinian objects and materials displayed: they are presented as a disordered ensemble of artefacts, especially weapons. The last one outlines Italian military shelters used in the colony that had been erected in an area of the village. The lower strip suggests instead an overview of the village and provides a visual narration of its fictional social life, filtered through the colonial gaze. The encounter between colonizers and colonized staged in Palermo is presented to the reader of the journal

²⁵ No photographic documentation has been found in public archives in Palermo. The Museo Etnografico Siciliano *Giuseppe Pitre* preserves a photographic album of the National Exhibition, without any photographs representing the *Mostra Eritrea*. Another album of the exhibition is stored in the private archive of the publishing house *Sellerio* in Palermo, but the access and consultation of the archive has not been permitted.

through the paternalistic gesture of the elegant bourgeois couple approaching two Abyssinian children in the foreground. Through the representation of this alleged pacific encounter Italy announced the beginning of its 'civilizing mission' in Africa.



Fig. 6: Cover of *Guida alla mostra eritrea: cataloghi delle collezioni esposte*, ed. by Giovanni Di Fede, Città di Castello 1892.

In Palermo, the aim of the display of human beings was an attempt to create a relationship, even though asymmetrical and colonialist, with the colony of Eritrea and its populace, assimilating the Abyssinian population within the national urban context. Indeed, it is important to frame the event in the history of nation's colonial policy: despite the first defeat in the Battle of Dogali, Italy had continued to sustain the occupation of African territories and just one year before the exhibition, in 1890, had finally obtained the formal establishment of the colony of Eritrea. Therefore, the national exhibition was for Italy an occasion to present the newly-acquired colony and to obtain new credibility at an international level, fashioning itself as a colonizing nation. The geographical position of Palermo, as well, acquired complex meanings. It was at a strategic point in the Mediterranean Sea, in the southernmost region of Italy.

The exhibition, with its international audience, was the occasion for Italy to present the success achieved during the thirty years after the unification, in Sicily and in the South in general, in suppressing the phenomenon of *brigantaggio*. For the Palermitan *élite*, who promoted the exhibition with the support of the prime minister Francesco Crispi, a native Sicilian, it was instead a way to exhibit the industrial activities together with the natural landscape and cultural heritage of the region, in order to promote tourism. A pavilion of the National exhibition in Palermo also hosted the *Mostra Etnografica Siciliana*, an ethnographic exhibition of Sicilian culture and traditions organized by the Sicilian anthropologist Giuseppe Pitrè²⁶. The exhibition mostly presented objects of everyday life: Sicilian traditional clothing was put on display together with objects of popular devotion, such as votive tablets. However, the presence of materials such as amulets testified to the persistence in Sicily of atavistic superstitions. In addition, the works realized by Sicilian shepherds, called *vistiamari* [Fig. 7], consisting of carved utensils, decorated musical instruments, and small devotional sculptures, were celebrated as peasant's *Belle Arti* and praised for their spontaneous artistic expression²⁷.

The coexistence, within the same national exhibition, of the show of Eritrean collections and the presence of the display of Sicilian traditional objects, induced the reviewers and the public of the exhibitions to establish strong comparisons between Sicily's regional culture and the Abyssinian one²⁸. The first one aimed to present Abyssinian society and culture through the display of ethnographical and artistic objects, the reconstruction of traditional architectures, and the living exhibition of natives, fostering the stereotype of a primitive and inferior society. On the other hand, Pitrè's ethnographical exhibition, even with a scientific scope, had revealed the most picturesque and ancient habits of the Sicilian populace, at that time still alive in the remoter areas of the island. As a result, what was considered at that time to be the most backward Italian region, the *Meridione*, and the most advanced African society, the Abyssinian, could be associated. Such a conviction was supported by the so-called Hamitic hypothesis. According to this theory of scientific racism, the populations from Eastern and Northern Africa belonged to the Hamitic race and therefore to be descending from Ham, the biblical son of Noah; for this reason, they were considered racially superior

²⁶ *Catalogo illustrato della Mostra Etnografica Siciliana*, ed. by Giuseppe Pitrè, Palermo, 1892. On the figure of Giuseppe Pitrè (Palermo, 1841-1916) see Alberto Mario Cirese, *Giuseppe Pitrè: tra storia locale e antropologia*, in *Pitrè e Salomone Marino*, Palermo 1968, pp. 19-49; Pasqualina Manzo, *Storia e folklore nell'opera museografica di Giuseppe Pitrè*, Frattamaggiore 1999.

²⁷ Vivien Greene examined the *Mostra Etnografica Siciliana* in the context of post-unification Italy's imagery and in relation to Italian colonialism. On the basis of the display of ethnographic materials, she demonstrated that the stereotype that described Sicily as the 'other' Africa was strengthened by the Palermo exhibition. (Vivien Greene, *The 'other' Africa: Giuseppe Pitrè's Mostra Etnografica Siciliana [1891-92]*, in «Journal of Modern Italian Studies», XVII, 2012, pp. 288-309.

²⁸ See: Carmen Belmonte, *Staging Colonialism in the 'Other' Italy. Art and Ethnography at Palermo's National Exhibition (1891/92)*, in «Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz», LIX (2017), Heft 1, *Visualizing Otherness in Modern Italy (XIX-XX Century)*, edited by Eva-Maria Troelenberg, pp. 87-108: 104.

to the 'negroid' population of Sub-Saharan Africa²⁹. Anthropologist Giuseppe Sergi went so far as to suggest that Mediterranean and Hamitic populations had a common origin, therefore hinting at an ancient link between Italy and its colony³⁰. In addition, the Sicilian anthropologist Alfredo Niceforo had defined the *Meridione*, the South of Italy, not only as "other" or primitive, but specifically as a place to be civilized³¹.



Fig. 7: Objects realized by *vistiamari* (sicilian shepherds) exhibited at the Sicilian Ethnographic Exhibition, reproduced photograph.

Indigenous Sicilian people and their social life had been the subjects of Giovanni Verga's verist literature and had entered the Italian imagination through his popular novels. Contemporary journals of the exhibition present the Eritrean village as the main attraction. At the same time Palermo itself with its 'Sicilian types' and their picturesque popular culture, was part of the spectacle, offering to the visitors a real, immersive snapshot of the everyday life of *popolani*, the lower class.

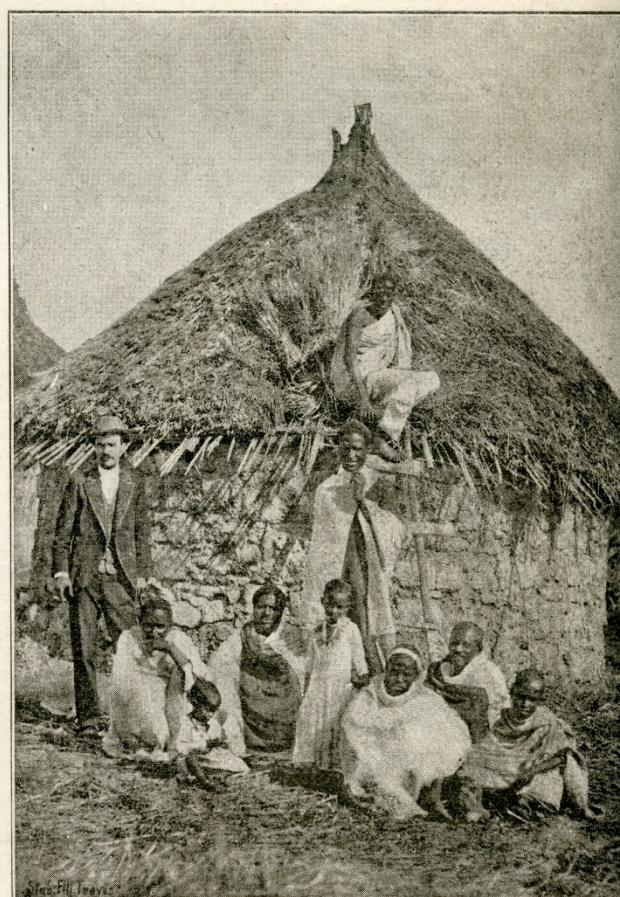
In illustrations and photographs the inhabitants of the Abyssinian village were represented in front of their tukuls, a building representative of their 'original' environment [Fig. 8]. Adopting similar visual codes, in a photographic sequence entitled *Motivi palermitani* [Fig. 9], two photographs by Eugenio Interguglielmi catch Sicilian commoners in their everyday life. The *Venditrice di frutta* (fruitseller) lingering on the threshold together with her relatives embodies a prototype of the peasant social class, whereas the image on the right side, titled *Una viuzza* (a narrow street), focuses attention on a narrow passage and on the ruined architecture of the historical center³².

²⁹ Barbara Sòrgoni, *op.cit.*, pp.62-80, here 66.

³⁰ Giuseppe Sergi, *Africa: antropologia della stirpe camitica. Specie eurafricana*, Turin 1897.

³¹ Alfredo Niceforo, *L'Italia barbara contemporanea (studi ed appunti)*, Milan, 1898, p. 6.

³² The same sequence had been published before by the publisher Treves with the caption 'Nei dintorni di Palermo (fotografie di Eugenio Interguglielmi - Riproduzione diretta)' in «L'Illustrazione Italiana», XVII, 1890, 49, cover. See Greene (note 56), pp. 298f. On Eugenio Interguglielmi see Michele Di Dio, Erminia Scaglia, *Gli Interguglielmi: una dinastia di fotografi*, Palermo 2003.



LE CAPANNE ABISSINE NELLA MOSTRA ERITREA (da fotografie istantanee).

Fig. 8: The Abyssinian Tukuls at the Eritrean Exhibition (reproduced photographs), in: *Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale del 1891-1892*



Fig. 9: Palermitan motives (reproduced photographs by Eugenio Interguglielmi)", in: *Palermo e l'Esposizione nazionale del 1891-1892*.

As part of the exhibition Italy outlined its profile as a colonizing nation assuming an imperialist attitude over Sicily, perceived, together with the other southern regions, as 'other'³³. The pairing of the Sicilian population and African natives points to a similar agenda: by classifying Sicilian culture as barbaric and exotic, Italy could justify its imperialistic attitude over the South, as in a sort of internal colonialism. As a result, it demonstrated that the 'civilizing mission' undertaken in the *Meridione* could be easily extended to Oriental Africa.

³³ Jane Schneider, *The Dynamics of Neo-Orientalism in Italy (1848-1995)*, in *Italy's 'Southern Question'*, pp. 1-23, note 7.