

La Busta dell'Ascari

War propaganda in Oromo in Latin script from 1940¹

Mauro Tosco

This article describes the first (and possibly only) issue of a four-pages newspaper issued by the Italian military command on the eve of the Second World War and designed to spread war propaganda among the *Ascari*, i.e., the Italian colonial troops. The main point of interest is provided by the use of four languages: Italian, Amharic, Arabic and Oromo, the latter written in Latin script and following the conventions of the Italian orthography. After an historical introduction (section 1.), sections 2. and 3. describe the orthography, language and contents of the Oromo text. Section 4. presents a large portion of the text itself, comparing it with the Italian text, analyzing it with the help of morphological glosses, and attempting a re-transcription in modern Oromo orthography. In the end, section 5. briefly comments on this historical document and the fate of this early attempt at writing down the Oromo language.

1. The *Busta* in its historical setting²

The object of the present notes is the first issue (and possibly the only one; see below) of a four-page bi-monthly newspaper published by the Italian military in East Africa on the eve of the Second World War and addressed to the colonial troops serving under Italian command. To the best of my knowledge, it has never been brought to the attention of linguists and historians. Still, it has a certain interest for its consistent use of four languages: Italian, Arabic, Amharic, and Oromo – the latter, and this is the main point of interest, in a rather idiosyncratic Latin script. The Oromo orthography and text will be the main topic of this article.

¹ Exceptionally, this contribution by *Kervan*'s scientific director has *not* been subject to double blind review.

² I thank Ernesto Milanese, emeritus from the University of Florence, for first telling me about the existence of this document. Ernesto was my colleague at the Somali National University, Mogadishu, in the late eighties of the past century and is a life-long collector and scholar of historical documents on the Italian presence in the Horn of Africa. I also thank my son Giorgio-Giòrs for having researched, found and photographed it at the National Library in Florence, and my friends and colleagues at Dilla University (Ethiopia) Ongaye Oda Orkaydo, Tadesse Girma and Yusuf Hussen for their precious assistance in the analysis and translation of the text and their comments on an earlier version. Any error or mistake remain of course my exclusive intellectual property.

The full title is *Busta dell'Ascari del Galla e Sidama*. *Galla e Sidama* was one of the six regions (Italian *governatorati*, singular *governatorato*) that made up the Italian African Empire from 1936 to 1941; it encompassed the southwest quarter of Ethiopia and was inhabited, among many other peoples, by the bulk of the Oromo of Ethiopia (who at that time were still called with the derogatory term “Galla”). As will be detailed below, *Busta dell'Ascari* roughly means “The colonial soldier’s (: *Ascari*) magazine (: *Busta*)”.

A single issue, number 1 of year 1, dated August 1940 – XVIII (i.e., the 18th year of the Fascist Era), is preserved at the National Library in Florence as a microfilm (catalog number: Microfilm 2045/1-9; the *Busta* is no. 7 of nine). The magazine was foreseen to be published twice a month, but it is unknown to the present writer whether other numbers were published; it looks very doubtful, given the quick end of the military operations in the Horn and the defeat of the Italian army. I do not even actually know whether this issue was ever printed and distributed, and how many copies were made.

The *Busta* was published by the *Comando dello Scacchiere Sud* (‘Command of the South Theater’); its director was a certain Lieutenant Colonel Matteo Caligiuri. The printer is unknown; the technical quality of printing is apparently quite good.

On the first page we have both text and B/W photos, pages 2 and 3 consist of text only, and page 4 of pictures with captions.

The newspaper’s title is written in Italian and repeated underneath in the other three languages:



Fig. 1. Under the title in Italian, from left to right the title in Oromo, Arabic, and Amharic.

The Oromo title reads: *Gasetta can Ascari can Galla Sidama* – in modern orthography, the Qubee, *Gaazexaa kan “Ascari” kan “Galla Sidama.”*

Pages 2 and 3 contain the same text in four columns, from left to right: Italian, Oromo, Amharic, and Arabic. Also the photos have captions in all the four languages.

Ascari (/‘askari/, with antepenultimate accent in Italian, as is often the case with foreign words) comes from the Arabic adjective ‘*askarī* ‘military’ (but here in the sense of ‘soldier’), itself from ‘*askar*

‘army.’ *Ascari* can be used in Italian as a singular noun (as in the *Busta*) or be interpreted as a masculine plural; in this case, a regular masculine singular *ascaro* (/‘askaro/) is backformed.

Nowadays the word *ascari* is scarcely used and hardly known, but in colonial times it was the official and common denomination of the African troops serving in the Royal Italian Army; the use started in 1885 when a mercenary group of Arab soldiers already present in Eritrea was literally bought in order to serve as irregular auxiliaries; recruitment in Eritrea started in 1889. Although Eritrea always remained the main source of enlistment, later on the *Ascari* were also recruited in Somalia and, from 1936, in Ethiopia. The *Ascari* grew in number and importance over the years, and in 1940 about 182,000 out of 256,000 effectives of the Italian army in the Horn were indigenous troops.

Although *Ascari* was also used informally for any African troops under Italian command, in Somalia another light infantry corps, the *Dubat*, was raised. *Dubat* is the Italianization of Somali *duubcad* ‘White Turban’ (from *duub* ‘turban’ + *cad* ‘white’), for the typical white turban they wore.³ The *Dubat* are mentioned in the text of the *Busta* (see below).

The publication name is striking: Italian *busta* (lit. ‘envelope’) is not normally used for publications, be them periodical or not. It is simply an envelope, a case or a folder; additionally, it can be a kind of lady purse (more often called *pochette*, a French loan) or the flat and foldable military cap variously called in English-speaking countries side cap, garrison cap, flight cap, wedge cap or field service cap. In Italian, the diminutive *bustina* is rather used in this sense. Interestingly, the *Ascari* never wore the *bustina* of the Italian army, but their typical red fez. I venture the hypothesis that *Busta* was chosen as the newspaper’s name with the implication that the newspaper was to be distributed among the colonial troops just as the Italian soldiers were receiving their mail from overseas in an envelope or folder.

2. The language and orthography of the *Busta*

The Oromo text of the *Busta* is consistently written in an Italian-based orthography. This means that the Italian writing rules are completely adhered to. Thus, <c> stands for /k/ before /a, o, u/ but for /tʃ/ before /e, i/ (and, conversely, <cia, cio, ciu> stand for /tʃa, tʃo, tʃu/, and <che, chi> stand for /ke, ki/).

As a consequence, a number of Oromo phonemes cannot have an autonomous graphic representation: this applies to the retroflex and slightly implosive phoneme written <dh> in the

³ The etymology proposed in the Italian Wikipedia (<https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dubat>) mistakenly mixes Somali and Arabic.

modern orthography, and to the whole series of the ejectives: /p'/ (in Oromo orthography <ph>), /t'/ (orthographically <x>), /tʃ'/ (orthographically <c>), and /k'/ (orthographically <q>). Even /z/ comes to be written <s> (<z> being reserved, as in Italian, to the dentoalveolar affricates /ts, dz/, absent in Oromo). The glottal stop (marked by <'> word-internally) is equally ignored. Vowel quality, too is generally left unmarked, except in a few cases.

The end result is the loss of much morphological distinctions (e.g., the genitive, marked by lengthening of a word final vowel; see below).

Consonant gemination, being phonological in both Italian and Oromo, fares better, but with many inconsistencies also within the text: e. g., *keessa* 'in; within' is written *chessa* as expected, but also *chesa*.

Pitch is occasionally marked on the last syllable only (as in Italian) by an accented vowel, as in *irrà* for *irraa* 'on; above.'

In order to distinguish /ɲ/ from the sequence /gn/ (which does not exist in Italian), the latter is written <ghn>, as in *giaghnuma* for *jagnummaa* 'courage.'

Furthermore, in *ogi* for *hoji* 'work' /h/ is not written, and this may show that the text was written down by a native speaker of Italian, who did not perceive any aspiration – as is so often the case with speakers of Romance languages.

The correspondences between the *Busta*-script and the modern orthography of Oromo (Qubee) are given below. The order follows the use of modern Oromo dictionaries, such as Akkaadaamii (1996) and Mekuria (1998). Graphemes not found in the *Busta* but that can be safely assumed on the basis of the orthography are in brackets.

Qubee	Busta	IPA	Qubee	Busta	IPA
a	a	a	n	n	n
b	b	b	q	c, chi/che	k'
c	c, ci/ce	tʃ	r	r	r
d	d	d	s	s	s
e	e	e	t	t	t
f	f	f	u	u	u
g	g, ghi/ghe	g	v	v	v
h	h, Ø	h	w	u	w
i	i	i	x	t	t'
j	g, gi/ge	dʒ	y	i	j
k	c, chi/che	k	z	s	z
l	l	l	ch	c, ci/ce	tʃ
m	m	m	dh	d	d'
n	n	n	ny	gn	ɲ
o	o	o	ph	(p)	p'
p	(p)	p	sh	sci/sce	ʃ

Table 1. The phonemes of Oromo in the orthography of the Busta compared to modern standard Oromo (Qubee), and their IPA correspondences.

The orthography of the *Busta* was devised by Italians whose foremost interest was readability (of course, for someone who knows the orthography of Italian). Not surprisingly, it is much different from what Italian scholars such as Enrico Cerulli and Martino Mario Moreno were using in those same years in their studies (cf. Cerulli 1922 and Moreno 1939): there, ejectives are transcribed with a dot underneath – following the Orientalist tradition for Semitic “emphatics” – and the *háček* is used for palatal consonants. In its consistent use of the Italian orthographic conventions, the *Busta* is rather closer to the orthography used in such Italian pre-scientific descriptions as Viterbo (1892). Actually, even a practical pocket vocabulary such as D’Arpino (1938) has more accuracy in transcription and keeps apart, e.g., /k/ and /q/.

Italian terms relative to the army are not translated in the *Busta* and are often capitalized: we thus find *Battaglione* ‘battalion,’ *Tenente* ‘Lieutenant,’ *Capitano* ‘Captain,’ *Finanza* ‘Customs and Border Corps,’ and *Muntaz* (a rank among the *Ascari*, equivalent to a corporal in the Italian Army; from Arabic *mumtāz* ‘excellent’), as well as *Bandiera italiana* ‘Italian flag’ – but *bandiera* is a well-established loan in the Horn of Africa; cf. not only Amharic *bandira* or *bandera* but also Oromo *bandiraa* and, e.g., Saho *bandeera* (Vergari and Vergari 2003).

Amharic is the main source of loanwords in this short text:⁴ the King is *neghesti* and the Emperor (in both cases the King of Italy and Emperor of Ethiopia, Victor Emmanuel III is meant) is *Negus-Neghesti* – the Italian transcription of the Ethiopian title *nəgusa nəgāst* – while *Duce* (i.e., Benito Mussolini) is not translated. The compounds *Abba dula*, i.e., *abbaa duulaa* ‘army commander’ is used for translating *Capo Supremo* ‘Supreme Commander’ (reference is to the King of Italy), while *sciumi guddi*, something like “big chief” (but *sciumi* is Amharic *šum*, see below) is introduced for *comandante* ‘commander’ (here the reference is to Benito Mussolini as chief of government).

For ‘machine gun’ we have *mitraieus* (but reading the microfilm is difficult in this point), very possibly corresponding to Amharic *mātrāyās* (the modern Oromo word is *matarayyasii*). On the other hand, Amharic words are usually Oromo-ized with a final vowel; a few are: *manghisti* (Amharic *māngəst*) ‘kingdom; government,’ *ghimbi* from Amharic *gənb* ‘tower,’ *sciumi* ‘chief’ (Amharic *šum*), *zabegna* ‘guardian, watchman’ (Amharic *zābāñña*), *uettaddera* ‘soldier’ (Amharic *wāttaddār*) instead of Oromo *raayyaa*, *sciallimati* ‘award’ (Amharic *šällāmat*; modern standard Oromo would rather use *badhaasa*), *mercheba* ‘ship’ (Amharic *mārkāb*; in Oromo we have *doonii*), and even *bahari* ‘sea’ (Amharic *bahər*) instead of Oromo *galaana* or *abbaayaa*.

Recent Oromo neologisms are obviously absent; thus, ‘airplane’ is not *xayyaara* or the like (from Arabic *ṭayyāra*) or *rophilaa* (from English *airplane*) but the compound *babura samai* (*baabura samii* in modern orthography), i.e. “train of the sky.” As a result of the absence of neologisms, the Oromo text looks at times as an abridged version of the Italian one, as will be shown in the next section.

In other cases the Oromo version simply omits a technical terms or an Italian word is inserted, as in the case of *camion* ‘truck, lorry’⁵ (modern written Oromo resorts to *konkolaataa* – or *makiinaa*, itself an Italian loan – *fe’isaa*, lit. “loading car”).

For *Medaglia d’argento* ‘silver medal’ the Italian expression is given in quotes: «*medaglia d’argento*,» while in just one case an Amharic word is followed in brackets by its Italian translation: *missighi* (*presidio*) – *missighi* (but *miscighi* on page 4) being Amharic *māššag* ‘fort.’

Names of countries are equally given in Italian: thus, *Etiopia*, *Germania*, *Italia*, *Somalia*, as well as, following the Italian orthography of the time,⁶ *Chenia*, i.e. ‘Ethiopia, Germany, Italy, Somalia, Kenya.’

⁴ Amharic loans in Oromo have not been properly addressed; Haacke (1967) and Gragg (1980) are two early exceptions. Needless to say, the Amharic words found in the *Busta* are not listed in any Oromo dictionary.

⁵ Although technically a French loan, *camion* (either /'kamjon/ or /'kamjoŋ/) is the common, everyday word for ‘truck, lorry’ in spoken Italian – *autocarro* being only used in the written and official registers.

⁶ It is simply <Kenya> in contemporary Italian, because orthographic Italianization of foreign words is no longer in use. The same applies to <Moyale,> without the occasional writing <j> for an intervocalic palatal glide as found in the text.

The corresponding forms in the modern orthography are *Itoophiyaa*, *Jarmanii*, *Xaaliyaanii*, *Somaaliyaa* and *Keeniyaa*. The same goes for *Africa Orientale Italiana* ‘Italian East Africa.’ An exception is *Fransai* ‘France’ (modern *Firaansi*) and *inglisi* ‘English’ (but British is actually meant here) – modern orthography *ingilizii*. Ditto for towns and villages: *Moiale* or *Mojale* ‘Moyale,’ *Cassala* ‘Kassala,’ etc.

An interesting lexical point is the constant use of *dula* (i.e., *duula*), lit. ‘raid, campaign’ for ‘war’ instead of the common word *waraana*, and consequently *mia duula* – standing for *mi’a duulaa* – for ‘weapon’ (lit. “goods of war”).

As for the grammar, it can be noted that genitival constructions are consistently expressed with the relative pronoun *can* (: *kan*), as in *bachè can egu* (i.e., *bakka kan eeguu*), lit. “place of guard,” as a translation of Italian ‘osservatorio’ (‘observation post’). The construction was probably felt to be clearer than the simple juxtaposition of Possessum and Possessee plus lengthening and high pitch on the final vowel, as in /mana namáa/ (orthographically *mana namaa*) ‘a man’s house’ (from *mana* ‘house’ and *nama* ‘man’).

It is very difficult, on the basis of the little available material, to ascertain the dialectal origin of the unknown author(s); the general dialect is certainly not a southern one, as shown by a form such as *lencia* (standard orthography *leenca* /le:ntʃ’a/) ‘lion’ vs. possible forms with an initial /n/, as Guji /ne:nk’a/ (Kebede 2012: 144), or /ɲ/, as Borana /ɲe:nɲa/ (Stroomer 1987: 375). On the other hand, a form such as *dina* (in standard orthography *diina* /di:na/) for ‘enemy’ points, according to Kebede (2012: 156), to a central area in Ethiopia, either Mecha (Oromo *Maccaa*), Tulema (*Tuulama*) or Arsi (*Arsii*).

Finally, the text displays the frequent use of many compound verbal forms with assimilation and affixation of the auxiliary which is not normally used in writing nowadays. Cases in point are the assimilation of the auxiliary *jir* ‘to be’ (a typical feature of Western Oromo dialects; Yusuf Hussen, p.c.), yielding such forms as *ogettaniru* for *hojjatanii jiru* ‘they have done,’ and *fudannera* for *fuudhannee jirra* ‘we have taken.’

3. The contents

The contents of the *Busta*, as can be expected, are nothing more than war propaganda of the worst kind: the strength of the Italian army is exalted, the courage and feats of the *Ascaris* are extolled, and the British army is defeated – or *about* to be defeated.

The text was especially composed for the colonial troops and probably translated, or better adapted, from an Italian original. A knowledge of Italian was not at all unknown among the Eritrean *Ascaris* (written Italian was a prerequisite for advancement), and Italian was probably the most

common written medium among a largely illiterate troop. Furthermore, some knowledge of the Italian orthography was obviously necessary in order to read the Oromo text itself. Still, the Oromo and Italian texts are on the whole quite independent.

The Ascari, and the Ascari only, are the protagonists of the short text, with no mention being made of the Italian army (e.g., air war and warfare are completely absent – a striking difference from Italian propaganda at home). The syntax and lexicon are extremely simple, with almost no subordination. The metaphors and figures of speech were not translated from Italian; not surprisingly, they make more sense in a language of the Horn than in Italian: e.g., the Ascari are lions, and their enemies are calves – how could calves ever oppose lions? Facts matter and words do not; facts are men's and words are women's, and the Ascari made themselves a necklace of facts with more beads than a *misbaḥa* – the Muslim string of beads – or a *māquṭāriya* – a string of beads used in the Coptic church (but both analogies are absent in the Oromo version).

The feats of the Ascari are obviously exaggerated, although they were indeed among the best colonial troops – the Eritrean Ascari in particular – and much akin in reputation to the British Gurkhas.

Among the historical facts alluded to in the short text are the Italian conquest of British Somaliland in August 1940; the operations along the Sudanese border, where the Italians captured the fort of Gallabat (which was at that time under the command of the famous voyager Wilfred Thesiger) and a certain number of villages along and near the border, among which it is possible to identify Kurmuk and a few others; and the occupation of Moyale (on the border along the main road connecting Ethiopia and Kenya), which was to remain in Italian hands until July 15, 1941.

As anticipated, the syntax of the text is very simple, and sentences very short. They are often further separated and highlighted with a long hyphen. In many cases, the absence of many technical words in Oromo leads to heavy cuts in the Oromo text. Thus, in Italian the last part of the first sentence on p. 2 reads:

[...] hanno moltissime grandi navi di ferro con grossissimi cannoni e migliaia di aeroplani.

(literally: [...] have many big iron ships with very big guns and thousands of airplanes; the subject being Italy and Germany).

The Oromo text is much shorter:⁷

⁷ Here and below the Oromo text of the *Busta* is followed by its equivalent in the modern orthography and a word-by-word English gloss. Foreign words are not given into standard Oromo.

mercheba giabà fi babura samai cuma fi cuma can cabda
 (Amh.) jabaa fi (baabura samii) kuma fi kuma kan qabda
 ship strong and vehicle sky.GEN thousand and thousand that get-MID-PRS.3M
 Literally: ‘... It has strong ships and thousands and thousands of planes.’

A few lines down, the Italian text reads:

- *I fatti contano e non le parole. I fatti sono degli uomini e le parole delle donne.*
- *I nostri bravi ascari di fatti ne hanno una collana più numerosa del masbaha o del mequterià*
 (- *Facts count and words don't. Facts are men's and words are women's.*)
- *Our brave Ascari have made for themselves a necklace of facts richer than a misbaha or a mequteria).*

The whole passage is reduced in Oromo to:

Dubbirrà ogitu ciala.
 dubbirraa hojituu caala.
 talk=from work=SUBJ.EMPH exceed-PRS.3M
 ‘Action counts more than talking.’

On the other hand, a few sentences are almost a verbatim translation of an Italian original, as in (again from p. 2):

- *Chi può resistere alla forza ed al valore dei nostri bravi ascari e dei nostri bravi dubat?*
- *Può resistere il vitello al leone?*
 (- *Who can resist the strength and courage of our brave Ascari and our brave Dubats?*
 - *Can a calf withstand a lion?*)

The Oromo text reads:

Humna fi giagnumaa can ascari fi dubat chenia egnu ciapsu
 humna fi jagnummaa kan A. fi D. Keeniyaa eenyu cabsuu
 force and courage that (Ascari) and (Dubat) Kenya who be_broken-CAUS-INF

 dandaa? Giabbi lencia cufisu dendaare?
 dandaa jabbii leenca kuffisuu dandaaree?
 be_able-PRS.3M calf lion fall-CAUS-INF be_able-PRS.3M-Q

Lit.: 'Who in Kenya can resist the force and courage of the Ascari and Dubat? Can a calf make a lion fall?'

4. The text

In the following the full Oromo text on p. 2 and the captions on p. 2-3 and 4 is reproduced. The shorter text on p. 1 is left out of consideration, also because parts of it are less readable in my copy of the document.

Lines are numbered according to the original. As in section 3., the text in the Busta's orthography is followed in turn by the same in Qubee orthography and the morphological glosses. In line 30. it was not possible to read two words; their place is marked by <XX>; in another case it was not possible to identify a word or understand its meaning in the text, and this is marked by <?>.

Finally, it must be remembered tha the frequent use of <gedani> (i.e., *jedhani*) 'they say' or the like does not have the dubitative meaning of its English translation.

4.1. The main text

1. *Italia* *fi* *Germania* *bia* *lama* *gudda* *uettadera* *fi* *mia* *dula*,
Xaaliyaanii *fi* *Jarmanii* *biyya* *lama* *guddaa* (Amh.) *fi* *mi'a* *duula*
 Italy and Germany country two large soldier and goods war

2. *malé* *can* *cabu*, *mitraieu* *medfe* *bombi* *lichi* *malé* *can* *cabu*,
malee *kan* *qabu* (?) *madfii* *boombii* *liqii* *malee* *kan* *qabu*
 except that get-DEP.3M machine-gun cannon bomb borrow without that get-DEP.3M

3. *Mercheba* *giabà* *fi* *babura* *samai* *cuma* *fi* *cuma* *can* *cabda*
 (Amh.) *jabaa* *fi* *baabura* *samii* *kuma* *fi* *kuma* *kan* *qabda*
 ship strong and train sky thousand and thousand that get-MID-DEP.3M

Italy and Germany are two great nations that have soldiers and instruments of war, among which machine-guns, cannons and bombs, and without getting any [exterior] help; they have thousand and thousands of strong ships and airplanes.

The Italian original reads:

L'Italia e la Germania sono due grandi Nazioni che hanno milioni e milioni di soldati armati di mitragliatrici, di cannoni, di carri armati e di bombe; che hanno moltissime grandi navi di ferro con grossissimi cannoni e migliaia di aeroplani.

An English literal translation runs as follows:

Italy and Germany are two great nations, with millions and millions of soldiers armed with machine-guns, guns, tanks, and bombs; they have many big iron ships with very big guns and thousands of airplanes.

4. Italia fi Germania cana dura Fransai moaniru
 Xaaliyaanii fi Jarmanii kana dura Firaansi moo'anii jiru
 Italy and Germany this before France defeat- PRS.3P be-PST.3P

Italy and Germany have already defeated France.

which corresponds in the Italian version to:

- *L'Italia e la Germania hanno già vinto la Francia.*

5. Ammammo Inglisi dulani mouf ademu.
 ammammo ingilizii duulani moo'uuf adeemu
 now=also English attack-PRS.3P defeat-INF=DAT go-DEP.3M

They are now fighting and going to defeat England.

corresponding again to the Italian text:

- *Adesso stanno vincendo l'Inghilterra.*

6. Gia lama chessa, utu dulu, bia baiè dinarrà Africa
 Ji'a lama keessa utuu duulu biyya baay'ee diina irraa Afrikaa
 month two in while attack-DEP.3M country many enemy from Africa

7. chessa fudannera
 keessa fuudhannee jirra
 in take-PST.1P be-PRS.1P

In two months of war we have taken much land from the enemy in Africa.

The Italian text reads:

– *In poco più di due mesi di guerra grandi vittorie abbiamo riportato sul nemico in Africa Orientale (lit.: In little more than two months of war we had great victories over the enemy in East Africa).*

8. *Bia Galla Sidama uettadera Chenia Inglisi irrà Mojale fi lafa*
biyya G. S. (Amh.) Keeniyaa ingilizii irraa Moyyaalee fi lafa
country Galla Sidama soldier Kenya English from Moyale and earth

gudda

guddaa

large

9. *Bia Mojale fi Kurmuk, Ghesan chenia fudaniru bia*
biyya Moyyaalee fi K. G. Keeniyaa fuudhanii jiru biyya
country Moyale and Kurmuk G. Kenya take-PST.3P be-DEP.3M country

Gambela

G.

Gambela

10. *Iocau Kurmuk Ghesan acca chenia galfataniru.*
Y. K. G. akka Keeniyaa galfatanii jiru
(Y.?) Kurmuk (G.?) like Kenya bring_back-MID-PST.3P be-DEP.3M

In Galla and Sidama we had taken from the British troops in Kenya Moyale and a great part of Moyale country, as well as Kurmuk and Gesan in Kenya, and have conquered Gambela, Yokau and Kurmuk [in Sudan].

The Italian version reads:

– *Nel Galla e Sidama le nostre brave truppe coloniali hanno conquistato Moiale inglese e molto territorio del Chenia; Gambela, Iocau, Kurmuk, Ghezan sono in nostre mani.*

(lit.: In Galla and Sidama our brave colonial troops conquered English Moyale and a great territory in Kenya; Gambela, Yokau (?), Kurmuk and Gezan (?) are in our hands).

11. *Bia Moiale fi Kurmuk, Ghesan Debel can gedani chessa, bandiera*
biyya Moyyaalee fi Kurmuk G. D. kan jedhani keessa (It.)
 country Moyale and K. G. D. that say-PRS.3P in flag
12. *dinarrà fudannera*
diina irraa fuudhannee jirra
 enemy=from take-PST.1P be-PRS.1P
We took from the enemy flags in Moyale, Kurmuk, Ghezan, and Debel.

The Italian version has:

- *Abbiamo preso ai nemici molte bandiere: a Moiale, a Kurmuk, a Ghezan, a Debel nel Chenia.*
 (lit.: *We took from our enemies many flags: in Moyale, Kurmuk, Ghezan, and Debel in Kenya.*)

13. *Mia dula, callabas, camion baié lacopa can incabu, acca*
mi'a duula (Ar.) (It.) baay'ee lakkoofsa kan hinqabu akka
 object weapon cloth truck many number that EMPH=get-DEP.3M as
chenia galfannera.
Keeniyaa galfannee jirra
 Kenya import-MID-PST.1P be-PST.1P
We took over a great number of weapons, clothes and trucks, like in Kenya.

vs. the much longer and detailed Italian version:

- *Armi, munizioni, viveri, materiali, automezzi in grande quantità sono caduti nelle nostre mani. A Kurmuk un'intera carovana di rifornimenti è caduta nelle nostre mani.*
 (lit.: *A great quantity of weapons, ammunitions, provisions, goods and vehicles has fallen in our hands. In Kurmuk a whole convoy of supplies has fallen in our hands.*)

It will be noticed that the second part of the Italian sentence has been omitted in Oromo.

14. *Cara Asmara bia Cassala fi Gallabat cabnera*
Karaa A. biyya K. fi G. qabnee jirra
 road Asmara country Kassala and Gallabat catch-PST.1P be-PRS.1P
[Along] the Asmara road we took Kasala and Gallabat.

The Italian text makes reference to Amhara country rather than to Asmara:

- *Nell'Amara abbiamo conquistato Cassala e il paese di Gallabat.*

i.e.: *In Amhara (country) we conquered Kassala and Gallabat town.*

15. *Somalia inglisi can bedani, gutusà can chenia taera.*
Somaaliyaa ingilizii kan badanii guutuu isaa kan keeniyaa taa'ee jira
Somalia English that lost full 3M that ours stay-PST.3M be-PRS.3M
*English Somaliland that before was not ours is fully in our possession.*⁸

Italian has:

- *La Somalia inglese è tutta in nostro possesso,*

i.e.: *English Somaliland is fully in our possession,*

16. *Humna fi giagnuma can ascari fi dubat chenia egnu ciapsu denda?*
humna fi jagnummaa kan A. fi D. Keeniyaa eenyu cabsuu dandaa
force and courage that Ascari and Dubat Kenya who cut-INF be_able-PRS.3M
Who in Kenya can oppose the strength and courage of the Ascari and Dubat?

which is almost a verbatim rendering of Italian:

- *Chi può resistere alla forza ed al valore dei nostri bravi ascari e dei nostri bravi dubat?*

i.e.: *Who can resist the strength and courage of our brave Ascari and our brave Dubats?*

17. *Giabbi lencia cufisu dendaare?*
jabbiin leenca kuffisuu danda'aree
calf lion fall-CAUS-INF be_able-PRS.3M=Q
Can a calf make a lion fall?

Corresponding in the Italian text to:

- *Può resistere il vitello al leone?*

i.e.: *Can a calf withstand a lion?*

⁸ The Oromo text pretends Italy had “lost” British Somaliland – which of course was never actually an Italian colony.

18. *Inglisimò humna chenia, humna lencia can faccatu, attamitti*
ingilizimmoo humna Keeniyaa humna leenca kan fakkaatu akkamiitti
 English-also force Kenya force lion that look_like-DEP.3M how

19. *irrà indendaa?*
irraa hindanda'a
 on EMPH=be_able-PRS.3M
And how can the army of Kenya withstand a force that is like a lion's?

The Italian text has:

- *E come possono resistere gli inglesi alla nostra forza che è grande come quella del leone?*
 i.e.: *And how can the English resist our strength, which is as big as a lion's?*

20. *Dubbirrà ogitu ciala.*
dubbirraa hojituu caala
 talk=from work-SUBJ.EMPH exceed-PRS.3M
Action counts more than words.

As anticipated, the Italian text is much longer:

- *I fatti contano e non le parole. I fatti sono degli uomini e le parole delle donne.*
 - *I nostri bravi ascari di fatti ne hanno una collana più numerosa del masbaha o del mequterià*
 I.e.:
 - *Facts count and words don't. Facts are men's and words are women's.*
 - *Our brave Ascari have made for themselves a necklace of facts richer than a misbaha or a mequteria.*

21. *Ascari giaghna chenia duguma ogi giaba baié ogettaniru.*
 A. *jagna Keeniyaa dhuguma hojii jaba baay'ee hojjatanii jiru*
 Ascari brave Kenya true work strong many work-MID-PST.3P be-DEP.3M
The brave Ascari have truly made much good work in Kenya.

This sentence does not find a direct correspondence in Italian, unless it stands for the missing part of the preceding sentence.

22. Bia Namaraput can gedani, muntaz tocco ascari scian Tenente
 biyaa N. kan jedhani M. tokko A. shan (It.)
 land Namaraput that say-PRS.3P M. one A. five Lieutenant
- tocco nagin
 tokko ?
 one ?

23. dina dibba lammarrà dula ciapsaniru.
 diina dhibba lammarraa duula cabsanii jiru
 enemy hundred two=from attack resist-PST.3P be-DEP.3M

They say that in Namaraput, five Ascaris and a Muntaz, under (?) a lieutenant, withstood the attack of 200 enemies.

In the Italian text:

- A Namaraput, cinque ascari e un muntaz, al comando di un Tenente, hanno combattuto contro una colonna di oltre 200 nemici.

I.e.:

- In Namaraput, five Ascaris and a muntaz, under the command of a Lieutenant, fought against a column of over 200 enemies.

24. Ascarota chenia aca lencia taaniti, dina baiè ariani
 A.-ota Keeniyaa akka leenca taa'anitti diina baay'ee ari'ani
 A.-P Kenya like lion in= PST.3P-stay enemy many chase_away-PST.3P

25. aggeessani, fi madessani.
 ajjeesanii fi madeessani
 kill-PST.3P and wound-PST.3P

The Ascaris in Kenya have been like lions. They made many enemy run away, they killed them and wounded them.

The Italian text has:

I nostri ascari sono stati dei leoni. Hanno combattuto per molte ore facendo scappare il nemico che ha avuto morti e feriti.

i.e.:

Our Ascaris have been lions. They fought for many hours and they made the enemy run away with many deaths and injuries.

26. *Bia Cognarè can gedama, ascari digdani scian Tenente sani naggin*
biyaa K. kan jedhama A. diigdama shan (It.) saani ?
land K. that say-PASS-PRS.3M Ascari twenty five Lieutenant their ?

27. *dina dibba fi sciantama dulani, ciapsaniru.*
diina dhibba fi shantama duulani cabsanii jiru
enemy hundred and fifty attack-PRS.3P break-PST.3P be-DEP.3M

It is said that in Cognarè 25 Ascaris and (?) their lieutenant have fought and defeated against 150 enemies.

Again, the Italian text is richer in details:

- A Cognarè 25 ascari nostri con un Tenente hanno combattuto vittoriosamente contro 150 nemici per tre giorni. Il nemico ha avuto molti morti.

English translation:

- In Cognarè 25 of our Ascaris and a lieutenant have victoriously fought against 150 enemies for three days, and the enemy had many deaths.

28. *Bia Iocauti zabegna lama Finanza can gedani ascarota torba naggin*
biyaa Y.=ti (Amh.) lama (It.) kan jedhani A.-ota torba ?
land Y.=LOC guardman two customs corps that say-PRS.3P Ascari-P seven ?

29. *missighi (presidio) can Inglisi itti arianiti Capitano tocco fi*
(Amh.) (It.) kan ingilizii itti ari'anitti (It.) tokko fi
fort garrison that English in chase_away-PRS.3P=LOC Captain one and

30. *ascari cuda scian bogia-ani XX XX hunduma irrà guraniru.*
A. kudha shan booji'ani XX XX hunduma irraa guuranii jiru
(Ascari) ten five seize-PRS.3P XX XX all from collect-PST.3P be-DEP.3M

They say that in Yokau, two guards of our Custom Corps and (?) seven Ascaris XXX have captured a Captain and seized all the guns and ammunitions of an English garrison strong of 15 enemies and a captain.

The Italian text reads:

- *A Iocau inglese, due nostre guardie di finanza con sette ascari hanno catturato tutti i fucili e le munizioni del presidio inglese forte di 15 nemici ed un capitano.*

I.e.:

- *In English Yokau, two guards of our Custom Corps and seven Ascaris seized all the guns and ammunitions of an English garrison strong of 15 enemies and a captain.*

4.2. The pictures and their captions

In the center of the page we find two pictures and the relevant captions. The Oromo text reads:

(above) *Mia dula dinarrà bia Moiale Chenia chesa can*
mi'a duulaa diinarra biyya Moyyalee Keeniyaa keessa kan
goods war.GEN enemy=from land Moyale Kenya in that

fudanè

fuudhane

take-PST.3P

'War implements (that were) taken from the enemy in Moyale country, Kenya.'

(below) *Iadaccia dula (bandiere)*
Yaadacha duulaa (bandiraa)
remembrance war.GEN (flags)

'War relics: flags.'



Fig. 2. Pictures and captions from p. 1.

Page 4 contains five photographs. Picture #5, the most interesting and clearest, is reproduced in Fig. 3.



Fig. 3. A Dubat standing guard in Moyale (p. 4).

In the center of page 4 we find the captions, from top to bottom in Italian, Oromo, Amharic, and Arabic:



Fig. 4. Italian and Oromo captions of the photographs on p. 4.

The Oromo captions read:

1. *Ghimbirra can Mojale Bandiera italiana fannisamera*
 (Amh.)=*rra kan Moyyaalee (It.) (It.) fannisamee jira*
 (tower)=from that Moyale (flag) (Italian) hang-PASS-PST.3M be-PRS.3M
 ‘The Italian flag hanging from the tower of Moyale.’

2. & 4. *Afan can sodacisu can Mishighi Harrington;⁹ Ascarotamò can*
afaan kan sodaachiisu kan (Amh.) H. A.-ota=mo kan
 mouth that fear-CAUS-DEP.3M that fort Harrington A.-P=also that

Galla Sidama ircan sani buchisaniru.

G. S. ilkaan saani buqqisanii jiru

Galla Sidama teeth his extract-PRS.3P be-DEP.3M

‘A threatening mouth in Fort Harrington; but the Ascari of Galla and Sidama have taken off its teeth.’

3. *Bia Mojale Chenia*
biyya Moyyaalee Keeniyaa
 land Moyale Kenya
 ‘Moyale (country), Kenya.’

5. *Bachè can egu; dubati tocco can Galla Sidama egu*
bakka kan eeguu tokko kan G. S. eeguu
 place that guard Dubat-SUBJ one that (Galla) (Sidama) guard

itti gira.

itti jira

for be-PRS.3M

‘Observation post; a Dubat of Galla and Sidama standing guard.’

⁹ Fort Harrington was the original name of the British settlement in Moyale.

5. Conclusion: some serendipity from colonialism and war?

In order to better fight the Ethiopian empire and the Amhara insurgence, Italy often sided with the minority and oppressed peoples of Ethiopia, trying to win them over and ensure their collaboration.

Oromo (still “Galla” in 1940) was not only called by Orientalist Martino Mario Moreno ‘la più importante e anche la più dolce [lingua] dell’Impero’ (‘the most important and also the sweetest language of the Empire;’ Moreno 1939: 17); it was also the obvious choice in order to challenge Amharic as a written medium – all the more so in the Ethiopian South. And, as reminded by Gragg (1976: 171), in those very years the Italian administration made the first attempts at radio broadcasting in Oromo.

Beyond its simplistic contents and duplicitous aims, the *Busta* project was certainly generous: to devise an orthography is always a challenge, and if the language has not been adequately described the whole enterprise can easily turn into a nightmare.¹⁰ Anyhow, the whole project was doomed to failure: too hasty and haphazard its preparation, too insecure and approximate the texts, maybe simply too ambitious the goals.

And then, obviously, history took a totally different course...

Abbreviations and morphological glosses

Amh.	Amharic	LOC	Locative
Ar.	Arabic	M	Masculine
CAUS	Causative	MID	Middle
DAT	Dative	P	Plural
DEP	Dependent	PASS	Passive
EMPH	Emphatic	PRS	Present
GEN	Genitive	PST	Past
INF	Infinitive	Q	Question marker
It.	Italian	SUBJ	Subject marker

¹⁰ The problem of the graphization of Oromo was briefly treated by Andrzejewski (1980); Griefenow-Mewis (1994) provides a short but rich history; an updated and much longer – if at times militant – treatment may be found in Teferi Degeneh Bijjga’s PhD Thesis (Teferi 2015).

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¹¹ In a few cases the publication year found in the source is in accordance with the Ethiopian calendar (*ankutataš*). The Gregorian year follows here in square brackets.

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Mauro Tosco is professor of African Linguistics at the University of Turin. His main area of research is the Horn of Africa, where he has been working on the analysis and description of Cushitic languages in an areal and typological perspective. Among his books: *A Grammatical Sketch of Dahalo* (Hamburg, 1991), *Tunni: Grammar, Texts and Vocabulary of a Southern Somali Dialect* (Köln, 1997), *The Dhaasanac Language* (Köln, 2001), while a grammar of Gawwada is forthcoming.

He can be reached at: mauro.tosco@unito.it