

International and Italian Reggae as a Tool of Counter-narrative: Songs and Lyrics on the Colonial Experience in Ethiopia

Renato TOMEI (Perugia)¹

Summary

This contribution addresses the role of popular music as an effective tool of counter-narrative, a significant yet scarcely investigated issue in the context of post-colonial studies. The main objective is to shed light on the musical production addressing the historical events related to the Italian invasion and occupation of Ethiopia (1935-1941), describing how, besides the propaganda songs of the Fascist regime, there is a large alternative repertoire of contemporary music, mainly pertaining to the Reggae genre.

While historical studies have focused on the reconstruction of dynamics and events, the artistic and musical production deserves further investigation, in particular for what concerns the voice of the Italian artists in response to the colonial policies of their nation.

The contribution provides the analysis of a selection of song lyrics by international (J. Miller, Culture, The Rastafarians, Barry Issac, Damian Marley, Sizzla, Midnite, Starkey Banton, Soulmedic, The Informative History Man) and Italian (Alborosie, Dan-I, Jahmento, Magadog, Babaman, Ras Caleb, Hobo, Ras Tewelde) Reggae artists, highlighting historiographical elements challenging the fascist narrative and the dominant discursive dynamics that erase or minimize historical colonial crimes.

The victory of good over evil: Ethiopia and Italy through the lyrics of international Reggae music

Popular music, its role and potential within the context of post-colonial studies, have not been adequately scholarly investigated. Yet, as stated by Lovesey, “popular music sometimes had a direct role in fostering anti-colonial cultural resistance and organizational communication, as well as decolonizing hearts and minds and ears. Popular music also in some cases would be used to define the parameters of the postcolony or to protest its neocolonial mimicry” (Lovesey 2017, 1).

Recent studies, however, describe how popular music is used to challenge coloniality across different geographical areas and genres (Varas-Díaz 2018; Fourie 2020). The present contribution aims at highlighting how music represents an effective medium of grassroots counternarrative, through the analysis of song lyrics of popular music repertoires on the specific topic of the fascist invasion and occupation of Ethiopia (1935-1941).

While the condemnation of fascism at large has been widely exposed through international artistic and musical productions, the same cannot be said for the atrocities and the crimes committed against the local populations in the Horn of Africa. The only genre that has given relevance to the Italian colonial experience is Reggae, which originated in Jamaica in the late 1960s and was brought to the attention of international audiences by Bob Marley.

The close relationship between Reggae and the opposition to the colonial system has been deepened by many scholars, who have highlighted, in particular, how the sense of belonging to the African continent constitutes a leitmotiv of the Jamaican and international Reggae production (Murrell/Spencer/McFarlane 1998; Veal 2007; Middleton 2015). There are several artists who address the theme of slavery and openly denounce the strategies of colonialism, claiming to belong to the same land from which their ancestors have torn away without any alternative, Africa. Many of these are members of the Rastafari community, a spiritual movement, as in the case of Reggae music, originated in Jamaica and popularized by Bob Marley. While describing the history, the development and the global spread of Reggae music and the Rastafari movement, and defining boundaries between them, is beyond the aim of the present contribution, it has to be observed how it is mainly thanks to the contribution of the Rastafari artists to the development of Reggae in its early stages that Ethiopia gains a symbolic and spiritual centrality, representing the recognised symbol of the independence and pride of the African people, who resisted and opposed the wave of colonisation that invaded the rest of the continent. Since then, the word 'Ethiopia' starts to be prominent in the lyrics and is also used to name bands (The Ethiopians, The Abyssinians), songs and albums (e.g., "Promised Land" by Dennis Brown, "Sattamasagana" by the Abyssinians, "Ethiopia" by Michael Prophet, "Ethiopian Sons" by Garnett Silk and Tony Rebel).

Furthering the toponymic synecdoche featured in Homer (*Iliad* I, XXIII; *Odyssey* I, IV, V), Herodotus (*The Histories*, II), and the Bible (*Genesis*, *Kings*, *Esther*, *Job*, *Psalms*, *Isaiah*, *Ezekiel*, *Nahum*, *Zephania*, *Acts*), where 'Aethiopia' defines a very large area of Africa, the generic reference to the African roots evolves into a more specific identification of Ethiopia as the entire continent. Moreover, according to the Rastafari spirituality, Haile Selassie I has divine features and Ethiopia is regarded as the new Jerusalem referred to in the Bible, the holy land, where the Ark of the Covenant, the sign of God's presence on earth, is currently preserved.² Therefore, there are many songs of the Reggae repertoire making references to Haile Selassie I and Ethiopia.

The data presented in this section have been selected from a large corpus of Reggae lyrics developed by the author and include lyrics of songs featuring the topic of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, composed between the 1970's and 2021 by artists of different nationalities, in different languages, translated into English by the author.

The selected lyrics have been subsequently classified and organized into three main thematic sections: the victory, Mussolini, the Italian invasion.

The victory

In the lyrics of the following songs, the ultimate victory of Ethiopia over fascist Italy is portrayed as the biblical victory of good over evil, the victory of the emperor, crowned with the titles given in the Bible to Christ (King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the tribe of Judah – Revelation 5:5 and 19:16), over Mussolini, therefore considered as the antichrist.

In this regard, the first example is provided by a *nyabinghi* chant, “The Lion of Judah”.³

The Lion of Judah shall break every chain
and give us the victory again and again.
The Conquering Lion shall break every chain
and give us the victory again and again.

The figurative reference to Ethiopia and its proud resistance is also a central element of the song “Whirl a Fya” (2008) by Benjamin Vaughn, voice and leader of Midnite, a Reggae band from the Virgin Islands:

When they start a fire in Ethiopia,
well, they burn their own cover.
“Today for I, tomorrow for you”,
Selassie I told them so.
But what they do? They run
to set the whole world on fire.

Here, there is a direct reference to the appeal to the League of Nations made by Emperor Haile Selassie I in June 1936 in Geneva, when the emperor reported the fascist invasion and the crimes committed by the Italians, requesting the support of the international community. This request, which went unheeded, contained a prophetic warning about the future expansion of Fascism in Europe, “It is us today, it will be you tomorrow”, here rephrased by Midnite in “Today for I, tomorrow for you”.

The song “Addis Ababa” (1996), by the Jamaican band Culture, refers to Haile Selassie as the King of a distant land called Addis Ababa, who firmly resisted the invasion of Mussolini.

There is a land far far, away,
it's called Addis Ababa.
The ruler of the land,

which is far away,
 His name is King Selassie,
 King of Kings and Lord of Lords.
 The ruler of the land,
 which is in the east,
 His name is King Selassie
 Mussolini tried to invade Ethiopia,
 but the Conqueror,
 His name is King Selassie,
 rule and respect!

In “Roman Soldiers of Babylon” (1975) by Jacob Miller, the arrogance of the fascist army is defeated by the wisdom of the emperor.

Don't give up, don't give up!
 The Roman soldiers of Babylon
 are here to fight us.
 Look out!
 They're in plain clothes!
 They're coming trying to fight Rastafari
 but they can't defeat
 the wisdom of Selassie I.

Mussolini

Many are the Reggae songs mentioning Benito Mussolini, emphasizing the opposition between the fascist leader and the Ethiopian emperor and his people, as in the case of “Nah Mean” (“Do you know what I mean?”) (2010), by the youngest son of Bob Marley, Damian, in collaboration with one of the stars of the American Hip Hop, Nas, and “Babylon Cowboy” (1997), by Sizzla Kalonji.⁴

We don't like their colonial regime, nah mean?
 Ethiopian don't like Mussolin', nah mean?

The Emperor sit down
 around de biggest machine gun.
 Mussolini test
 and get their skull turn down.

In particular, “Babylon Cowboy” explicitly evokes two significant and famous pictures: Haile Selassie I commanding a 20 mm Oerlikon machine gun on the battlefield, and Mussolini’s body hung in Piazzale Loreto on 29 April 1945. This particular event is also recalled in “Moussolini” (2011), by the British artist Barry Issac, which features a more detailed description of the reaction of the crowd gathered in the square of Milan to the corpse of the Duce and other fascists.

There once was a man called Moussolini.
 A wicked man!
 He and his followers disrespected royalty
 Oh Lord!
 He and his followers
 disrespected His Majesty.
 They were dealing with war
 and so much brutality
 But when his people turned against him,
 they hanged him upside down
 and they spat on him.
 And the dog pissed on him.

The Italian invasion

Although, as described so far, Ethiopia and Haile Selassie I represent central themes in the discography of several Jamaican and international Reggae artists, not always there are direct references to historiographic data concerning the war and the fascist invasion.

Amongst the songs explicitly addressing these topics there are “Love King Selassie I” (2007), by Starkey Banton and The Dub Organiser, and “Occupation” (1981), produced in California by the Jamaican band The Rastafarians, both mentioning, amongst other elements, the involvement of the Vatican and the prohibited use of poisonous gas by the Italian army.

The Pope bombed up Ethiopia
 with the mustard gas.
 [...] Mussolini invaded Ethiopia
 I wonder if you know who he did work for.
 No other than the Vatican
 and dem tallawa⁵
 as they want to control Addis Ababa.
 So the pope bless the soldiers
 with dirty water.

He gave them the order to commit slaughter
to slaughter Ethiopian sons and daughter.

Occupation by Mussolini, it was wrong! Invaded Ethiopia, killing us one by one.
Occupation by Mussolini, it was wrong! And the orders came from the Vatican
1935, third of October, they crossed their borders, war in Ethiopia.
A nation of 42 million attacking a nation of 12 million.
It was the beginning, woah yeah, of World War.
Systematic extermination, fight for various means.
The victims of the poisonous gas fell on the ground
Mutilation of men, women and children, killing of all living creatures
showing Rastafari their true features
Selassie I went to the League of Nations, he had a proclamation
he wanted to end Italy's invasion in our land.
But all fifty-two nations, they all turned their back.
Ethiopians, oh yeah, stand up and fight for their lives.
Then remember the massacre of 1937, so don't come tell I 'bout it, you ever.
so much, yeah, Ethiopia lives, Selassie I survived!

Other examples of songs containing specific historical references are “Biography of Haile Selassie I” (2005), by the prolific Jamaican artist The Informative History Man, and the more recent “Terrible” (2019), by the Californian Soulmedic.

1932, you must remember
Italians start to spread their propaganda
[...] 1934, war was right at the door
Italian army spread up
from shore to shore
1935, the second of October
Italians start the war with Ethiopia
1936, it was second of May
the war comes to an end
and it's final day
Haile leave the country
and go to England
Because HIM want to chat
to the League of Nation
Haile Selassie, the Conquering Lion,
return to Ethiopia 1941.

Remember the little man from Ethiopia,
told the assembly of nations 'game over'.
He is the defender of the faith
and told the boy straight
"Mussolini the line you crossed over"
The Lake Tana they want to bulldozer,
and build roads to rob the African culture
But no sir, HIM no play,
what Selassie said "no way, no please don't even touch a boulder".
So they roll down deep unto the border.
Heavy artillery with tanks and soldiers.
And they show this position,
like war is the mission,
they throw the first stone from the holster.
Jah⁶ HIM say "me today, then you tomorrow
We are peaceful people we want no war".
But they turn them back,
I feel to say they have no sorrow,
them rob Africa because they are vultures.
The Pope say that he is Christian,
but he is an obeah⁷,
They torture, enslave or extort you.
They try roll with the covenant
back to their government.
Klap! Lightning flash and it scorches you!

Sons of Italy: Ethiopia and Italy through the lyrics of Italian Reggae music

In Italy, the efforts of the fascist regime to create and maintain public consensus on political and military operations were enormous. In addition to literary, journalistic, film and radio productions, there is a vast musical repertoire that reflects the institutional commitment to support the military experience in the Horn of Africa. Countless are the songs on Ethiopia, its political and social condition, geography, customs, and traditions.⁸ "Topolino in Abyssinia" ("Mickey Mouse in Abyssinia") (1935), by Fernando Crivelli, is one of the most striking examples of how the regime used music not only to spread propaganda and gain support but also to defuse the brutality of the invasion.

Original version (Italian)	English translation
<p>Mi sono armato da solo. Ho la spada, il fucile, una mitragliatrice sulle spalle e mezzo litro di gas asfissiante nella borraccia! [...] Appena vedo il Negus lo servo a dovere, se è nero lo faccio diventare bianco dallo spavento! [...] Ma io ho molta premura, ho promesso a mia mamma di mandarle una pelle di un moro per farci un paio di scarpe. A mio padre manderò tre o quattro pelli per fare i cuscini della Balilla, a mio zio un vagone di pelli perché fa il guantaio.</p>	<p>I armed myself. I have the sword, the rifle, a machine gun on my shoulders and a pint of asphyxiating gas in the canteen! [...] As soon as I see the Negus, I'll treat him properly, If he is black, I will turn him white with fright! [...] But I'm in a hurry, I promised my mother to send her a skin of an African to make a pair of shoes. I'll send my father three or four skins to make Balilla's pillows, my uncle a wagonload of skins, as he makes gloves.</p>

During the process of liberation from fascism and after the fall of the regime, partisan and anti-fascist songs began to circulate more freely and to receive attention also from the Italian music industry. There are countless collections of anti-fascist songs, whose publication began as early as 1945, and then intensified during the 1960s, for example with the *Canti della resistenza italiana* series, produced by I Dischi del Sole. Surprisingly, this repertoire includes very few references to the Italian colonial experience. One of these is featured in a song improvised by a group of partisans on April 25, 1944, while waiting for news about the war events (Revelli 2005,160). It is the “Badoglieide” (1944, published in 1963), a political accusation against Pietro Badoglio (appointed Duke of Addis Ababa in 1936) and King Vittorio Emanuele III.

Original version (Italian)	English translation
<p>O Badoglio, o Pietro Badoglio ingrassato dal Fascio Littorio, col tuo degno compare Vittorio ci hai già rotto abbastanza i coglion. Ti ricordi quand'eri fascista e facevi il saluto romano ed al Duce stringevi la mano? sei davvero un gran bel porcaccion.</p>	<p>Oh Badoglio, oh Pietro Badoglio fattened by the Fascio Littorio, with your worthy <i>compare</i> Vittorio you've already busted our balls enough. Do you remember when you were a fascist and you were doing the Roman greeting and you shook the Duce's hand? you're a real pig.</p>

Original version (Italian)	English translation
Ti ricordi l'impresa d'Etiopia? e il ducato di Addis Abeba? meritavi di prendere l'ameba ed invece facevi i milion.	Do you remember the Ethiopian feat? and the Duchy of Addis Ababa? you deserved to take the amoeba and instead, you were making millions.

However, Italian music after fascism has never devoted particular attention to the colonial experience in the Horn of Africa. As in the case of the international music scenario, the only genre addressing the topic of the second Italo-Ethiopian war and the consequent occupation is Reggae.

The phenomenon of Reggae in Italy is certainly to be linked to the Italian socio-cultural context of the eighties, when this musical genre began to spread and develop. It is in fact to be placed in a close relationship of continuity with the cultural ferment that began in the sixties and seventies, linked to the emergence of protest movements. The popular masses, acquiring a greater political awareness, progressively identified themselves with the proletariat, both rural and urban, of which, overseas, the Jamaican Reggae described and denounced the living conditions. Although productions and events related to this genre date back to the early eighties, in the previous decade, Bob Marley's music conquered the revolutionary minds of that generation, which found themselves gathered at the San Siro Stadium in Milan and the Stadio Comunale in Turin for the memorable concerts of the 'king of Reggae' on 27 and 28 June 1980 – in Milan there was an audience of 80.000 people. From that moment on, the diffusion of Reggae music, as well as the cultural aspects associated with it, was rapid and widespread, creating the development of aggregative spaces for musical production and consumption (Bettini/Tosi 2009). There were two main themes conveyed by Jamaican music that defined the style and the artistic choices of the first Italian Reggae bands and DJs: the social protest on the one hand, and the Rastafari faith on the other. Since 1981, in different areas of the country, there was the establishment of Reggae bands with different approaches: those more related to political environments (antifascist movements) such as Different Stylee and Struggle in Puglia, and those who had instead inherited and embraced the tenets of the Rastafari spirituality, such as the Sicilian Jah Children Family, which was also the core of the first Italian Rastafari community.⁹

In line with the distinctive elements characterizing the Jamaican and international Reggae, the Italian scene has developed a repertoire of lyrics that include the topic of Ethiopia, in particular for what concerns Rastafari singers and composers, highlighting how Rastafari-inspired Reggae and narratives from Jamaica have influenced anticolonial narratives in Italian Reggae, reversing the 'Global South-Global North' power dynamics.

As for the case of the previous section, the presented data have been organized following a thematic classification: Ethiopia, Haile Selassie I, the Italian invasion.

Ethiopia

There is a large contemporary Italian production of songs on the topic of Ethiopia, or Africa at large, written in Italian and/or English and Jamaican language and interpreted by Italian singers. In this regard, the most popular Italian artist within the international Reggae scene, Alborosie (born in Sicily and raised in Bergamo), is particularly prolific. The following is an excerpt of the lyrics of “Janhoy” (2015).

Give thanks and praises to the Most High,
Janhoy, Janhoy, Janhoy!
Holy Ethiopia,
where King Selassie comes from.

The spiritual belonging to the land of Haile Selassie I is also expressed in “One-way Ticket” (2011), by the Neapolitan Ras Tewelde.

I want a one-way ticket to Addis Ababa
One-way ticket to the Mount Zion
One-way ticket to Ethiopia
Want to go back home.
So let me tell you now,
I don't need Visa to go forward home,
Lalibela is the place where I belong.

The two songs convey one of the basic concepts of the Rastafari faith: the *Repatriation*, the return to the promised land, Ethiopia, but also a spiritual condition to be achieved through prayer and meditation.¹⁰ “Repatriation” (2002) is also the title of a song by the Sicilian Jahmento.

Original version (Italian)	English translation
Rimpatrio, rimpatrio, rimpatrio! Devo seguire la rotta, questa nave è li che mi porta. È deciso, è nel segno del destino, come schiavo rapito, dalla peste liberato. Haile Selassie è il mio unico fondamento, come lui ha agito è come Jah ha ordinato.	Repatriation, repatriation, repatriation! I need to follow the route, this ship is taking me there. It's decided. It's fate, as a kidnapped slave, from the freed plague. Haile Selassie is my only foundation, he acted as Jah ordered.

Haile Selassie I

As previously mentioned, the Ethiopian emperor constitutes the primary inspiration and source for Rastafari Reggae artists. The Italian context is not an exception, as visible in the following examples, celebrating the Emperor Haile Selassie I and declaring his divinity, “Lode a Jah” (Praise to Jah) (2011) by Magadog, “Lui è la legge” (He is the Law) (2004) by Jahmento, and “Sua Maestà” (His Majesty) (2006) by Babaman.

Original version (Italian)	English translation
<p>Libero scrivo di ciò che voglio, della verità Ed ogni giorno mi sento sempre più African Lode a Jah, Rastafari – Lord Have Mercy Lode a Jah – inna the Gideon [...] chi come me, cammina insieme a te, nel santo nome e nella luce di Sua Maestà È proprio questa la mia forza, la mia spada ed il mio scudo</p>	<p>Free to write about what I want, about the truth And every day I feel more and more African Praise be to Jah, Rastafari – Lord Have Mercy Praise be to Jah – on the Judgment Day [...] people like me walk with you, in the holy name and light of His Majesty This is my strength, my sword and my shield</p>

Original version (Italian)	English translation
<p>Give thanks and praises to the Most High Jah Rastafari, Re dei Re, Signore dei Signori, Leone conquistatore della tribù di Giuda, Jah Rastafari, Re Selassie. Al disopra dell’uomo, al disopra del mondo. Al disopra dell’universo, È la che ci sta l’Uno. [...] Egli è la Legge, Egli crea simultaneamente.</p>	<p>Give thanks and praises to the Most High. Jah Rastafari, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the tribe of Judah, Jah Rastafari, King Selassie. Above man, above the world. Above the universe, That’s where The One is. He is the Law, He creates simultaneously.</p>

Original version (Italian)	English translation
<p>I&I running in your kingdom looking for your love, Selassie I Marcus Garvey ci disse un bambino nascerà cercate verso madre terra Etiopia e qui sul trono di Davide costui si siederà e così la profezia si avvererà¹¹</p>	<p>I am running in your kingdom looking for your love, Selassie I Marcus Garvey told us a baby will be born look towards mother earth Ethiopia and here on the throne of David he shall sit and so the prophecy will come true</p>

Original version (Italian)	English translation
Christ is coming back again to fight them Ras- tafari è la coscienza di ogni singolo man come back again to fight them è tornato per distruggere Azazel. ¹²	Christ is coming back again to fight them. Rastafari is the conscience of every single man He came back again to fight them, He has returned to destroy Azazel.

The invasion

The first song of the Italian Reggae repertoire providing specific data with reference to the fascist invasion of Ethiopia is “Sarà perché” (“It is because”) (2004) by one of the first Rastafari singers in Italy, Hobo (Mariano Caiano). The song is included in a musical compilation called *Reggae4Ethiopia*, produced by Reggae Meridional Crew.

Original version (Italian)	English translation
Ascolta questa voce forte e chiara, è di Hobo, I&I for Etiopia. Ascolta questo riddim che batte forte come il cuore, ti fa pensare, ti fa pensare. Quanti mari di pianti, laghi di dolori e lamenti, quante stupide guerre, no! Quanto inutile odio, quanto sangue versato che non ho capito mai. [...] Non dimenticare ciò che fece Mussolini In Africa Orientale a donne, giovani e bambini. Col fuoco rubò il cielo e col ferro acqua e terra, distrusse case e pace a chi non conosceva guerra. Con le camicie nere sporcò il sacro tricolore, verde, giallo, rosso ed il suo biblico Leone. Per questo dico leggi bene la lontana storia che diede all'Italia la vergogna e non la gloria	Listen to this voice loud and clear, It's from Hobo for Ethiopia. Listen to this riddim beating as fast as your heart, makes you think, makes you think. So many seas of weeping, lakes of sorrows and lamentations, how many stupid wars, no! How much of pointless hatred, how much spilled blood I have never understood [...] Don't forget what Mussolini did in East Africa to women, youth and children. With fire he stole the sky and with iron water and earth, destroyed homes and peace to those who knew no war. He soiled the sacred flag with his black shirts, green, yellow, red and his biblical Lion. For this reason, I say read well the distant history who gave Italy the shame and not the glory.

The song “Pope” (2015), by the Venetian singer Dan I, instead, points at the participation of the Catholic Church in the Italian colonial experience, denouncing the blessing of soldiers and armaments by the Pope (also to be understood as clergy).

Faya (fire) for the pope, for the one who bless the bombs,
to the murderer and the liar, who make the human blood run.
Faya for the pope, for the one who bless the bombs,
to the one the man call holy, let me tell you about the story.
When the vicious man moves to step upon Jah land,
with a people of a nation under corruption, to rule the kingdom of the Son
take the power from His Throne, conquer the Conquering lion,
and put the children on the ground.
But the Lion never sleeps, can't fool him with your tricks.
Get ready because the judgement comes quicker than quick.
From Italy, you want to enter our holy country
I tell you your desire is farther than what you can see.

Ras Tewelde, in his “Only in One Day” (2021), recalls the words of Haile Selassie I, who, on the day of the liberation of Addis Ababa (5 May 1941), exhorted the Ethiopian population not to reciprocate the hatred suffered by the Italians, and to put the Christian forgiveness into practice, showing love and hospitality to those Italians who wanted to stay.

HIM change the whole thing just like that day
after HIM win the war – HIM ask them to stay
and show the world what is the right the way
violence with violence we are not supposed to pay – is what Selassie say
Only in One Day – Jah Jah come to me – and change the whole thing
And when the enemies get scattered and defeated
and HIM throw the antichrist out of street
right down at the Negus feet
none of them could say they did not see it
International Morality – something that those people before have never seen
make them stumble, make them crumble
and they had to confess HIM is the Prince of Peace

The last song of the proposed selection provides the most detailed historical account of the events that occurred during the conflict in Ethiopia. It is “Figli d'Italia”, composed and performed by another pioneer of Italian Rastafari singers and composers, Guido Farella, aka Ras Caleb:

Original version (Italian)	English translation
<p>Figli d'Italia, vi voglio raccontare di una vicenda da non dimenticare. Erano i tempi in cui le nostre donne andavano tutte ancora con le gonne. Terra e lavoro, su questo si campava, tranne coloro che il popolo sfruttava: parlo dei nobili, politici e banchieri, capi d'industria, prelati e militari. Furono costoro, insieme, ad arguire che c'era ancora tanto, ma tanto da scoprire, luoghi mai visti, razze fortunate, nazioni intere, ricchezze smisurate. E fu così che un passo dopo l'altro, violentemente oppure in modo scaltro, vollero porre le basi di un impero incatenando e sfruttando l'Uomo Nero. Francia, Inghilterra, Spagna, Belgio, Portogallo, Germania, Olanda, anch'esse seppero trovarlo quel posto al sole così tanto importante da non curarsi quanto di sangue è grondante. Ed è all'Italia che viene riservato il bocconcino più degli altri prelibato, è a lei che tocca il compito cruciale di contrapporsi a Sua Maestà Imperiale. Cominciò il Papa, come al solito zelante, ad aprire strade con il suo clero militante. Dalle missioni alle caserme il passo è breve, completò l'opera di altre leve: quelle che aprivano il vano delle bombe, quelle dei gas, vallate intere trasformate in tombe! Corpi straziati, villaggi sterminati, truci delitti con grandi onori compensati.</p>	<p>Children of Italy, I want to tell you about a story not to be forgotten. Those were the days when all our women were still wearing skirts. Land and work, that's what people lived on, except for those who oppressed the people: I'm talking about the nobles, politicians and bankers, heads of industry, prelates and soldiers. They were the ones who, together, considered that there was still so much to discover, places never-before-seen, whole nations and races, boundless riches. And so it was that one step after the other, violently or cunningly, they wanted to lay the foundations of an empire by chaining and exploiting the black man. France, England, Spain, Belgium, Portugal, Germany, Holland, they could find that place in the sun, so important not to care how much blood is dripping. And it is for Italy that the best morsel is reserved, it has the crucial task of opposing His Imperial Majesty. The Pope began, zealous as usual, to open the way with his militant clergy. From missions to barracks, the pace is short, He completed the work of other levers: the ones that opened the compartment of the bombs, the gas ones, whole valleys turned into graves! Bodies torn to pieces, villages exterminated, crimes compensated with great honours.</p>

Original version (Italian)	English translation
<p>Squillano le trombe, gioisce il popolino mentre i predoni spartiscono il bottino, gloria alla patria, medaglie ai malfattori ma quanto più brindano tanto più saranno dolori. L'Imperatore, dall'esilio volontario seppe accettare stoicamente il suo calvario, già preparava, nella momentanea resa le condizioni per sanare quell'offesa. E breve fu il giubilo di coloro che arrivarono ai loro sogni, più di tanto, non durarono: se un 5 maggio Selassie dovette andare, un 5 maggio Sua Maestà può ritornare. E quale sorte toccherebbe agl'Italiani se Jah in persona non stendeva le sue mani: 'Non ripagate l'invasore con vendetta, sarà abbastanza la vergogna che li aspetta'. [...] E siccome i crimini non vengono cancellati firmando dei trattati, noi vi esortiamo ad un vero pentimento che non è tale se non c'è risarcimento. L'aggressione italiana all'Etiopia ha causato danni terribili. Privata di risorse umane e materiali, quella nazione ha subito tracolli ancora oggi devastanti. L'Italia si prodighi, dunque, per il benessere etiopico ed africano, offrendo il meglio delle sue ricchezze, senza alcun'altra condizione se non quella derivante dal principio che l'Africa è degli Africani, Etiopia per i Rastafariani.</p>	<p>The trumpets sound, the people rejoice while the marauders share the spoils, glory to the fatherland, medals to the evildoers but the more they toast, the more pain there is. The emperor, from his voluntary exile, was able to stoically accept his ordeal, already prepared, in the momentary surrender, the conditions to heal that offence. And brief was the jubilation of those who realised their dreams, they didn't last: if a May 5 Selassie had to go, a May 5 His Majesty could return. And what fate would befall the Italians if Jah himself did not stretch his hands: 'Do not repay the invader with vengeance, it'll be enough shame waiting for them'. [...] And since crimes aren't erased by signing treaties, we urge you to repent, which is not true if there is no compensation. The Italian aggression against Ethiopia has caused terrible damage. Deprived of human and material resources, that nation has been devastatingly crushed to this day. Italy should therefore do its best for the Ethiopian and African well-being, offering the best of its riches, with no conditions other than that resulting from the principle that Africa belongs to the Africans, Ethiopia to the Rastafari.</p>

This is undoubtedly the most complete song in terms of the description of historical events and the explicit stance against the fascist attack on Ethiopia. The main historiographic elements mentioned in “Figli d’Italia” are the involvement of the Catholic Church; the numerical superiority of the Italian forces; the systematic extermination, carried out using all possible means, from poisonous gases to mass mutilations and killings, even of women, children, and the clergy; the emperor’s voluntary exile in Bath and his appeal to the League of Nations; the victory and the emperor’s magnanimity towards the Italians. Moreover, the introductory and conclusive sections raise serious ethical issues, as they describe the Italian socio-political and economic situation, once forcing to look for new lands and resources to exploit, now urging for a compensation of the subjugated populations of the Horn of Africa.

A further diachronic analysis of the repertoire taken into consideration would provide rich insights into how, also due to a wider global access to information, contemporary singers and composers provide more – and more accurate – historiographical elements and descriptions than the previous generations of artists, also accounting for the dynamicity of both Reggae and Rastafari movements.

Conclusions

The music repertoire under scrutiny can be a valuable tool for analysis within the context of postcolonial studies, as it highlights the counternarrative value of music, through the dissemination of lyrics reporting historiographic elements not featured in the fascist narrative and the dominant discursive dynamics aimed at minimizing Italian colonial atrocities in Africa. Since the early eighties, Italian and international Reggae songs have exposed the brutality of the fascist invasion of Ethiopia, quoting the established literature on the subject and providing, sometimes very accurately, the summary of the main data and elements.

Besides the historiographic approach, the lyrics of Reggae songs provide a sacralised image of Ethiopia, highlighting facts and events that the propaganda of the fascist regime had somehow managed to obscure, even with the help of the Italian Church. For example, the fact that the Ethiopian ancient Judeo-Christian culture can be traced back to the first century A.D., or the words pronounced by the archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Ildefonso Schuster, on 28 October 1935, before blessing the war insignia leaving for Ethiopia: “blessed be the valiant army which, at the price of blood, opens the doors of Ethiopia to the Catholic faith and Roman civilization” (Beltrame Quattrocchi 1985). As stated by Marco Impagliazzo, “the sacralization of the war, even by military chaplains, led to the contempt of Ethiopian Christians. The clergy was, according to an authoritative Catholic magazine, ‘ignorant and corrupt’ and the Ethiopian Church ‘a larva’, indeed ‘a monstrous mixture’, because it was divided by Rome” (Impagliazzo 2018, 42).

Studies and research on Italian crimes committed in the Horn of Africa have received considerable impetus since the opening of the Vatican Secret Archives in 2006, which, albeit belatedly, has allowed a more detailed reconstruction of events and reports. In the

introduction to Lucia Ceci's 2010 text, *The Pope must not speak*, Angelo Del Boca describes the controversial attitude of Pope Pius XI, who had had a very cordial meeting with Ras Tafari in 1924 (before he became emperor of Ethiopia), and underlines how "he surely judged the war on Haile Selassie's millenary and Christian empire as absurd and criminal. Yet, we know that he never publicly denounced the Fascist aggression, because every time a peace initiative matured, slightest obstacles were replaced by prudence and the fear of damaging the privileged relations established with Mussolini's government" (Del Boca 2010, x).

The "prudence" and "fear" have probably contributed to the determination of what can be defined as selective amnesia with reference to the Italian colonial experience in the Horn of Africa, capable of reducing to a few paragraphs of school textbooks what deserves instead to be addressed in the courtrooms of international tribunals.

The same amnesia has contributed decisively to the definition of a distorted national narrative of the events of the 20th century, which has produced a legitimization of the dominant culture and prevented the cultural eradication of dangerous ideas and political principles. In this regard, particularly significant, as well as alarming, is the episode of Affile, a town near Rome, where, in 2012, the mayor and the local administration inaugurated a mausoleum in honour of Marshal Graziani, the military officer remembered, among the many war crimes, for the responsibility in the use of mustard and phosgene bombs in Ethiopia and the massacres of Addis Ababa and Debre Libanos in 1937. Once again, after an evanescent national media exposure and the late suspension of funds for the construction of the mausoleum by the regional governor Nicola Zingaretti, silence has fallen again on one of the most macabre pages of Italian history.

The historiographic approach of Italian studies to the national colonial past has only recently aimed at a deconstruction of the grand or master narrative, a functional institutional communication based on political opportunism. On the contrary, as an artistic expression of a cultural sphere in which the theme of Ethiopia is central, Reggae music, through direct lyrics and performances of artists, represents a relevant value, as it is able to produce counter-narratives using an alternative historiographical language often in contrast with institutional functional communication.

Endnotes

- 1 Renato Tomei (PhD) is associate professor of English Language and Translation at the Department of Human and Social Sciences, University for Foreigners of Perugia, Italy.
- 2 The story of the movement of the Ark from Jerusalem to Ethiopia is described in detail in the pages of the Kebra Negast, one of the texts that, together with the Bible, constitute the sacred canon of reference for the Tewahedo Orthodox Church of Ethiopia.
- 3 Nyabinghi chants are ritualistic celebratory coral compositions belonging to the traditional repertoire of the Rastafari movement, often consisting – as probably in the case of "The Lion

- of Judah” – in readaptations, made by the members of early Rastafari communities in Jamaica, of Christian gospel songs. The rhythmic pattern of Nyabinghi, and the most prominent artists performing it since 1950’s have played a fundamental role in the development of Rocksteady, Ska and Reggae. Cf. Chevannes 1994; Murrell/Spencer/McFarlane 1998; Spencer 1999; Katz 2012.
- 4 One of the latest productions of this Jamaican artist is significantly titled Victory, an album produced in 2019, whose cover features the image of the singer, mirroring that of Emperor Haile Selassie I, and decorative elements that recall the Ethiopian empire (banners, swords, spears).
 - 5 In Jamaica, ‘tallawa’ is used to describe individuals of high and robust build, often associated with prestige and social status (big man, or important person) (cf. Cassidy and LePage 1967). In this context, the term indicates influential people close to the Pope and the Vatican.
 - 6 The terms ‘Jah’, HIM (His Imperial Majesty), and ‘Janhoy’ are used by members of the Rastafari movement to refer to God, more specifically, Haile Selassie I (Pollard 2000).
 - 7 The term ‘obeah’ refers to a Jamaican spiritual practice of malignant magic, generally used to harm someone (cf. Cassidy/LePage 1967).
 - 8 There are also some collections of the greatest hits, such as *In Africa you go: Songs of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-1936)* which includes the famous “Macallè”, “Faccetta nera”, “Etiopia”, “Amba Alagi”, “Carovane del Tigrai”, “Ti saluto, vado in Abissinia”.
 - 9 On the development of the Italian Reggae movement, cf. Manfredi 2011, Scarparo and Stevenson 2018. With regard to the relationship between Italian Reggae and the development of the national Rastafari community, cf. Bonacci 2002, 2003.
 - 10 In 1948, the emperor offered a large portion of land in the south of the country (Shashamane) to the African descendants scattered throughout the world and all those who had supported the liberation of Ethiopia from the Italian invaders. The first movements back to Ethiopia started at the end of the fifties, mainly from Jamaica and the rest of the Caribbean. Currently, the Rastafari community of Shashamane is composed of almost a thousand returnees from the Caribbean, the United States, Canada, Europe, Asia, Australia and many other African countries (Bonacci 2015).
 - 11 Marcus Mosiah Garvey, one of the initiators of Pan-Africanism and Ethiopianism and founder of the UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association), is a controversial figure but accepted by the members of the Rastafari community as one of the inspiring sources of the movement. Cf. Campbell 1987; Murrell/Spencer/McFarlane 1998.
 - 12 ‘Azazel’ is the name of a mythological creature described in many ancient texts. In particular, in the Bible, this creature may represent a goat’s demon (Leviticus 16:8), but also one of the Lord’s rebellious angels who diverted mankind, teaching men to build weapons and women ornaments and cosmetics (1 Enoch 8:1).

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