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From Incunabula to Book History: Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the Search for their Printed Past*

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Introduction

The International Conference on African Bibliography, organized in Nairobi from 4 to 8 December 1967, is a milestone for studies on African bibliography.¹ Its fifty-five participants presented over twenty-five papers and discussed the problems of coordination and standardization of African bibliographical services.² Taking advantage of the occasion, it was possible to make an initial survey of the state of African national bibliographies: apart from South Africa, which has always been one of the continent's most bibliographically active countries,³ what emerged was that only Nigeria and Ethiopia possessed fairly accurate national bibliographies. For other African countries there were no national repertoires. Twenty years later, the situation had significantly improved, with twenty-five African countries that could count on this basic tool.⁴ A positive trend that, however, was destined to gradually reach a crisis point, so much so that in 2018 Hans Zell wrote that the panorama of African national bibliog-

* The author would like to thank the projects EuropeAid/159681/DD/ACT/ER, contract no. CSO-LA/2018/403-679, Digital Technologies and Cultural Heritage Preservation in Eritrea, A Framework for an Improved Action, and the PRIN 2017 Genealogies of African Freedoms for funding my research. I would like to express my gratitude to Silvia Benini, Anna Ferrando, Valentina Fusari, Marco Gardini, Ettore Morelli, and Pierluigi Valsecchi for offering their insightful comments on this article.

¹ To understand the importance of this conference, besides the volume of the proceedings (Pearson and Jones 1970), the report on the conference in the English version is also useful (cf. Pearson and Jones 1968) and its summary in French (cf. Institut Africain International 1969). A valuable reflection on the legacy of this conference is McIlwaine 2001.

² '31 from 13 African countries, 18 from 6 European countries and six from the U.S.A.', McIlwaine 2001, 7.

³ South Africa has two national libraries, the National Library of South Africa Pretoria Campus and Cape Town Campus. The former began publishing a regular list of accession in 1933, followed by the latter in 1946. Starting in 1958 and 1959, these accession lists were transformed into actual national bibliographies.

⁴ Gorman and Mills 1987.

raphies presented ‘a dismal picture’, with many countries that had by now given up collecting data and more than twenty countries without a national bibliography.⁵ When we then consider retrospective bibliographies, or bibliographies ‘restricted to materials published in the past, usually limited to a specific period of time’,⁶ Zell’s considerations became even more negative and, exception made for South Africa, almost all the other countries of the continent did not have sufficiently large and precise mappings of what had been printed within their national borders.⁷ While in 1999 the *Final Recommendations of the International Conference on National Bibliographic Services* recommended retrospective coverage ‘where practicable’,⁸ the difficulties faced by many African countries meant that the recording of current publications alone was often a utopian aim.⁹

It can be said that the need to record the arrival of the printing press in a given country, its first progress, or even just to dwell on the events of a specific editorial experience, has inspired a type of research that is easily identifiable in every African country. However, such attempts almost always lacked continuity, so much so that today they appear mostly as surveys on temporal series too limited to aspire to the title of true national bibliographies. In the absence of effective national bibliographic agencies, Zell’s pessimistic assessments still apply to many African countries, in pointing out that both the book heritage of the very early days and that linked to today’s digital revolution run the risk of oblivion.

While this is the prevailing trend, there are exceptions, as evidenced by the situation of Ethiopia and Eritrea. In these two countries there have been attempts to preserve traces of a book production that is by its very nature very evanescent, yet there has been a surprising number of studies, researches, and catalogues, as well as genuine bibliographies, which printing historians of the Horn of Africa can rely on. Initially, what stimulated interest was the understandable curiosity piqued among bibliophiles and bibliographers by printed materials coming from Africa. Such was the interest that the news of the first book printed by the Tipografia Militare of Massawa,¹⁰ and later on its first printed periodical, was reported in Italy almost in real time.¹¹ In Ethiopia, satisfaction with these

⁵ Zell 2018, 10.

⁶ Reitz 2004, 616.

⁷ In the words of John McIlwaine, ‘South Africa [is] one of the best covered nations in bibliographical terms anywhere in the world [...] There is as yet no parallel to South Africa anywhere else on the continent for effort sponsored by official bodies’, McIlwaine 2001, 12.

⁸ <https://archive.ifla.org/ubcim/icnbs/fina.htm>, accessed on 24 September 2021.

⁹ Knutsen 2007, 14.

¹⁰ *Giornale della libreria, della tipografia e industrie affini* 1888a.

¹¹ *Giornale della libreria, della tipografia e industrie affini* 1890.

first works led, in 1911, Ḥəruy Wäldä Šəllase to publish what can be considered the first catalogue of works printed in the country, *Bä'ityoḥya yämmiggäññu yämäsaḥəft quṭər* ('Enumeration of books to be found in Ethiopia').¹² But it was not until the 1960s that the first systematic collections of books printed between Ethiopia and Eritrea came to light: in 1967 Stephen Wright, with his *Ethiopian Incunabula*, offered a first survey of all books printed in Ethiopia before the Italian occupation of 1936–1941.¹³ By definition, incunabula are the 'first texts' printed with movable type, therefore the very first printed production of a given country. In Europe, the chronological period covered by incunabula ranges from 1455 to 1500. Forcing the term a bit, Wright designated as incunabula all the texts printed in Eritrea and Ethiopia from the arrival of the printing press up to 1935.¹⁴

Later on Wright's attempt inspired the research of Stefan Strelcyn, Osvaldo Raineri, and Kibrom Tseggai.¹⁵ Christiane Höjer was responsible for attempting to cover the years from 1942 to 1962,¹⁶ leaving only one major gap, that of the five years of Italian occupation.¹⁷ Subsequently, a series of selective bibliographies focused on some areas, in particular Amharic literature.¹⁸ There is also a hefty and accurate crypto-bibliography, edited by *Abba Agostinos Tädla* and

¹² Ḥəruy Wäldä Šəllase 1911/1912. According to Enrico Cerulli, Ḥəruy Wäldä Šəllase conceived the idea for this 'bibliographic attempt' in 1910 when, travelling by train between Oxford and London, a fellow passenger suggested to him the idea of compiling a catalogue of books published in Ethiopia. Hence the publication, the following year, of a 16-pages pamphlet in which the author indistinguishably assembled manuscripts and printed books, see Cerulli 1929.

¹³ Wright 1967.

¹⁴ Wright's definition ('In the present work it is used in the sense of all books printed in Ethiopia before the Italian occupation of 1936–1941', Wright 1967, iii) was later the subject of some criticism, see Hryćko 2007, 93. However, the term 'incunabula' has been adopted by all the scholars who have integrated Wright's work; Strelcyn considered the term not without a certain originality: 'ouvrage appelé non sans ingéniosité *Ethiopian Incunabula*' (Strelcyn 1971–1972, 457). Following Wright's example, in this article too, by 'Ethiopian incunabula' we mean all printed documents published in Ethiopia and Eritrea before 1936. See also 'Incunabula: Early prints in Ethiopia and Eritrea', *EAE*, III (2007), 135b–138a (G. Fiaccadori and B. Juel-Jensen); and 'Incunabula: Early prints in Ethiopia and Eritrea', *EAE*, III (2007), 138a–141a (D. Nosnitsin).

¹⁵ Strelcyn 1971–1972; Strelcyn 1978–1979; Strelcyn 1980; Raineri 1991; Kibrom Tseggai n.d.

¹⁶ Höjer 1974.

¹⁷ Garretson 1978, 286.

¹⁸ Beer 1975; Fekade Azeze 1985; Taye Assefa and Shiferaw Bekele 2000; Yonas Admassu 2001.

included in a volume of whose 506 pages it occupies a little over half.¹⁹ To these repertoires are to be added Richard Pankhurst's works of historical contextualization,²⁰ Meseret Chekol Reta's and Enrico Mania's memoirs and studies,²¹ as well as more than a dozen articles devoted to individual periodicals and literary works. Even in the absence of a summary work, what is striking is the multiplicity of experiences and their richness; a picture in strong contrast to the predominant scenarios in other African contexts.

This article focuses in particular—though not exclusively—on bibliographies whose purpose is the mapping of the Eritrean and Ethiopian first print production, focusing mainly on the quantitative data, while the typologies considered include books but also pamphlets, leaflets, and occasional publications of all kinds. The aim is to investigate the factors that contributed to polarizing scholarly interest around Eritrea's and Ethiopia's first print production and that were the background to the often collective effort aimed at recovering what Wright has defined as the 'Ethiopian incunabula'. From a methodological viewpoint, making a clear separation between the history of printing in Eritrea and Ethiopia is problematic because, while there are undeniable differences, it is also true that there were moments of strong convergence and, especially in its early years, many of the titles printed in Eritrea were designed for the Ethiopian market.²² Further, with regard to bibliographic research, the main efforts made to reconstruct this heritage were carried out by scholars who operated in a historical phase in which any research that emphasized an Eritrean identity was discouraged.

This article argues that to understand this wealth of contributions, Wright's work and the like must be viewed in a larger and more dynamic context. These contributions must not, in fact, be understood as bibliographic preciousities, but as the response to a precise cultural climate and specific research needs.

The interest surrounding the Eritrean and Ethiopian book production went through two main phases. In the first, which roughly coincides with the Italian colonial period, several scholars paid attention to this particular source type, without however arriving at comprehensive works. A second particularly fruitful phase can be placed between the 1960s and 1970s, with the appearance of the

¹⁹ Agostino Tadla 1994, 239–506.

²⁰ Pankhurst 1962.

²¹ Meseret Chekol Reta 2013; Mania 2005; Mania 2009.

²² The Swedish Mission arrived in Eritrea in 1866 with the aim of reaching the 'Galla' region, for this reason, among the first books printed in Monkullo (i.e. ጩkullu or Mankullu), we have a series of texts in Oromo, see Hylander 1969, 83–84.

first bibliographic collections specifically dedicated to the history of book production.

Since the 1990s, this type of bibliographic research has sharply decelerated, owing to a phenomenon not attributable alone to the geographical area considered in this article, but embracing the entire continent and, more generally, bibliography as a research area. The last section of this article examines the nature of this 'crisis' and evaluates the elements that may help to revitalize this line of research.

Origins

Despite their Spartan simplicity, the first works printed in Eritrea immediately captured the attention and fantasies of bibliophiles. For Ethiopists, the name Giuseppe Fumagalli is inextricably linked to the *Bibliografia etiopica*,²³ long the standard bibliography for nineteenth-century Ethiopia. It was a stroke of luck that Fumagalli, one of the greatest Italian bibliographers and, more generally, a key figure in the history of the Italian library system, had a lifelong passion for Africa.²⁴ It was Fumagalli, in 1888, who turned the attention of Italian readers to the first book printed by the Tipografia Militare of Massawa.²⁵ The news appeared in the *Giornale della libreria, della tipografia e industrie affini*, which shortly after also published a description of the printing establishment itself,²⁶ and later signalled the birth of Massawa's first newspaper.²⁷ Published in 1893, the *Bibliografia etiopica* contains references to twenty-four incunabula, but, despite Fumagalli's extreme care in identifying them, it was still a far cry from any systematic treatment of this production. In about the same years, modern Semitic and Ethiopian studies dominated interest in the first Eritrean and Ethiopian printed texts. In Rome, a prestigious school was formed around the teachings of Ignazio Guidi, which were a point of reference in the field of Italian and European Semitic studies. Ignazio Guidi was a multifaceted personality. In addition to making fundamental contributions in the history of Eastern ecclesiastical and Arab-Islamic literatures, he was the founder of modern Ethiopian studies in Italy.²⁸ His school formed, among others, Francesco Gallina, Carlo Conti Rossi-

²³ Fumagalli 1893.

²⁴ In Domenico Fava's obituary, Fumagalli is said to be a 'convinced colonialist', and the author tells of 'his pride and daring' in learning about the conquest of Ethiopia: Fava 1939–1940, 165.

²⁵ Fumagalli 1888.

²⁶ *Giornale della libreria, della tipografia e industrie affini* 1888b.

²⁷ *Giornale della libreria, della tipografia e industrie affini* 1890.

²⁸ Soravia 2005, 273.

ni, and Enrico Cerulli. For Ignazio Guidi and the ‘Roman school’, linguistic mastery and knowledge of texts were always fundamental elements for understanding the Semitic-speaking peoples. Its penchant for the philological method and linguistic expertise resulted in a preference for publishing critical editions, annotated translations and commentaries. This extraordinary sensitivity for original language works is apparent in Ignazio’s and Michelangelo Guidi’s library, now housed in the Istituto Italiano di Studi Orientali of the Sapienza Università di Roma and testifying to a constant attention to the Middle Eastern and African publishing market. Ignazio Guidi’s library contains numerous titles printed in Eritrea and Ethiopia, including one of the very rare copies of what in all likelihood is the first book ever printed in Eritrea.²⁹

Another basic tool for reconstructing the history of printing in Ethiopia and Eritrea are the bibliographic reviews of early twentieth-century academic journals. Conceived with the aim of updating scholars on current research and the most recent publications, from time to time they did not fail to mention also print production in Africa.³⁰

Attention to this production took place in a context in which the preferences of scholars clearly went to Ethiopia’s rich manuscript tradition; the first printed works were treated as ancillary documents, often curiosities, but this was enough to keep track of them and prevent their irreparable dispersion.³¹ This attitude is evident in Conti Rossini, from 1920 holder of the chair of History and Languages of Abyssinia in Rome. In his only stay in Eritrea, from 1899 to 1903, Conti Rossini collected many materials, but concentrated especially on recovering local texts, to supersede the dependence on the Ethiopian collections of European libraries that had characterized works published until then.³² His interest in original language documentation also implied an attention to the first works printed in the Horn of Africa, towards which, however, Conti Rossini showed reservations that, perhaps, he never managed to overcome. An attitude that appears clearly in his periodic and accurate bibliographic reviews of Ethiopian studies. In that of 1911, for example, there are no publications printed in Eritrea and Ethiopia.³³ An exclusion motivated by the low scientific value that he ap-

²⁹ Bel 1867.

³⁰ One of the first scientific periodicals to take up this habit was the *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, published starting in 1907 by the Scuola Orientale dell’Università di Roma, see Guidi 1910; Conti Rossini 1913; Vaglieri 1916, 60–71.

³¹ For example, the governor Ferdinando Martini sent the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze about twenty volumes printed in Eritrea which appeared in the 31 August 1898 issue of the *Bollettino delle pubblicazioni italiane ricevute per diritto di stampa*.

³² Cerulli 1949, 98. For the years Conti Rossini spent in Eritrea, see Dore 2014.

³³ Conti Rossini 1911.

parently felt these texts had, ‘so their omission does not seem to me to matter’.³⁴ Although over time Conti Rossini attenuated his reluctance, he never fully overcame it, so that among the approximately four hundred works included in his bibliographic review of 1927, only forty-four were printed in Eritrea and only sixteen in Ethiopia.³⁵ In the end, Conti Rossini’s ostracism was aimed mainly at religious texts, ‘because they are of no scientific interest’,³⁶ and later on he conceded that perhaps local production could be included in a possible ‘special review’.³⁷

Most likely, over time Conti Rossini understood that the phenomenon had reached such proportions that it could no longer be ignored, to the point of recognizing that the local publications made it possible to ‘keep up with the cultural trends down there’³⁸ and observe the transformations that Amharic was undergoing ‘due to the country’s passage from its ancient state of millennial barbarism to European civilization, and neologisms arise almost every day’.³⁹ He went on to praise Cerulli, who in those years was showing a keen interest in these materials, even if it was forced to be a mostly passing recognition given that, in the last Ethiopian bibliography he edited, Conti Rossini once again excluded books printed in Africa.⁴⁰

As we have seen, a different matter was the sensitivity shown by Cerulli, who between 1926 and 1933 wrote seven articles on the Ethiopian press,⁴¹ presenting and analysing fifty-one works. It is difficult to summarize briefly how Cerulli managed to gather these materials. Certainly, his fieldwork was fundamental, but in most cases his access was mediated or indirect, exposing him at times to inaccuracies.⁴²

Cerulli had noted how, when the World War I was raging in Europe, in Addis Abāba there was a flowering of political publications in the Amharic language.

³⁴ Conti Rossini 1927, 460.

³⁵ Conti Rossini 1927.

³⁶ Conti Rossini 1936, 468.

³⁷ Conti Rossini 1936. In this bibliography, out of the seven hundred titles listed, ten were printed in Eritrea and twenty-seven in Ethiopia.

³⁸ Conti Rossini 1936, 475–476.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 566.

⁴⁰ Conti Rossini 1944–1945. In motivating the decision he was quite trenchant: ‘non esser-vene qui menzione poco nuocerà agli studi’ (‘not being mentioned here will do little harm to studies’) (*ibid.*, 3).

⁴¹ Cerulli 1926a; 1926b; 1927; 1928; 1932a; 1932b; 1933.

⁴² Apropos of this see Hylander 1969 in which a series of criticisms are raised at the presentation Cerulli made of Onesimus Nesib’s *Galla Spelling Book*, see Cerulli 1922.

They were the ‘harbingers of an awakening’⁴³ whose importance Cerulli felt immediately and wanted to be a witness of, convinced that through these works it was possible to grasp the ‘mentality and [the] degree of culture of today’s Abyssinians’⁴⁴ and the ‘cultural movement that for some years has been taking place under the high patronage of the *negusa nagast* Hāyila Sellāsē’.⁴⁵ What Bahru Zewde has called ‘the intellectual vibrancy that prevailed in the 1920s’⁴⁶ was also having profound repercussions on the level of language, with the rapid adaptation of Amharic to the new cultural context,⁴⁷ and, subsequently, the decisive increase in the circulation of books.⁴⁸

Between Conti Rossini’s attitude of withdrawal and detachment and Cerulli’s attention, it was the latter that prevailed, and the first Italian academic journals devoted to the Islamic world and, later, to the Ethiopian world recognized the importance of these types of sources. The Istituto per l’Oriente (later entitled to Carlo Alfonso Nallino), founded on 13 March 1921, introducing itself to the public on the occasion of the release of the first issue of *Oriente Moderno*, stated that the institute’s purpose was to provide information based on ‘genuine sources’ and that for this reason it had taken on the task of collecting information that examined the major European-language journals such as those ‘in Arabic, Armenian, Persian and Turkish’.⁴⁹ *Oriente Moderno* ran two regular columns, ‘Chronicles and Documents’ and ‘Various News’, largely based on information obtained from Middle Eastern newspapers. While the new journal focused its attention on the Islamic world, the editorial staff immediately vowed not to neglect ‘the Christian and Jewish enclaves’⁵⁰ and entrusted Cerulli with the task of following the Ethiopian news, which he did while always paying attention to the local press, of which he often published broad excerpts.⁵¹

Starting in 1921, in the Ethiopian capital *Bərhanənnā sālam* (‘Light and peace’) began to operate a state-owned printing press, which, strongly desired

⁴³ Cerulli 1926a, 167.

⁴⁴ Cerulli 1926b, 555a.

⁴⁵ Cerulli 1932a, 170.

⁴⁶ Bahru Zewde 2002, 211.

⁴⁷ Cerulli 1933, 58.

⁴⁸ Rubinkowska-Anioł 2018, 69.

⁴⁹ *Oriente Moderno* 1921, 1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵¹ See for example Cerulli and Rossi 1927, where the controversy over the appointment of the new metropolitan of Ethiopia, the Bolshevik question, and the appointment of new heads, ministers, and dignitaries were all presented on the basis of articles published in *Bərhanənnā sālam* and *A’məro* (‘Knowledge’); for *Bərhanənnā sālam* see ‘Bərhanənnā Sālam’, *EAE*, I (2003), 537a–b (H. Rubinkowska-Anioł).

by Täfäri Mäk^wännən, was directed by Gäbrä Krəstos Täklä Haymanot, recently arrived from Asmära. Under the direction of Gäbrä Krəstos, the printing house began to work at full speed, turning out relatively inexpensive books on the market.⁵² Täfäri Mäk^wännən's satisfaction was such that he took care to donate some specimens of these publications to the École nationale des langues orientales vivantes in Paris and to the Seminar für Orientalische Sprachen in Berlin,⁵³ while, in 1927, Həruy Wäldä Šəllase, a key figure in Ethiopia's political and cultural history between the two wars, edited a second edition of his 1911 bibliography.⁵⁴

Cerulli's example was soon followed by other scholars, all convinced that local publications offered a unique opportunity to grasp the transformations under way in Ethiopian society. Among these was undoubtedly Martino Mario Moreno,⁵⁵ who, after two years in Eritrea (1929–1931) as director of Civil Affairs, in 1931 became a counsellor at the Regia Legazione d'Italia in Addis Abäba. The conviction that 'the literature of a people is one of the principal documents of its mentality',⁵⁶ together with the awareness that Ethiopia in those years was undergoing important changes, were the basis of the numerous, often hefty and learned reviews that Moreno prepared, initially for *Oriente Moderno* and subsequently for the *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*.⁵⁷ The latter journal, starting in 1943, decided to devote more space to the 'more significant documents of the new Amharic literature'⁵⁸ by publishing the translation, edited by Luigi Fusella, who taught Amharic at the Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli, of the short history of Emperor Yohannəs written by Həruy Wäldä Šəllase,⁵⁹ and later with an article by Elena Sengal on the Amharic texts published in Addis Abäba up to the Italian conquest.⁶⁰ Three years later, Fusella, openly acknowledging his debt

⁵² De Lorenzi 2015, 43–44.

⁵³ Cerulli 1926a, 167. The volumes donated to the École nationale des langues orientales vivantes in Paris were later catalogued by Marcel Cohen, see Cohen 1925.

⁵⁴ Həruy Wäldä Šəllase 1927/1928. Conti Rossini did not have a great opinion either of this work or of its author. He wrote of the first that 'it would be easy to demonstrate notable gaps' (Conti Rossini 1936, 474), while, about the author, Conti Rossini considered Həruy's words 'the manifestation of a poorly digested European culture' (Conti Rossini 1942, 212). For a more thoughtful and informed assessment, see instead De Lorenzi 2015, 1–5.

⁵⁵ Lusini 2017.

⁵⁶ Moreno 1932, 563.

⁵⁷ See for example Moreno 1947.

⁵⁸ Fusella 1943, 200.

⁵⁹ Fusella 1943.

⁶⁰ Sengal 1943. On Elena Sengal's life see Fusella and Tubiana 2018.

to Cerulli, published 'Recenti pubblicazioni amariche in Abissinia'.⁶¹ At the end of his career, he published the translation of Hərüy Wäldä Šəllase's biographies.⁶² Another Ethiopist who was very attentive to the Ethiopian press was Lanfranco Ricci, who wrote almost twenty reviews among which that of the *Dizionario progressista amarico*.⁶³ When Ricci joined the Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli in the early 1960s, he reorganized the institute's long neglected library, taking pains to obtain texts directly from Ethiopia.⁶⁴

Sensitivity towards the local press was not a prerogative of Italian Ethiopian studies alone. The first three issues of the journal *Annales d'Éthiopie* welcomed the contributions of Pierre Comba of the Lycée franco-éthiopien Guébré-Mariam in Addis Abäba. It was a summary of the author's visits to the major bookstores in the Ethiopian capital.⁶⁵ Comba's three articles are precious because they offer a rare insight into Ethiopian publications in circulation in the mid-1950s and testify to the emergence of new types of texts: manuals, technical literature, and self-help. The pamphlet novels phenomenon in Addis Abäba was treated by Solomon Deressa in a short but very interesting article published in the late 1960s.⁶⁶ After World War II, print production became chaotic, so much so that it is not at all easy to reconstruct this phase. Despite strict government control, the lack of a printing press was equated with backwardness and the 'print revolution' with civilization,⁶⁷ hence a flourishing of endeavours only partially included in works such as the hefty *Guide Book of Ethiopia* and, still in the same year, Aklilä Bərhan Wäldä Qirqos's inventory.⁶⁸

Books, Libraries and the African Quest for Development

Attention to the printed heritage of African countries found new life in the phase culminating in the period of independence. Investing energy and financial resources in schools, universities, libraries, archives, and museums was considered an agent of cultural and economic development.⁶⁹ Although the resources were

⁶¹ Fusella 1946.

⁶² Fusella 1984–1986; 1987.

⁶³ Without going into the detail of the individual reviews, they are reported in Ricci 1950 and Ricci 1978–1979.

⁶⁴ Yaqob Beyene 2008, 219.

⁶⁵ Comba 1955; 1957; 1959.

⁶⁶ Solomon Deressa 1969a. By the same author there is also an interesting cross section of cultural life in Addis Abäba published in the same year: see Solomon Deressa 1969b.

⁶⁷ In Arthur Asseraf's words, even in Ethiopia the printing press was 'not just a symbol of civilization but the most effective way of creating it', Asseraf 2019, 28.

⁶⁸ The Chamber of Commerce 1954; Aklilä Bərhan Wäldä Qirqos 1960/1961.

⁶⁹ Laugesen 2014.

mainly intended for the fight against illiteracy, there was no lack of initiatives to strengthen university education and research. On this point, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which had the broad mission of promoting world peace through the sharing of educational, scientific, and cultural resources across international borders, played a crucial role.⁷⁰ Two early UNESCO director generals were from the library field: Jaime Torres Bodet (1942–1952)⁷¹ had been for a time head of the Department of Libraries within the Mexican Ministry of Education, while his successor, Luther Harris Evans (1953–1958), had been the tenth librarian of Congress from 1945 to 1953. The first periodical issued by UNESCO was the *Bulletin for Libraries*, a bimonthly journal that first appeared in April 1947. The same year saw the activation of a partnership with the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and the promotion of library development in the Global South became one of its main priorities.⁷² Although the original UNESCO initially showed scarce attention to Africa,⁷³ from the second half of the 1950s its commitment gradually increased. The IFLA and UNESCO encouraged and supported the creation of national bibliographies through congresses and publications. In 1974 the IFLA published *Universal Bibliographic Control: A Long Term Policy—A Plan for Action*, which stressed ‘the responsibility of national bibliographic agencies for creating an authoritative bibliographic record of publications of their own countries’.⁷⁴

The same emphasis on the educational power of print is found in many of the programmes sponsored by various cooperation agencies, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Soviet State Committee for Foreign Economic Relations (Gosudarstvennyi komitet po vneshnim ekonomicheskim sviaziam, GKES), both of which had major book donation schemes in place.⁷⁵

The 1950s and 1960s was also a time of profound transformation for African studies. Under the pressure of decolonization, new orientations and methodologies began to emerge and, in many American universities, area studies programmes were launched with significant resources even earmarked for the formation of African collections. In 1957, at the time of its creation, the African

⁷⁰ Coleman 2005, 127.

⁷¹ Second Director General.

⁷² Lor 2012, 272.

⁷³ Matasci 2020, 3.

⁷⁴ Nepori and Sabba 2019, 75. In 1979 UNESCO published *Guidelines for the National Bibliographic Agency and the National Bibliography*.

⁷⁵ Brouillette 2014, 37.

Studies Association (ASA) established a Archives/Libraries Committee (now Africana Librarians Council, ALC), one of whose objectives was to coordinate the activities of librarians, archivists, or documentalists working with materials from and about Africa. In 1961, the ASA's Archives/Libraries Committee was discussing the project of having a 'roving acquisition officer in Africa for the gathering of materials'.⁷⁶ The following year, the Library of Congress set up its Overseas Operations Offices with the aim of collecting non-European materials for distribution among American libraries. When, in 1966, Congress funded the National Program for Acquisition and Cataloging (NPAC), it was possible to inaugurate the Library of Congress Office in Nairobi, which still today does the collection work in twenty-eight countries south of the Sahara.⁷⁷

The following year, the International Conference on African Bibliography (Nairobi, 4–8 December 1967) was organized with the participation of fifty-five delegates from Africa, Europe, and the USA,⁷⁸ in which Ethiopia was represented by Rita Pankhurst, university librarian at the Haile Selassie I University of Addis Abāba. A conference destined to make history, even if the plan to follow it up never materialized. Mostly struggling with the aim of quickly providing themselves with the tools to produce national bibliographies—defined, very generically, as 'Lists of publications produced within a given country'⁷⁹—the discussions did not fail to encourage a retrospective effort, even if this appeared to be less compelling. There was a strong push to promulgate a legal deposit law, the request to submit copies of a publication to an official repository, considered a *sine qua non* condition in the process of assembling national bibliographies.

Enthusiasm for the Cause of Libraries

Ethiopia played a leading role in this particular international situation. As soon as he returned from exile in Great Britain, Ḥaylā Šəllase I promoted a decisive build-up of his country's educational and research structures. The National Library of Ethiopia (*Yähəzb betä mäṣahəft wämäzäkkər*) was opened on 5 May 1944 with an initial stock of about 15,000 books largely inherited from the Italian government library.⁸⁰ The library was at first entrusted to the care of Säräqä Bərhan Gäbrä Əgzi'abḥər, who also made use of foreign expert-advisors: Hans

⁷⁶ *African Studies Bulletin* 1961, 31.

⁷⁷ Howard-Reguindin 2004.

⁷⁸ See McIlwaine 2001, 7.

⁷⁹ Pearson and Jones 1968, 296.

⁸⁰ In 1968 the books in stock had raised to 83,300, see Paton 1969, 14; Pankhurst and Pankhurst 2013.

Wilhelm Locket remained at the National Library for more than twenty years, flanked, for a certain period, by Stephen Wright and Rita Pankhurst.⁸¹ Between 1959 and 1960 two divisions were formed: a research division and a public division. The former had the task of gathering copies of all Ethiopian publications issued at home and abroad, and of publishing lists of all materials published in Ethiopia. Plagued by organizational and economic problems, the National Library succeeded only partially in fulfilling its demanding mandate.⁸²

Alongside the National Library, the other major library of the country was the library of the University College of Addis Ababa (UCAA), which, funded in 1950, was the first modern institution of higher learning in Ethiopia. The UCAA library organized the first exhibition of books in Amharic and published bibliographical works on Ethiopia. In 1961, the UCAA was renamed Haile Selassie I University (later, in 1975, Addis Ababa University, AAU), and in December of the same year the university library was inaugurated. As Richard Pankhurst recalled, 'the transition from College to University was effected wherever possible by staff transfers, rather than by new appointments'.⁸³

Stanisław Chojnacki, former chief librarian at the UCAA Library, where he worked at forming a comprehensive Aethiopia collection, was named librarian at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES), officially funded in 1963 and directed by Richard Pankhurst until 1975.⁸⁴ Wright, from the National Library, was made the head of the Amharic section at the IES Library and later arranged for his personal collection to be shared between the IES and the National Library, the former receiving books published in Ethiopia and the latter entrusted with foreign-published books about the country.⁸⁵ Lastly, Rita Pankhurst was moved from the National Library to the Haile Selassie I University Library and later became the first librarian of the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library.

Among IES's main activities was managing a specialized library on Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, and creating and overseeing an ethnological museum. Its library took shape by the transfer to the institute's premises of the UCAA Library's entire Ethiopian section, with books in Ethiopian languages as well as all other languages. The library prioritized not only works on Ethiopia but also 'all

⁸¹ For a decidedly rare circumstance, with the exception of Wright, all the librarian protagonists of this period left useful memoirs for reconstructing the spirit of those days: Locket 1989; Singh 1999; Chojnacki 2010; Pankhurst and Pankhurst 2013.

⁸² On the National Library of Ethiopia see Hryčko 2007; Wright 1964; Wion 2006, 30. See also 'Archives and libraries: II. Libraries', *EAE*, V (2014), 244a–248a (R. Pankhurst).

⁸³ Pankhurst and Pankhurst 2011.

⁸⁴ Heery 2004, 8.

⁸⁵ Wion 2006, 6; Pankhurst and Pankhurst 2011, 217; Pankhurst 2012, 134.

publications produced in Ethiopia itself.⁸⁶ Hence, from the very start, attention also went to materials published in the country, with regular annual acquisition visits to Asmāra, an attention that also materialized in the organization of the first exhibition of Amharic books printed in Ethiopia.⁸⁷ The IES also promoted numerous publishing and bibliographic activities: in addition to the *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, it edited the publication of *A List of Current Periodical Publications in Ethiopia* (published every two years from 1964 to 1974) and *Ethiopian Publication*, an annual listing by subject that included books, pamphlets, annuals, and periodical articles published in Ethiopia.⁸⁸ Originally edited by Chojnacki, it was organized in two sections: the first containing works in Ethiopian languages, and the second works in foreign languages.⁸⁹ Another bibliography of particular interest that IES published was *A Catalogue of Clandestine Literature on Ethiopia* (1995).⁹⁰

When in 1975 Chojnacki retired, the IES Library possessed 10,600 works in Ethiopian languages and some 14,350 works in foreign languages.⁹¹ Also in the same year, the first legal deposit law was promulgated, making it possible to avoid a bibliographic blackout on national production and allowing, from 1981 on, the Legal Deposit and Bibliography Section of the Department of Library and Archives in the Ministry of Culture and Sports to publish their national bibliography indexes under the title of *Ethiopian Publications*.⁹²

The reinforcement of the national library system also took place through the active participation of foreign institutions. In 1946 the British Council Library was inaugurated, an institution committed to disseminating books and to devel-

⁸⁶ Pankhurst 1991, 612.

⁸⁷ Pankhurst and Pankhurst 2011, 217.

⁸⁸ With Richard Pankhurst, Chojnacki published an annual *Register of Current Research on Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa*.

⁸⁹ For Jerry J. James *Ethiopian Publications* was ‘excellent and especially praiseworthy for a country which has no real legal deposit act’ (James 1970, 76); see also Nepori and Sabba 2019, 76.

⁹⁰ ‘Institute of Ethiopian Studies’, *Eae*, III (2007), 168a–169b (R. Pankhurst), esp. 169b.

⁹¹ Pankhurst and Pankhurst 2011, 217.

⁹² These biographies were topic-based and included all materials printed in Ethiopia and abroad gathered by virtue of the legal deposit law of 1975. According to a list published by Katarzyna Hryćko these publications were *Ethiopian Periodicals and Non-book Publications Index of the Legal Deposit and Bibliography Section*; *Bibliography on Ethiopian Literature of the Legal Deposit and Bibliography Section*; *Bibliography on Religious Works of the Legal Deposit and Bibliography Section*; *The Index of the Legal Deposit and Bibliography Section*; *Author Index of the Legal Deposit and Bibliography Section*; *Holdings of English Language Publications of the Legal Deposit and Bibliography Section*.

oping librarianship overseas.⁹³ In 1965, the British Council Library in Ethiopia had a collection comprising 9,800 volumes and 120 periodicals, with a membership of 3,646 and a yearly circulation of 33,000 volumes.⁹⁴ In 1959, the United States Information Service inaugurated its own American Library, soon imitated by the cultural institutes of Germany, Italy, France, and Russia.⁹⁵ Soon after its first session in January 1959, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) established a research library which in 1963 already contained some 18,000 items.⁹⁶ The library was directed by Surjit Singh, an experienced Indian librarian who had graduated in library science from the University of Michigan and arrived in Addis Abäba in 1959. This international make-up was reinforced by Ethiopia's participation in the acquisitions programme brought forward by the Library of Congress through its Nairobi office, while, thanks to funds made available by USAID, in 1970 the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library was inaugurated on the Haile Selassie I University campus.⁹⁷

These were massive investments that produced encouraging results, so much so that in the 1960s Ethiopia, bibliographically speaking, was among the most virtuous countries on the African continent. In the 1950s and 1960s the country's cultural landscape was effervescent, to the point of prompting Albert X. Gérard to declare that 'Ethiopia is at present one of the most prolific areas of sub-Saharan Africa as regards the production of poetry, plays and prose fiction in the vernacular tongue'.⁹⁸ A promising market, so much so that, when Oxford University Press decided to focus on Africa, it landed very early in Ethiopia, opening in Addis Abäba its own representative office, which also published texts in Amharic and remained operational until 1975.⁹⁹

While many texts dwell on the dynamism and cultural exuberance of Ethiopia in the 1950s–1960s, no comparable reconstruction took place for Eritrea.¹⁰⁰ The available elements indicate a phase of intense creativity and production in the aftermath of the end of Italian rule, but also its progressive waning, the effect of increasingly strict censorship and a deteriorating political situation.¹⁰¹

⁹³ Coleman 2005, 123.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁹⁶ Singh 1963.

⁹⁷ For an overview of the state of Ethiopia's public libraries at the end of 1968, see Paton 1969.

⁹⁸ Gérard 1968, 53–54.

⁹⁹ Ficquet and Shiferaw Bekele 2005, 86. Among these texts, see for example Bachrach 1967.

¹⁰⁰ Worth mentioning is *Alämsägäd Täsfay's* trilogy covering the years 1941–1962: *Alämsägäd Täsfay* 2002; *Alämsägäd Täsfay* 2005; *Alämsägäd Täsfay* 2016; *Asras Täsämma* 2006; Ghirmai Negash 2010; Temesghen Tesfamariam 2020.

¹⁰¹ Ficquet and Shiferaw Bekele 2005, 86.

In this electrifying climate, and taking advantage of the fact that it hosted the headquarters of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the ECA, Ethiopia seemed to cherish the idea of proposing itself as leader of bibliographic activities on a continental level. Already in 1960 a survey of higher education in Ethiopia, conducted by The University of Utah, advocated founding a centre for African studies in Ethiopia and creating ‘an international focal point for African research and serv[ing] as a clearing house and conference center for scholarship on the African continent’.¹⁰² Eight years later, the UNESCO-sponsored Gillette Survey visited the country and determined the feasibility and need for establishing a regional documentation centre for children.¹⁰³

The Nairobi conference discussed creating an ‘operating center on international basis’ with the mandate to produce ‘a comprehensive current bibliography of Africa’.¹⁰⁴ The centre would make use of a sophisticated computerized system and would also assume a document delivery function that would enable users to receive copies of stored documents.¹⁰⁵ The Ethiopian capital was nominated to host this centralized technical centre, where all bibliographic data would converge from the main African research centres, possibly under the aegis of the ECA.

Partly drawing inspiration from this project, in 1974 Robert Thayer Jordan and Kebeab Wolde Giorgis presented the project of creating in Addis Abäba an African Bibliographic Center (ABC)¹⁰⁶. Later, the activities moved to Tanzania, where Colin Darch (then at the University of Dar es Salaam Library) led the project.¹⁰⁷

The dream of hosting a regional information system in Addis Abäba came true in January 1980 when—with the support of the ECA, the International Development Research Center (IDRC), and the governments of Germany and the Netherlands—Addis Abäba became the headquarters of the Pan African Development System (PADIS). PADIS’s functions were to include data collection and dissemination, technological and scientific development, and the facilitation of information exchange in Africa through the collection and sharing of data and information on development, and to provide access to published and unpublished documents produced in Africa. The project operated through a central

¹⁰² Aklilu Habte et al. 1963, 4.

¹⁰³ Coleman 2005, 128.

¹⁰⁴ Pearson and Jones 1968, 298; Pankhurst 1968, 265.

¹⁰⁵ McIlwaine 2001, 13.

¹⁰⁶ Jordan and Kebeab Giorgis 1974; 1975.

¹⁰⁷ Darch 1977. One outcome of the project were the five volumes of the *African Index to Continental Periodical Literature* covering the period 1976–1981.

Addis Abäba office and other regional offices. The initiative was undoubtedly ambitious but failed to achieve the desired results. An evaluation of the project that appeared in 1995 concluded ‘that PADIS as it was then operating was almost totally ineffective’.¹⁰⁸

Ethiopian Incunabula

In the cultural context that we have just outlined, it should not be surprising that some scholars have tried to map local press production, or even just some of its portions, and that this commitment has been somehow collective, having involved several authors over two decades. The extreme vitality of the Ethiopian publishing scene in the 1950s and 1960s led some observers to pay attention to the book market and to the production and reading tastes of the Ethiopian capital.¹⁰⁹ Alongside these surveys, there were also the first attempts at retrospective bibliographies of local production: in 1961, Comba published an inventory of publications in Amharic of the Ethiopian section of the UCAA Library.¹¹⁰ Six years later, Gérard published a bibliography on early Amharic creative writing, intended mainly as a tool for encouraging further research.¹¹¹

The most significant work of this phase was that of Wright, a British librarian who, before joining the National Library of Ethiopia, worked at the Bodleian Library in Oxford. An expert on Amharic, Wright had translated several Amharic texts into English and in 1967 published his *Ethiopian Incunabula*, a bibliography of the books printed in Ethiopia and Eritrea from the arrival of print up to 1935, preserved in the country’s two main libraries: the National Library of Ethiopia and the Haile Selassie I University Library. Complying with the best bibliographic practices, Wright provided his work with clear indications of its scope and coverage, and identified 223 titles,¹¹² an undoubtedly important result, achieved in the absence of such a fundamental tool as the legal deposit law.¹¹³ The bibliography is divided into three parts: an alphabetical list of the authors with a brief description of their works; an extended description of the volumes

¹⁰⁸ McIlwaine 2007, 14.

¹⁰⁹ Comba 1955; Comba 1957; Comba 1959; Solomon Deressa 1969b.

¹¹⁰ Comba 1961.

¹¹¹ Gérard 1968, 56–59.

¹¹² Wright writes in his Preface that the titles he found totaled to 223 (Wright 1967, iv).

¹¹³ Garretson 1978, 286. In 1975, with proclamation no. 50, the first legal deposit law was enforced in the country by the Provisional Military Administrative Council: all Ethiopian publishers were asked to submit three copies of each publication to the National Library. The previous attempts to enforce a legal deposit law failed; an interesting description of these early attempts is found in Pankhurst and Pankhurst 2013, 180–181.

arranged by town of printing and printing press, and, lastly, a chronological list of the volumes. Despite the importance of this work, Wright specified that his was a ‘handlist’,¹¹⁴ a ‘provisional list of items’,¹¹⁵ stressing its provisional nature already in the Preface,¹¹⁶ such that a second edition was considered inevitable and desirable.¹¹⁷ The work was favourably received by scholars, who immediately recognized its importance, while its critics always maintained a constructive tone.¹¹⁸ Along with the second edition, Wright also planned a bibliography on the 1935–1941 period of Italian occupation, and then a research dedicated to the years 1941–1950.¹¹⁹ Wright died on 14 February 1976, without having completed any of these projects, and it was a real pity. A little over half a century after the publication of *Ethiopian Incunabula*, one cannot but appreciate Wright’s work, which has attracted the attention of scholars to this precious documentation, thus contributing to its preservation.

More than in the volume’s accuracy and completeness, Wright’s three choices aroused some criticism. The most obvious was to include only a part of the titles in Italian published in Eritrea, which Wright justified in this way:

However, in view of the large number of entirely Italian works printed in Eritrea up to (and after) 1936, some books issued (through whatever printer) by the Italian administration have been excluded. This separation is admittedly arbitrary, and open to objection from pedantic bibliographers, but it seemed necessary if this handlist were not to be ‘swamped’ by publication in Italian of essentially ‘colonial’ interest.¹²⁰

Considering that the titles thus excluded were several hundred, this choice had a significant impact on the final result.¹²¹

A second element of fragility was the decision to limit the investigation to 1935, a choice then imitated by numerous other authors (i.e. Peter P. Garretson and Gérard).¹²² In political terms, the Italian invasion was undoubtedly a traumatic period, but, in those of the history of the printing, the arrival of the Italians

¹¹⁴ Wright 1967, 3.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 4.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 21.

¹¹⁸ Edward Ullendorff published a review of the book in Ullendorff 1968, in which he recognized the usefulness of the work and pointed out some inevitable lacunae.

¹¹⁹ Strelcyn 1971–1972, 457.

¹²⁰ Wright 1967, iv.

¹²¹ For a critical evaluation of this choice, see Strelcyn 1971–1972, 457–458.

¹²² Garretson 1978, 286; Gérard 1968, 51: ‘The growth of this budding literature of modern Ethiopia was prematurely interrupted by the Italian invasion of 1935’.

did not entail a halt in printing activities, which, on the contrary, flourished despite the strict control of the Italian authorities.¹²³ The list edited in 1939 by the Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda of Africa Orientale Italiana reported for Ethiopia one newspaper in Italian (*Corriere dell'Impero*) and four weekly newspapers (*Il Lunedì dell'Impero*; *L'Impero Illustrato*; *L'Impero del Lavoro*; *La Pattuglia*), twelve official administrative publications, and six of various types. Two weeklies were printed for the non-Italian public, one in Amharic (*YäQesar Mängəst Mäləktäñña* ('Courier of [Italian] empire'), with a circulation of about 20,000 copies, first issue 4 March 1938) and one in Arabic (*Barīd al-Imbīrātūrīya*, 'Courier of [Italian] empire', with a circulation of 10,000 copies). A monthly in Amharic was also printed, *YäRoma Bərhan* ('Light of Rome', with a circulation of 10,000 copies, first issue June 1939),¹²⁴ while from September 1929 the Direzione Generale Affari Politici began to publish *Tāhaddäsät Ityōpya* ('Ethiopia was renovated'). In 1940 a periodical was also launched in Oromo: *Busta dell'Ascari del Galla and Sidama*.¹²⁵ In the same years, the Ethiopian resistance circulated *Amdä bərhan zä'ityōpya* ('Pillar of light of Ethiopia'), while the British army edited the field newspaper *Banderaččən* ('Our flag').¹²⁶ In 1941 the central government library for Africa Orientale Italiana opened to the public in Addis Abāba.¹²⁷

A third limitation was represented by the exclusion of periodical publications: 'all newspapers and other periodicals have been excluded. Information about these has already appeared in various sources, and it would take a great deal of time and labor to expand this to proper bibliographical proportions'.¹²⁸ Works that had already addressed the matter of the periodical press in Ethiopia are those of Erich Weinzinger, Stephen Gaselee, Adrien Zervos, and Franco Bianca.¹²⁹ All in all, a decision, the exclusion of periodicals, that today appears hardly acceptable, but it should not be forgotten that, in excluding periodicals, Wright was conforming to a very common practice in the bibliographic field. Obviously, it was not a neutral and unimportant choice: it was periodicals that hosted much of the literary and poetic production in local languages,¹³⁰ and,

¹²³ Even Conti Rossini noted this in his latest bibliographic review devoted to Ethiopian publications: Conti Rossini 1944–1945, 7.

¹²⁴ Governo Generale dell'A.O.I., Ufficio Stampa e Propaganda 1939, 27.

¹²⁵ Tosco 2020.

¹²⁶ Pankhurst 2009.

¹²⁷ Hryčko 2007, 93.

¹²⁸ Wright 1967, iii.

¹²⁹ Weinzinger 1928; Gaselee 1930; Zervos 1936; Bianca 1963.

¹³⁰ Ullendorff 1967.

more generally, important information at all levels can be gleaned from their pages.

Of the three critical issues discussed, the first appeared the most obvious. In 1969, Stefan Strelcyn, after having funded the Department of Semitic Studies within the Oriental Studies Institute of Warsaw University, left for the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and later became professor at the University of Manchester. His name has remained linked to research on Oriental manuscripts, Ethiopian magic and medicine, and the study of Early Amharic. On the sidelines of these interests, Strelcyn also curated valuable research on the history of printing in Ethiopia and Eritrea, seeking to complete Wright's work.¹³¹ Analysing the collections held in six libraries in Rome, between 1970 and 1971 Strelcyn prepared a *supplément* containing 230 new titles. A result obtained in large part due to the decision to include all the texts printed in Eritrea and Ethiopia, overcoming Wright's ostracism towards Italian production in Eritrea.¹³² Although Strelcyn had doubled the list of titles, he sensed that there was considerable room for improvement, so that, after visiting in 1976 the Faitlovitch Collection at Tel Aviv University, and later the collection at the Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli, Strelcyn printed a second *supplément* with 168 new incunabula.¹³³ The third chapter of his work also contained a broad section devoted to printers operating in the two countries up to 1935.¹³⁴

In 1980, Strelcyn met *Abba* Kibrom Tseggai, who was in Rome for study reasons at the Pontificio Collegio Etiopico in the Vatican City. On Strelcyn's encouragement, *Abba* Kibrom Tseggai did a series of researches at five important religious libraries in the Lazio region. Strelcyn died on 19 March 1981 in Manchester, unable to complete his plan to publish a third *supplément*. *Abba* Kibrom Tseggai then undertook to complete singlehandedly the research task he had been carrying out under Strelcyn's guidance. Focusing exclusively on the materials that Wright and Strelcyn had not identified, *Abba* Kibrom Tseggai succeeded in drawing up a list of an additional 114 titles, and in 1987 made arrangements for publishing his contribution in *Quaderni di Studi Etiopici*, the journal directed by Bro. Ezio Tonini and published by the Centro Studi Etiopici of Asmara. According to the author's testimony, Ethiopian censorship prevented its

¹³¹ For the life and work of Strelcyn see Marrassini 1983. It is interesting to note that the importance of Strelcyn's studies on the history of printing in the Horn of Africa has not been grasped by the main commentators of his work.

¹³² Strelcyn 1971–1972.

¹³³ Strelcyn 1978–1979.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 101–117.

release.¹³⁵ Ten years later, after Eritrea had won its independence, the author contacted again *Quaderni di Studi Etiopici*, but even in that instance the article was not published.¹³⁶ Abba Kibrom Tseggai's valuable contribution can now be seen on the Internet and still awaits acceptance by some specialist journal.¹³⁷

The frequently harsh conditions in which Strelcyn operated—often admitted to consult uncategorized collections held in deposits—made some omissions and errors inevitable. Sixteen years after Strelcyn's visit to the Istituto Italiano dell'Africa (later the Istituto Italo-Africano, then ISIAO), Osvaldo Raineri was commissioned by the general secretary of the institute to draw up an inventory of the works in 'Ethiopian languages' in the institute's library. After careful revision, Raineri was able to add twenty-four new incunabula which Strelcyn had apparently overlooked during his visit.¹³⁸

The failure to publish Abba Kibrom Tseggai's work and the progressive drying up of this line of research are due to some basic problems of this type of literature and, more generally, of bibliographic research.

Certainly, Wright's analytical bibliography, with its quantitative and descriptive approach, did not go in the direction desired by Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin,¹³⁹ and by Roger Chartier's *histoire du livre*.¹⁴⁰ In Wright, the contents of the carefully listed documents were overshadowed by the materiality of the book, with the risk of becoming an 'esoteric specialization'. In Wright the emphasis, more than on the material and social conditions of the creation, dissemination, and reception of script and print,¹⁴¹ went toward identifying and describing texts printed in few copies and often unavailable.¹⁴² Among other things, this exercise had taken on, as is evident in Raineri's contribution, progressively more cryptic and specialized forms, often difficult even for the most

¹³⁵ An undated copy of Abba Kibrom Tseggai's typescript is kept in the archive of the library of the Pavoni Social Centre in Asmara with the title *Ethiopian Incunabula: A Bibliography of Publications in Ethiopia up to 1936, A Third Supplement from Different Sources*. The typescript is devoted to the memory of Strelcyn.

¹³⁶ Kibrom Tseggai n.d., 2–3. 'I was discouraged by the attitude of the editor', *ibid.*, 3. In the early years of the new millennium his contribution was published on the Internet: a copy can be found on the website of the Catholic Eparchy of Keren (<http://www.eparchyofkeren.com/topics/Ethio-Eritrean%20Incunabula.pdf>, accessed on 12 April 2021).

¹³⁷ Kibrom Tseggai n.d.

¹³⁸ Raineri 1991.

¹³⁹ Febvre and Martin 1958.

¹⁴⁰ Hérubel 2004, 299–303.

¹⁴¹ We use the book history definition promoted by the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing, cf. Noorda and Marsden 2019, 372.

¹⁴² The expression is in Darnton 1990, 111.

motivated readers. However, it would be unfair to reproach Wright and his followers for not having immediately positioned themselves within the history of books, a discipline that began to take shape in the 1960s and 1970s, and whose birth conventionally dates back to 1982, when Robert Darnton wrote his seminal paper ‘What Is the History of Books?’.¹⁴³ Of much greater importance is the fact that, with his bibliography, Wright was counterbalancing the Eurocentrism of the history of books as practiced in the West—no small merit.

The progressive difficulties that have affected the bibliographic genre since the 1990s have also reduced the attractiveness of these studies. While just a few decades earlier bibliography was seen as ‘the basis of all academic study’,¹⁴⁴ and even at the end of the 1980s the general opinion was that in African studies bibliographies had carved out their own space and a decent reputation, as time went by there prevailed a progressive indifference, proof of which was the tendency to review these works in the ‘shorter review/also received sections’.¹⁴⁵ Consequently, bibliographers complain that there is no recognition of the value of bibliography or appreciation of the work involved in preparing reference works. Works, which offer the collection of factual data and accurate descriptions, tend to be treated with a certain dose of contempt by users who hold interpretation in much greater esteem,¹⁴⁶ though McIlwaine has already pointed out that it is wrong to suggest that collection implies no interpretation.

A decline exemplified by the fate of the most prestigious reference publishing house in the African field, Hans Zell Publishing, which, founded in 1975, ceased its publishing activities around 2008, leading McIlwaine to conclude that ‘[t]he fortunes of Zell inevitably remind us of the small to non-existent profit margins that exist in African studies bibliography’.¹⁴⁷ Google and the other search engines have created the illusion that bibliographies are now an obsolete genre, and the numbers relating to published titles and sales seem to confirm this conclusion.

¹⁴³ In Darnton’s view, one of book history’s ‘purpose is to understand how ideas were transmitted through print and how exposure to the printed word affected the thought and behavior of mankind during the last five hundred years’, Darnton 1982, 65.

¹⁴⁴ The expression is that of Hopkins 1973, 297, cit. in Henige 1983, 109.

¹⁴⁵ McIlwaine 2001, 10. The notice of the appearance of *Ethiopian Incunabula* by Wright was announced by five lines on the Shorter Notices’ section of *African Affairs* (Z.G.S. 1969).

¹⁴⁶ In this connection, Jan Vansina’s review on Albert Lévesque’s *Contribution to the National Bibliography of Rwanda: 1965–1970* is emblematic (Vansina 1981). Vansina was critical of the attempt by the author to identify all titles published in Rwanda, instead he seemed to prefer lists of exclusively scholarly works published anywhere.

¹⁴⁷ McIlwaine 2001, 11.

These considerations must not make us lose sight of the fact that the difficulties encountered by bibliography as a genre have not automatically morphed into indifference towards African printed media. In an article by Stephen Ellis, published at the beginning of the new millennium, local printed media were in fact identified as one of the most promising sources for reinvigorating African studies, enabling it to broaden the topics for investigation. In the same years, African literature studies highlighted the potential of local print sources,¹⁴⁸ which was then followed by a more recent trend linked to intellectual history and Amharic print culture. Irma Taddia had the merit of being among the first to grasp the importance of this line of research,¹⁴⁹ together with Reidulf Knut Molvaer, Ghirmai Negash, and Bahru Zewde.¹⁵⁰ Today the works of James De Lorenzi and Sara Marzagora are creating a proper intellectual history of the region and are linked to the growing interest in print cultures,¹⁵¹ as evidenced also by numerous special issues devoted to this topic that have promptly appeared.¹⁵²

What made the popularity of these researches more difficult was also a limitation inherent in all bibliographies, but which, in the case of publications printed in Africa, is even more evident. Scholars approach reference works with the hope of recovering useful materials for their research, and their interest is a very pragmatic one, more concerned with what a book is about than with its physical features. But the rarity of print materials in Africa makes it extremely complicated to consult works that, even if they survive, are kept in very few libraries and are not always accessible. Much of this literature was also published in local periodicals, representing in acute form the problem of their accessibility.¹⁵³ So it is not uncommon for publications printed in Africa to have just one copy survived today, since limited editions and historical troubles have inflicted on many African books a fate closer to that of manuscripts, united in being an unicum. While in the 1960s and 1970s this limitation was not objectively resolvable, today the technical resources are available to overcome them. Thanks to digital technology, it is now possible at a fairly low cost to link a bibliographic record to the full-text of the related document.¹⁵⁴ This is an extremely important development because it will finally make ever-larger portions of African printed heritage accessible to scholars and users. At the moment, experiences in this sense

¹⁴⁸ Taye Assefa and Shiferaw Bekele 2000; Yonas Admassu 2001; Ghirmai Negash 2009.

¹⁴⁹ Taddia 1990.

¹⁵⁰ Molvaer 1997; Ghirmai Negash 2009; Ghirmai Negash 2010; Bahru Zewde 2002.

¹⁵¹ De Lorenzi 2008; De Lorenzi 2015; Marzagora 2017; Marzagora 2019.

¹⁵² Hofmeyr et al. 2011; Davis et al. 2018; Hunter and James 2020.

¹⁵³ A particularly evident aspect in relation to Ethiopian creative writing which, as can be clearly deduced in Fekade Azeze 1985.

¹⁵⁴ Limb 2006, 14.

are still limited, but the debate has started and there is no shortage of pilot experiences that should soon lead to the online launch of the first African national digital libraries.¹⁵⁵ Hence, one nation's example could serve as a model for other nations, encouraging them to save their print heritage by making it available, first of all, to their own communities, and, secondly, to those users who believe that culture is a common heritage of humanity.

Conclusions

Since the arrival of the first printing houses in Massawa, the history of printing in Eritrea and Ethiopia has aroused an interest that has favoured the preparation and publication of numerous inventories and bibliographies. Unlike other African countries, knowledge of the printed heritage of Eritrea and Ethiopia has been much more precise and detailed, at least as regards its production up to 1935. This article has investigated the reasons for this 'exceptionalism', and it is clear that this peculiarity is not the accidental result of a series of coincidences, but the consequence of a more complex and lasting situation.

The influence exerted by linguistics and philology on Ethiopian studies has fuelled a great sensitivity towards written texts, with a clear preference for the rich manuscript tradition of the Ethiopian plateau, but this does not signify indifference towards printed texts. Indeed, many Ethiopianists have shown attention to books published in Eritrea and Ethiopia, considered a very effective means to grasp and understand the profound transformations that swept the societies of the region from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. It suffices to cite the case of Strelcyn, who published his first *supplément* as a '*sous-produit*'¹⁵⁶ of the catalogue of Ethiopian manuscripts in the Conti Rossini collection at the Biblioteca dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei e Corsiniana.¹⁵⁷

Attention went from sporadic to constant in the aftermath of Italy's defeat in the Horn of Africa. In this historical juncture, three elements contributed to creating the conditions for great attention to the printed heritage: at an international level, in the post-war period many African governments made education a na-

¹⁵⁵ In this regard, the Asmara Research and Documentation Center and the Università degli Studi di Pavia are working on the creation of the national digital library of Eritrea, as part of the project EuropeAid/159681/DD/ACT/ER, Contract no. CSO-LA/2018/403-679, Digital Technologies and Cultural Heritage Preservation in Eritrea, A Framework for an Improved Action.

¹⁵⁶ The expression, in quotation marks, is by Strelcyn himself (Strelcyn 1971–1972, 457).

¹⁵⁷ When commemorating Strelcyn's death, Paolo Marrassini, in his exhaustive presentation, failed to mention his *incunables éthiopiens*, absolutely fundamental texts for the history of printing in the Horn of Africa, cf. Marrassini 1983.

tional priority and launched massive literacy campaigns and a decisive strengthening of educational structures. But, thanks above all to the activities of UNESCO and IFLA, the publishing and library sectors were not neglected, considered two important components in the plans for relaunching each country. At this stage, Ethiopia wanted to consolidate its continental leadership by actively participating in these activities too. Emperor Ḥaylā Śəllase supported the creation of university and research structures of excellence: the foundation of the Haile Selassie I University (1961) and later that of Institute of Ethiopian Studies (1963) provided Ethiopia with two very dynamic research centres, which also operated at a bibliographic and documentary level. In the same years, the cultural and creative vitality of Ethiopia and Eritrea generated a real boom in publications and initiatives. The attention that Ethiopians have always paid to these types of documents, the favourable international situation, and the rapidly growing domestic one paved the way for an ever more precise recognition of local print production. The combination of these factors gave birth to what we could define as Eritrea's and Ethiopia's bibliographic exceptionalism.

A fairly obvious problem remains: when Wright decided to set 1935 as the end point of his investigation of the incunabula, he established a chronological framework that was accepted by all the scholars who completed the work. Whence a progressive discrepancy between research on incunabula—more and more precise and in-depth—and the history of print in Eritrea and Ethiopia, which in the post-World War II period went through a particularly dynamic and creative phase. Although the incunabula were secured, hundreds of works from the 1950s–1970s thus run the serious risk of eluding any attempt at detection. Attempts to broaden research to this production remain the prime urgency for the near future, orienting the studies that have focused on this region from a history of the incunabula to a wider history of books, capable of combining the materiality of a text with its historicity.

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Summary

The history of the printed book in Africa is a relatively new line of inquiry. One of the most challenging issues confronting its practitioners will be to produce authoritative and comprehensive records of the national output of African countries, an essential prerequisite before venturing into more complex analysis. In this panorama, Eritrea and Ethiopia seem to represent two happy exceptions: the pioneering work of Hərury Wäldä Šəllase, Stephen Wright's *Ethiopian Incunabula* and then the supplements by Stefan Strelcyn, Osvaldo Raineri, and Kibrom Tseggai have allowed for the reconstruction of large sections of the print production of the two countries. This article maps out the cultural and political context in which the attention for Ethiopian incunabula emerged and traces the stages of the collective effort that has allowed the preservation of the traces of the early printed documentation in Eritrea and Ethiopia. The article argues that there are still significant margins of improvement in the retrospective coverage of the history of the printed book in Africa, especially since the arrival of digital technologies and the Internet that have offered a very effective set of tools for solving some of the problems that have plagued African retrospective national bibliographies since their inception.