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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Challenging race, gender, and class in Fascist and postwar Italy. Biographical notes on Elena Sengal (1911–1962)

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Abstract

Our essay aims to offer a biography of Elena Sengal (1911–1962), an Italian citizen of Ethiopian origin, whose life offers important elements to better understand both Fascist and postwar Italy. Elena was born into an Italo-Ethiopian family and became an Italian citizen after the naturalisation of her father, Sengal Workneh, a former Italian colonial subject and a lecturer in Amharic and Tigrinya at the Istituto Orientale in Naples. She grew up in Naples where she graduated and later held a teaching position, following in her father's footsteps. When in 1939 her partner, Guido Cucci, fell in Ethiopia fighting the Ethiopian resistance, Elena found herself alone with a newborn child and struggled to make a living. Her life did not improve with the end of Fascism. Indeed, in postwar Italy it became so unbearable that she relocated to Ethiopia. However, racism and exclusion accompanied her life in the East African country too. This biography is based on archival materials as well as a body of personal letters of Elena Sengal, kindly made available by her granddaughter Maria Elena Cucci.

Keywords: biographies; Italian colonialism; race; gender; Eritrea; Ethiopia

Introduction

The November 1962 issue of *La Voce dell'Africa*, the bimonthly journal of the Istituto Italiano per l'Africa, reported with the following words what it defined as an Italo-Ethiopian mourning ('*un lutto italo-etiopico*')

> Ci è giunta in questi giorni, tristissima, la notizia che il 5 luglio scorso si è spenta la professoressa Elena Sengal, donna di elette doti di cultura e di animo, la cui vita si intreccia alle vicende storiche dei rapporti tra Italia e Etiopia.[1]

Elena Sengal,[2] to whom this obituary was devoted, was born in 1911 in Asmara, capital city of Eritrea – the first colony of the Italian Kingdom – and died in Addis Ababa in 1962, after having spent most of her adult life in Italy. What follows are preliminary notes on a work in progress which aims at reconstructing the fascinating story of a family whose vicissitudes are inextricably linked to the broader context of Italian history and colonialism, spanning approximately 80 years. The principal sources for our research are the extensive and largely untapped documentation held in the colonial collections of the Archive of the

Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ASMAI) and of the Central Archive in Rome (ACS), as well as the documents kept in private collections.[3]

Methodologically, our research draws on the rich epistemological debate on biographical studies, which we believe provides the ideal methodological framework for our investigation. Indeed, the relationship between biography and history has often been uneasy. Initially, they were perceived as fairly equivalent disciplines, since both were thought to be concerned with the public lives of famous people, an understanding best epitomised by Carlyle's historiographical work on the French Revolution (Carlyle 1837), which assumed that great men were the driving force of history. A departure from this attitude was introduced by Marxist historiography, which, based on its materialist conception of history, prioritised class struggle as a key force shaping the trajectory of human societies. This attitude was further reinforced by the rise of mass movements such as Socialism and Fascism, which led historians to focus on collectivities and socio-economic forces as the true engines of history, while rejecting biography, whose focus on individuals was perceived as too narrow. The structuralist approach that informed the work of the French Annales school can be seen as a kind of bridge between the two opposing attitudes. Indeed, the Annalistes argued not for the history of high politics but for the history of broader issues, and vowed to expand the boundaries of the historiographic canon by borrowing methodological insights from the fields of economics, geography, anthropology, and psychology. This shift can be seen in further historiographical developments between the 1970s and 1990s, which produced the micro-history approach, best exemplified by Kathryn Kish Sklar's seminal work (1973), further developed in the work of Carlo Ginzburg (1976), Giovanni Levi (1985), and more recently by Francesca Trivellato (2009). Micro-history, with its privileged attention to those considered marginal, brought biography closer to history by revealing a growing overlap not only in subject matter but also in methods. Ultimately, the emergence of biographical research as an accepted critical scholarly method of inquiry and the growing attention to its interactions with history culminated in what scholars have defined as the 'biographical turn' (Renders, De Haan and Harmsma 2017). This term captures the growing awareness of the need to regard biography as a research perspective that can be applied across the full spectrum of historical research and, as such, is relevant to many fields of study (Renders, De Haan and Harmsma 2017, 3-4). In this perspective, special attention has been paid to the ability of the biographical approach to emphasise agency, through a bottom-up viewpoint. Biographical studies were credited with the power to shed light on the dialectics between structure and agency, unveiling the way individuals have contributed to the shaping of historical events and, conversely, how these people and their understanding of the world in which they lived have been shaped by the historical context in which they lived. This new approach was further strengthened by the assumption that micro-history and biography share the vantage of investigating, challenging, and possibly revising established interpretations of human history in a scholarly way.[4]

Biographies and the study of colonialism

Area studies, and particularly African studies, have made a significant contribution to the rapprochement between history and biography. However, this has been achieved through a complex and indirect route. Indeed, precolonial Africa is replete with biographic data. The traditions of celebrating the deeds of important people, both in the oral tradition (for instance through the griots) as well as in the written (hagiographies in the Christian tradition of the Horn of Africa), provided a rich material which was further enriched by Christian missionaries, who gave special emphasis to biographies for their potential to uplift and

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proselytise (van Walraven 2020, 5-6). In a paradoxical turn of events, the end of colonialism and the rise of new independent African states led to a decline of biographical studies, as the new pressing priority was the celebration of the state. In this perspective, the historiographic focus was then shifted to the reconstruction of precolonial economic and political systems as well as the celebration of anticolonial resistance, which was perceived as a pioneering step in the state-building process.

Biographical studies re-entered Africanist historical studies through anthropology, thanks to the discipline's tendency to incorporate them into ethnographic work. The life story was typically presented as an extensive account of an individual's life, conveyed to and recorded by another individual, with a particular focus on the experiences and perspectives of the subject. Rather than charting the achievements of great leaders, life histories sought to reveal broad features of social life through emblematic informants. This approach has been highly fruitful in the study of colonialism, particularly in enabling historians to examine how 'ordinary' individuals and groups negotiated their position within the various imperial spheres and structures of the colonial world (Von Oppen and Strickrodt 2019). Another significant contribution of African studies to the revitalisation of biographical studies has been the prioritisation of oral sources in the reconstruction of the past. This significant methodological innovation has not only facilitated the academic study of the African past, but has also prompted the consideration of an additional crucial methodological issue: the challenge to the universalist claims of the Western cultural tradition, by questioning how to provide a voice for those traditionally excluded from the historiographical tradition, namely minorities, peasants, slaves, workers and women. It can be argued that one of the most significant contributions of African studies to biographical studies has been its special focus on women's biographies.[5] This has helped to fill the gap left by previous historiographies and has enabled a change in our understanding of the role of women in major African historical processes. It has shed light on their agency even in constrained social and political spaces, such as the colonial sphere.

In present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia, where our case study begins, biographical traditions had followed a somewhat divergent trajectory from the rest of the African continent, primarily due to the existence of an ancient indigenous written tradition. Indeed, borrowing from Bahru Zewde (1996), 'explicitly or implicitly biographies have dominated Ethiopian historiography'. For instance, hagiographies in medieval Christian societies of the region played a significant role in the cultural and religious life of local communities, influencing their religious identities and offering pious role models (Kaplan 2017; Brita 2020). Notably, this prolific production also had a gendered dimension, with many hagiographies dedicated to female saints (Wells 2020). This documentary tradition also played a significant role in Muslim societies of the region, due to its ability to draw on a rich tradition in the Arabic language (Gori 2020; Petrone 2024). In the contemporary era, Ethiopia has witnessed a flourishing of biographical and autobiographical writings, including those by Heruy Welde Sellase (1922/23) and Mahteme Sellase (1968/69), as well as the celebrated autobiography of Emperor Haile Selassie (Haile Selassie 1976). Furthermore, academic scholarship has demonstrated a notable interest in these studies, as evidenced by the works of Rubenson (1966), Bairu Tafla (1969), Marcus (1975), Zewde Gabre Selassie[6] (1975), Erlich (1982), and Prouty (1986). This inclination has been further reinforced following the demise of the Derg regime in 1991, with a proliferation of published material, frequently in collaboration with Addis Ababa University. This has resulted in a comprehensive account of the lives of prominent Ethiopian figures of the twentieth century. A further significant contribution has been made by Elizabeth Wolde Giorgis (2019), who has produced a study of the cultural and intellectual history of modern Ethiopia, based on a detailed analysis of the biographies of local artists. With regard to Italian colonialism, crucial work has been carried out by

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Gianni Dore (2021) who has examined in detail the use of biographies by Italian authorities as a tool to document and control indigenous leadership.

Our paper sits at the nexus of these intricate developments in biographical studies. The biography of Elena Sengal analyses the life story of a woman born as a colonial subject and then raised as an Italian citizen, who lived her life between two worlds: that of her origin – the colony of Eritrea – and Italy, where she spent most of her human and professional existence, only to return in her last painful years to a homeland that had by then become mythologised, if longed for. Her life story describes the trajectory of a woman who navigated between different imperial spheres, constantly challenging the categories and role models that were enforced upon her. Indeed, Elena Sengal was a woman born in a colonial space, who then moved from the colony to the metropolis following her family. Italy thus offered her the opportunity of a refined secondary and university education, culminating in a teaching position at the University of Naples L'Orientale, thanks in part to her father's (Sengal Workneh) prestigious background at that university. However, Italy also exposed her to the brutality of fascism and the violence of racial laws that violated her most basic rights and, even more brutally, her most intimate affections. This brutality, to her great dismay, also affected her in postwar Italy when the afterlife of racial laws made her life in Italy unbearable. This paper represents a preliminary attempt to write her story, which offers a unique opportunity to shed light on the way Africans and Black Italians experienced colonialism. Furthermore, the reconstruction of Elena Sengal's biography presents a unique opportunity to illuminate the social context in which she was situated. This context includes the transnational networks of Africans who were in Italy during the Fascist era and who also experienced the brutality of Nazi-Fascism during the Second World War.[7] Our research assumes that the history of Italian colonialism has rarely been written on the basis of biographies.[8] Consequently, our paper represents an attempt to adopt a new perspective to the study of Italian colonialism by examining the life story of an individual whose life trajectory is made even more interesting by the intersection of the three concepts of race, gender, and class. Furthermore, this individual represents a powerful expression of African agency. It is our intention to contribute to the broadening of understanding of the multifaceted colonial and imperial sphere.

Background and the formative years

Elena Sengal was born to Maria Cipolla and Sengal Workneh in Asmara on January 8, 1911.[9] Maria Cipolla was an Italo-Eritrean who died when Elena and her two siblings (Annunziata and Johannes) were still infants. There is a paucity of information regarding her background and life trajectory, but it is likely that she did not have Italian citizenship; conversely, there is a wealth of information available on Elena's father, Sengal Workneh (Puglisi 1952, 271; Ricci 1969, 887, 906). Therefore an examination of Sengal Workneh's life story might be helpful in order to gain a deeper understanding of the complex biography of his daughter, Elena. Sengal was born on 31 January 1880 in Addi Abun, situated in the vicinity of Adwa in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia. As a child, he relocated to the Colonia Eritrea, a common occurrence among residents of Tigray who were fleeing the detrimental effects of the Great Famine that had devastated the region in those years. They perceived the colonial space as an opportunity for relief, employment, and social advancement. In Massawa, Sengal attended the R. Istituto De Cristoforis, a school reserved for colonial subjects established in 1888, which took its name from Lieutenant Colonel Tommaso De Cristoforis, who had perished in the Battle of Dogali in 1887 (Puglisi 1953; Fusari 2023). In 1896, Sengal was relocated to Naples by an Italian educator who was stationed in Massawa, something which was not unusual in those days. Upon completion of his secondary education in 1899, he enlisted in the Cavalleggeri regiment in Alessandria. This too was not an uncommon choice

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at the time, as the army was perceived as a tool for social mobility for colonial subjects, both in the colony and in Italy, for those who managed to gain access to it.[10] From 1899 to 1903, he was deployed with his regiment to various Italian cities, attaining the rank of sergeant. In 1903, Sengal returned to Eritrea, where he was employed as an interpreter in the colonial administration. He subsequently became a civil servant within the colonial administration, a position held until 1914, using his language skills as an interpreter[11] in different offices within the colony as well as in Ethiopia and in the Italian consulate in Aden.

The status of Sengal in the colonial administration provides an illustrative example of the complexity and nuances inherent in the analysis of the role of colonial intermediaries. As proposed by Lawrance, Osborn and Roberts (2006), the role of Africans who worked in the colonial administration cannot be adequately understood through the lens of the dichotomous framework developed in the aftermath of decolonisation. During this period, nationalist historians tended to interpret their experiences either in terms of collaboration or resistance, with a focus on the latter. In reality, African intermediaries, particularly in the early formative years of colonialism, those in which Sengal was working, wielded considerable influence and often demonstrated a powerful agency. Individuals like Sengal were acknowledged as crucial intermediaries by the local population, and operated within a narrow political and social space that separated the development of the colonial project from the conflicting needs of the colonial subjects. Due to the intricate and nuanced nature of their role, African intermediaries, in the words of Lawrance, 'exerted influences in ways unanticipated by, ignored by, or unbeknown to Europeans' (Lawrance, Osborn and Roberts 2006, 5). The life of Sengal Workneh can be summarised as that of a cultural broker, an intermediary between the world of the colonisers and the world of the colonised.

In 1914, after a decade spent within the colonial administration, Sengal was dispatched back to Italy on the request of the Ministry of Colonies. There, he was employed as assistant lecturer of the Amharic and Tigrinya languages at the University L'Orientale in Naples, which was a centre of excellence for the study of Oriental languages in which colonial civil servants and officers received their training on the languages spoken in the Italian colonies (Guazzini 2007). During the First World War he enlisted and was promoted to captain for his military deeds during the defence of Naples. In 1919, after a protracted tug-of-war with the Italian administration Sengal, thanks to his determination, managed also to obtain Italian citizenship for himself and his children (Camilleri 2022). Eventually, Sengal died in Asmara in 1929 during a leave trip to Eritrea. Both as an interpreter in the colonial administration and later as lecturer in Naples, Sengal Workneh moved repeatedly between different spheres of empire, settling with confidence and determination across Eritrea, Ethiopia and Italy. His individual trajectory epitomises the strong agency of a generation of intellectuals who rejected the subaltern identity cages of 'colonial subjects' that colonialism tried to impose on them and navigated freely between their strong cultural roots and the challenges of Western modernity.

To gain a full understanding of the life story of Elena Sengal, it is essential to consider the complex and nuanced context in which she lived. Born in Asmara, the segregated capital of colonial Eritrea, where urban spaces were planned along racial barriers (Uoldelul 2004), she crossed a physical and cultural sea to move to Naples, which was at that time one of the larger and most cosmopolitan European cities, still retaining visible traces of its past splendour as the capital of the Bourbon kingdom in its social and cultural life (Macry 1988). In Naples, Elena grew up as an Italian citizen (acquiring Italian citizenship through her father's naturalisation in 1919, when she was eight) and received an elite education at the Liceo Classico Vittorio Emanuele. She then went to the University, where she earned a degree in *Lettere e Filosofia* in 1934. It is noteworthy that her dissertation focused on the Battle of Adwa, analysed from an Ethiopian perspective. This was an original and risky choice for an Italo-Ethiopian student living under the Fascist regime, on the eve of the

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invasion of Ethiopia, which in the propaganda of the regime was also framed as a legitimate revenge for the so called '*onta*' (shame) of Adwa. Her education can be seen as the result of both her strong determination and the affectionate but firm guidance of her father, who pushed her not to confine her ambitions to the social and cultural expectations of the time and to proudly challenge them. Therefore, the experiences of Elena Sengal were shaped by the intersections of her race, gender and class. Her biography reflects the ongoing, painful process of accommodating her existence within the context of these lacerating social and political tensions.

Becoming an academic in Fascist Italy

In 1929, a few days before his untimely demise, Sengal Workneh penned a poignant missive from Asmara to his family in Naples. He had kind words for all of them, but he was especially generous with his love and encouragement for his daughter, Elena. In the few lines he addressed to her, he strongly emphasised the importance he attached to her education. He wrote:

> Ti scrivo brevissimamente e ti dico, anzi ti ripeto che sono contentissimo di te, e qualunque sacrificio che si fa per te non va perduto. Ti sei abbonata alla scuola per corrispondenza per il tedesco, hai fatto benissimo. Cerca di esercitarti anche nel francese ed inglese che sono lingue utilissime. Quando ti iscriverai al 1° anno di università ti farò iscrivere contemporaneamente all'Istituto Orientale per l'amarico e tigrino. Così quando avrai la laurea universitaria avrai anche quella dell'I. O. e con due lauree tu sarai una grande professoressa e troverai posto da per tutto.[12]

The content of these lines evinces a father's profound pride in his daughter and his keen interest in her academic progress. Similar expressions can be found in other letters, such as the one written about a month earlier to his second wife, Clementina.[13] In this letter, he expressed his happiness about Elena's promotion and stated that she would soon receive a 'well-deserved gift' from him.[14]

If Sengal was a proud father, Elena was most likely a diligent student pursuing a solid education. At the time of the above letter, she was close to earning her classical high school diploma at the prestigious Liceo Classico Vittorio Emanuele II. This educational institution has a long tradition, having been established as a public school in the newly unified Kingdom of Italy in 1861. The *Liceo classico* traditionally attracted the offspring of the local bourgeoisie, predominantly young men. In general, since the unification of Italy, the *Liceo classico* has been regarded as an institution that promoted the humanistic tradition which was the cornerstone of the social and cultural profile of the Italian bourgeoisie. Indeed, the training of clerks, lawyers, doctors and so forth, that is to say the training of an independent middle class, had to pass through the study of the classical disciplines. The new *borghesia umanistica* (Meriggi 1989) derived considerable social prestige and distinction from their attendance at a *Liceo classico*, which could prove advantageous in many ways, especially in the development of their career. This type of school became a cornerstone of the consolidation of the classical tradition of the country and thus of the nationalisation of the new elites. If this was true for the post-unification years, the *Liceo classico* retained its status as a key educational institution even in Fascist Italy. The reform implemented by Giovanni Gentile, minister and philosopher, altered numerous aspects of the educational system. However, it did not diminish the centrality of the classical high school in the formation of the ruling classes. In fact, it enhanced its elitist significance (Charnitzky 1996).

Memories of this young Black woman walking the streets of Naples were still vivid years later. A newspaper article published in 1962 to commemorate her demise recounts her

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popularity in her neighbourhood and her reputation as a dedicated student. The neighbours recalled her going to school in the morning, '*libri sotto il braccio, testa alta ed occhi sorridenti*'[15] while the women of the area cheered her with admiration for her seriousness and distinction (Napoletano 1962). If, as has been argued, only one in four students enrolled in a *Liceo classico* were women (De Grazia 1992, 155), the admiration of Elena's neighbours was also based on the assumption of the unusual educational path she was taking. The same source indicates that she successfully completed her studies at the Liceo Vittorio Emanuele at the age of 18, receiving her classical high school diploma. She subsequently enrolled at the University of Naples, leaving behind her sister Annunziata, who wished to devote herself to the household. At the university she pursued studies in Arts and Humanities (*Lettere e filosofia*) and graduated with the highest honours in the summer session of 1934. In the 1930s, only a minority of women attended university and graduated; those who did pursue this path, did so to study literature and philosophy, or to become teachers. In fact, there was a certain increase in enrolments during the years of Fascism. This was partly due to the growth of the population and the adverse condition of the job market (De Grazia 1992, 154–157). For example, the faculties that prepared students for the liberal professions were a male domain. The case of Elena Sengal was particularly noteworthy due to her status as a black woman, an Italo-Ethiopian who had her Italian citizenship conferred through the naturalisation of her father. In Fascist Italy, where women who graduated were a tiny minority, the circumstance of a black woman going to university was very rare indeed. Another documented case of a black woman attending an Italian university in those years, which can be usefully mentioned here, is that of Olga Manente. Born in Eritrea in 1917 to an Italian soldier and an Eritrean woman, she studied at the University of Venice Ca' Foscari from 1938 to 1945. Her history, laden with experiences of racial discrimination, has recently been reconstructed (Furlan 2022).

The distinction that Elena received at the end of her studies rewarded her serious approach to education, and the important thesis that she presented. The thesis was on the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1896 from an Ethiopian perspective and was entitled: *Il conflitto italo-etiopico (come in Abissinia ne furono visti i principali episodi)*.[16] We are not able to discuss what Elena wrote in this thesis because, unfortunately, we have not yet been able to retrieve this document. However, 1896 was a very significant date in Fascist Italy. The military defeat inflicted by the soldiers of Ethiopian emperor Menelik II on the Italian army in the proximity of the ancient city of Adwa, in northern Ethiopia, remained a thorn in the flesh of the Fascist Party. Avenging Adwa became one of the ideological motivations underlying Fascist Italy's imperial strategy, which culminated in the war against Ethiopia in 1935–36. The occupation of Ethiopia was seen as Fascist Italy's revenge for the *complesso di Adua* (Adwa complex), which had been a burden on liberal Italy.

Soon after graduating, Elena Sengal was offered a position at the *Regio Istituto Universitario Orientale* in Naples where she taught Amharic and Tigrinya, as her father had done previously. We can assume that in her dissertation she had demonstrated the depth of her knowledge of the linguistic and literary traditions of Ethiopia and Eritrea. At the time the Royal Oriental Institute in Naples was an important centre of research on the history, culture and languages of Asia and Africa, with a particular focus on Ethiopia and the wider Horn of Africa region, as well as North Africa. In addition to this scientific focus, the Institute also had a commitment to serve the political project of Italian colonialism. The Neapolitan university had emerged as a centre of Oriental studies in the eighteenth century; from the late nineteenth century onward, it had also assumed the profile of a centre of African studies. The colonial expansion of the Kingdom of Italy fostered the need for comprehensive investigation into the linguistic and cultural traditions of Africa, particularly those spoken in territories under Italian governance. The collection of information on many cultural aspects of colonial societies was part of a larger project of colonial knowledge

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production in the metropole, but it also served the purpose of enabling colonial empires to better control colonised societies locally. In this regard Italy followed what Cohn has brilliantly defined as the colonial project of commanding languages in order to identify languages of command (Cohn 1996). Subsequently, in the wake of the Italian invasion of Libya, the university underwent a restructuring, which saw the introduction of courses in colonial languages, colonial geography, the history of colonisation, and colonial legislation (Nicolini 1942, 29).[17]

In 1891 the first chair of Amharic had been established at the Regio Istituto Universitario Orientale in Naples, with Francesco Gallina (1861–1942) assigned to the role (Ricci 1986). Gallina became among the most prominent figures working there in this period, and Elena became his assistant. A former student of the eminent scholar Ignazio Guidi, Gallina continued teaching well after his retirement and trained several students who became famous scholars. These include Enrico Cerulli and Luigi Fusella, following Elena Sengal (Yaqob 2005). Although Francesco Gallina published only a few works, he made a significant scientific contribution through the translation and editing of several Ethiopian texts. He was held in high esteem by international scholars. Following his demise, two obituaries were published: one by Enrico Cerulli (1942) and one by Elena Sengal (1942). In her text, published in *Oriente Moderno*, the scientific journal of the Istituto per l'Oriente, a major orientalist research centre founded after the First World War in Rome, she recalled the scientific and human qualities of her mentor, emphasised his contributions in disseminating the literary works of authors writing in Amharic, Ge'ez and Tigrinya, and lauded also his patriotic commitment in shaping the imperial agenda of the Kingdom of Italy. In Elena's words:

> Egli è stato un precursore dell'idea imperiale e non con vane parole, ma con l'opera di tutta la sua vita; ha formato la mente ed il cuore di giovani che oggi sono valentissimi funzionari coloniali; si è conquistato il rispetto e l'ammirazione degli Abissini d'ogni classe, con i quali ha avuto contatto.[18] (Elena Sengal 1942, 302).

In texts of this nature, expressions of esteem and devotion from scholars to their mentors are not uncommon. However, it is noteworthy that Elena Sengal, as well as her father, Sengal Workneh, held a profound sense of esteem and gratitude towards Professor Gallina. This esteem is also evidenced by private correspondence. Concurrently, Gallina reciprocated his admiration for both individuals.

In a country with a strong commitment to its colonial expansion, conferences on colonial topics became an essential moment of cultural policy, with scientists required to be involved in the colonial project. The collaboration of academic resources, intellectuals and scientists with actors of colonial policy has undoubtedly shaped European colonialism for centuries. Scientists with diverse specialisations had already contributed to debates on colonial sciences in the previous years of the Italian colonial endeavour. However, the *Congresso di scienze coloniali* held in Florence and Rome in April 1937 was not merely a gathering of colonial scientists, administrators, lobbyists and politicians. The congress became a stage on which Fascist Italy sought to present itself as a global colonial power. Just eleven months earlier, on 6 May 1936, Benito Mussolini had famously proclaimed the establishment of a new empire in East Africa from the balcony of his office in Palazzo Venezia. Elena Sengal attended the congress with a group of academics from the Istituto Universitario Orientale, including Francesco Beguinot, who was at the time the director of the Institute and held the chair of Berber language, and the Arabist Laura Veccia Vaglieri (Nicolini 1942, 47). She delivered a paper at the session on ethnography, literature and sociology on the morning of 14 April. The paper addressed the new conditions and new needs of Ethiopia at the advent of the twentieth century and was subsequently included in the conference proceedings (Elena

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Sengal 1937). It seems reasonable to posit that this text represents an elaboration of her thesis. The paper focused on the figure and work of Gebre-Heywet Baykedagn (1886–1919), a prominent Ethiopian intellectual, born in the Adwa district and spokesman for a modernity agenda for Ethiopia in his time. The book at the centre of Elena Sengal's paper, entitled *Atse Menilikenna Etiopia* (*Emperor Menelik and Ethiopia*) and published in the colonial capital Asmara in 1912, constituted a passionate appeal to the future emperor who would have succeeded the ailing Menelik, to initiate reforms in Ethiopia and propel the country towards what Matteo Salvadore called a 'sovereign modernity' (Salvadore 2007).

In addition to this text, Elena also produced a number of other scholarly contributions, all of which were devoted to Ethiopian literature and the linguistics of Amharic and Tigrinya. Other notable titles include 'Favole e storielle abissine' (Elena Sengal 1935) and 'Note sulla letteratura amarica' (Elena Sengal 1943). Her work, of a purely scholarly nature, continues to represent a significant contribution to the body of knowledge pertaining to the literary culture of the Ethiopian region. However, it is also necessary to analyse her intellectual work in the context of the political conditions under which it was produced, and read it between the lines of pervasive Fascist propaganda and a violent ideology of Italy's superiority to Ethiopia. Indeed, her work makes explicit references to the political context of the time and to the rhetoric of the civilising mission that Fascism had made its own by loading it with its imperial ideology. Her writing substantiated the notion that Ethiopia was a backward country whose transition to modernity and civilisation could only be facilitated by Fascist Italy. A review-essay on the novel *Lebb Welled Tarik*,[19] written by the Italophile Ethiopian intellectual, Afewerq Gebre Iyesus (Rouaud 1991), and published in Rome in 1908, represents an interesting object of analysis (Elena Sengal 1941, 28). In it, Afewerq was presented not only as '*il più evoluto ed eclettico tra gli scrittori abissini*'[20] but also the politician who had promoted good relations between the two countries and what was defined as the '*pacifica e proficua penetrazione italiana in Etiopia*'.[21] At the end of the review she rhetorically wonders what future of splendour awaits Ethiopia now in the hands of the Italians: '*Se l'Italia, anche da nemica, ha pur già fatto tanto bene, quanta felicità non saprà dare in avvenire con il suo amore?*'[22]

Elena Sengal's intellectual stance in the face of Fascist imperialism requires further in-depth analysis. One can see in the paper presented at the colonial congress an endorsement of the modernity that Fascism aimed to bring to Ethiopia; other expressions of agreement are not lacking in her work. However, her statements require more scrutiny, as it is not clear whether they expressed a wholehearted endorsement of Fascism's programmes or rather a camouflage strategy. Moreover, her opinions may have differed in character at different stages of her professional and personal life, and depending on whether they were public or private, as later private correspondence makes clear. Certainly, any understanding of Elena must include the recognition that she was a person whose life was heavily influenced by political events and who tried to navigate them as best she could, even taking contradictory positions over the years.

Elena Sengal's academic work also took her abroad. In 1935 she undertook a scientific mission to Cairo, Egypt, and in 1936 one to Jerusalem, Palestine. The latter was supposed to allow her to have an exchange with the Polish-born anthropologist and scholar of Ethiopian studies, Jacques Faïtlovitch. However, it is alleged that it had a covert objective of disseminating pro-Italian propaganda among Ethiopian residents of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv (Fusella and Tubiana 2018). All in all, Elena Sengal, as a black woman, was able to gain esteem and a good reputation in her academic environment. The obituary in her honour cited above is a late testimony of this good reputation: it opened precisely by recalling the '*elette doti di cultura e di animo*'[23] that had distinguished the '*professoressa*' Elena Sengal. Surely, Elena Sengal's life was very different from the image of women that Fascism promoted. The role reserved for women in Fascist society was related to motherhood, home and family care.

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If women studying at universities were a minority in Fascist Italy, women working as academics were an even smaller minority. However, it is important to note that Sengal's work in academia was heavily intertwined with (and enabled by) the political project of colonial expansion and domination. Research on Amharic and Tigrinya in Italy had a strong utilitarian character, which would abruptly end when Italy lost its colonies during the Second World War. Suddenly, the practical and utilitarian dimension of the research and teaching of 'colonial languages' was missing. Therefore, Elena Sengal continued to work at the Istituto Universitario Orientale after the war, but her working conditions deteriorated as her academic interests lost much of their relevance. Furthermore, she felt more and more uncomfortable in this environment, where racism did not spare her at work. In a letter to a friend in April 1945, she expressed her anger and frustration at her treatment at the university. She stressed that the end of the Fascist regime had not brought an end to some racist attitudes:

> La ragione è una: sono razzisti. Del resto, sono le identiche persone che si trovavano a spadroneggiare in tempo fascista e non posso pretendere che in soli due anni abbiano mutato idee. Per quanto camaleontici si possa essere, qualche idea rimane radicata.[24]

This period of her life requires a comprehensive investigation. A significant degree of uncertainty persists regarding the circumstances that facilitated her relocation to Ethiopia and her subsequent settlement in Addis Ababa. In any case she moved to Addis Ababa in 1946 and remained there until 1950. In the capital of independent Ethiopia, she was employed in the Ethiopian National Library. Built after the Italian occupation and inaugurated by Emperor Haile Selassie I himself on 5 May 1944, it was welcomed as 'one of the constructive landmarks on the road to the rebuilding of the Empire' (Ethiopian National Library 1945). Elena Sengal remained in Addis Ababa from 1946 until 1950. However, settling in Ethiopia proved to be more complex than she could have imagined. It seems that Elena Sengal struggled to find her own place in Ethiopian society: an independent woman, she felt squeezed between the material difficulties associated with her meagre salary, and the behavioural expectations of Ethiopian society, a culture to which she didn't fully belong, having grown up and spent most of her life in Italy. She therefore decided to move back to Italy in 1950, but again, unable to find a place for herself in the academia and society of 1950s Italy, she returned to Ethiopia, where she lived until her death in 1962.

Conclusion

To write a biography of Elena Sengal, which concerns many important aspects of Italian history and its colonial entanglements with the Horn of Africa, is no easy task. Extensive research will have to shed light on many aspects of her life still unknown. The biographical sketch presented so far can give the misleading picture of a success story. In certain aspects, Elena Sengal was an accomplished woman, and her work was widely recognised. On an academic and scientific level this was surely true, but on a societal level her figure was more contested. This is especially true when considering Elena's private life. From 1940, she had to raise her son alone, because the child's father had died in October 1939 before his birth. Her partner, Guido Cucci, was an Italian army officer, hailing from a distinguished military family from around Salerno, who was killed in a battle with Ethiopian partisans in Ebenat, in the Gondar zone, not far from Lake Tana. This love story adds a tragic dimension to the life of Elena Sengal, that still needs to be studied in detail. The Istituto Universitario Orientale is the place where Elena Sengal dedicated her work to the study of Ethiopian and Eritrean culture, but it is probably also the place where she met a man whose passion for the Italian

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colonial project had many faces, combining intellectual interest in the Horn of Africa with involvement in the violent agenda of colonial occupation.

This paper has focused on an essentially unknown figure in twentieth-century Italy, who deserves more attention among historians and beyond. The biographical study of Elena Sengal has the power to shed light on both Fascist and postwar Italy. With regard to Fascist Italy, it provides insights into the many nuances of the lives of black Italians under a dictatorial and racist regime. It shows the complexity of their agency and their sometimes contradictory strategies to navigate the suffocating web of authoritarian rules. The popular image of black women was more the Black Venus or the sexualised subject of Italian East Africa, and less an academic residing in Naples and committed to high tasks of study and research. With regard to postwar Italy, the life of Elena Sengal provides further evidence of the continuity and persistence of a racialised understanding of society between Fascist and republican Italy. Her voice is a precious testimony of this strong continuity in the history of modern Italian racism, with the unique value of offering it from a gendered perspective. Giving voice to a woman born as a colonial subject and then raised as an Italian citizen, and acknowledging her agency, allow us to see 1930s Italian society in a new light and to think differently about the relationship between gender and race in Fascist Italy. The biographical study of Elena Sengal adds an important chapter to the history of women in twentieth-century Italy.

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Competing interests. The authors declare none.

Notes

1. 'We have just received the very sad news that Professor Elena Sengal, a woman of eloquent cultural and spiritual gifts, whose life was interwoven with the historic events of relations between Italy and Ethiopia, died on 5 July.' Translations are by the authors.
2. In this paper, for ease of reading, the names in Tigrinya and Amharic have been given their conventional transliteration rather than the scientific one.
3. In this regard, we would like to express our deepest and heartfelt gratitude to the Cucci Family and in particular to Maria Elena Cucci – the granddaughter of Elena Sengal – who generously made the family's rich collection of letters and photographic material available to us.
4. On this issue a diverging perspective is offered by Lepore (2001) who argues for clear distinctions between biography and micro-history. Indeed, she blamed micro-historians for only using the individual life histories as tools to study a specific topic.
5. Examples of this special focus are Smith (1954), Shostak (1981), Davison (1989), Keegan (1988), Wright (1984), Bozzoli (1991), Mirza and Strobel (1989), Robertson and Klein (1983) just to mention some.
6. The same author in a recent book (Zewde 2015) dealing with the history of the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia added a long list of short biographies of Eritreans who moved to Ethiopia and worked in the Ethiopian government, starting from the late 1890s.
7. To date, the most substantial contribution in this regard can be attributed to Martha Nesibu's autobiographical text (2005) beside Gabrielli (1999) and Deplano's work (Deplano 2017) .
8. Beside the useful biographical tool which is Puglisi's *Chi è dell'Eritrea* (1952) we could consider as the only notable attempt to give voice to the voiceless through a sort of biographical approach Irma Taddia's seminal works *La memoria dell'Impero* (1988) followed by *Autobiografie africane* (1996).
9. Her father, Sengal Workneh, called her Elena Sengal, in keeping with the tradition of the Eritrean and Ethiopian highlands, where the personal name is followed by the father's name. For this reason, we will refer to her as Elena or Elena Sengal throughout the text to avoid any possible confusion with her father.
10. This was the case of Domenico Mondelli and Fessehatsion Beyene. Domenico Mondelli was an Italo-Eritrean who joined the Italian military academy in October 1900 and later joined the army, earning his flying licence in 1914, and finally reaching the rank of general (Valeri 2015). Fessehatsion Beyene had a stint as an askari in Eritrea

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and then moved to Italy in 1921 as driver for an Italian family. Later he joined the army again and gained a flying licence in 1929 (Volterra 2005).

11. Besides being fluent in Tigrinya, Amharic and Italian, Sengal Workneh had good knowledge of Tigre and a working knowledge of French and English.

12. 'I write to you very briefly and tell you, nay I repeat, that I am delighted with you, and any sacrifice that is made for you is not lost. You subscribed to the correspondence school for German, you did very well. Also try to practise French and English, which are very useful languages. When you enrol in the first year of university, I will have you enrol at the same time in the Oriental Institute for Amharic and Tigrinya. That way, when you get your university degree, you will also have your I.O. degree and with two degrees you will be a great teacher and will find a place everywhere.' Sengal to Elena, Asmara, 9 August 1929, Cucci private collection.

13. Sengal had married Clementina Conversano in 1921 after the death of his first wife Maria Cipolla.

14. Sengal to Clementina, Asmara, 2 July 1929, Cucci private collection.

15. 'Books under her arm, head held high and eyes smiling.'

16. Annuario della R. Università degli Studi di Napoli, Anno Accademico 1934–35, Napoli, Arti Grafiche, 1935, p. 257.

17. On the colonial dimension of the Istituto Universitario Orientale, see Beguinot 1941.

18. 'He was a pioneer of the imperial idea, not merely in words but in deeds throughout his lifetime. He shaped the minds and hearts of young men and women who went on to become highly competent colonial officials. He earned the respect and admiration of the Abyssinians of all social classes with whom he interacted.'

19. This work is regarded as the inaugural example of fictional work in contemporary Amharic literature. Indeed, the term *leb weled*, which literally translates as 'written with the heart', has since been used in Amharic to refer to this genre.

20. 'The most evolved and eclectic of Abyssinian writers.'

21. 'Peaceful and fruitful Italian penetration into Ethiopia.'

22. 'If Italy, even as an enemy, has already done so much good, how much happiness will it not be able to give in the future with its love?'.

23. 'The elevated cultural and spiritual gifts.'

24. 'The reason is simple: they are racists. After all, they are the exact same people who ruled in Fascist times and I cannot expect them to have changed their ideas in just two years. However chameleon-like one may be, some ideas remain ingrained.' Elena to Beyene, Naples,01 April 1945, Cucci private collecion.

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Italian summary

Il nostro saggio intende offrire una biografia di Elena Sengal (1911–1962), cittadina italiana di origine etiope, la cui vita offre elementi importanti per comprendere meglio sia l'Italia fascista sia l'Italia del dopoguerra. Elena nasce in una famiglia italo-etiope e diventa cittadina italiana dopo la naturalizzazione del padre, Sengal Workneh, ex suddito coloniale italiano e docente di amarico e tigrino presso l'Istituto Orientale di Napoli. Cresce a Napoli dove si laurea e in seguito ricopre il ruolo di insegnante seguendo le orme del padre. Quando nel 1939 il suo compagno, Guido Cucci, cadde in Etiopia combattendo la resistenza etiope, Elena si ritrovò sola con un bambino appena nato e fronteggiò molte difficoltà per guadagnarsi da vivere. La sua vita non migliorò con la fine del fascismo. Anzi, nell'Italia del dopoguerra la situazione divenne così insopportabile che si trasferì in Etiopia. Tuttavia, il razzismo e l'esclusione accompagnarono la sua vita anche nel suo nuovo paese. Questa biografia si basa su materiali d'archivio e su un corpus di lettere personali di Elena Sengal, gentilmente messe a disposizione dalla nipote Maria Elena Cucci.

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