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African Perspectives on Power, Expansion and Colonial Encounters

Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University

21-22 January 2027

Organized within the framework of the international research project *Reassessing (Hi)stories of Early Italian Colonialism: The Afterlives of Luigi Robecchi Bricchetti's African Collections in Italy and Beyond*, this workshop critically examines the conceptual and historiographical frameworks through which colonialism and empire have been studied in African history. It seeks to move beyond Eurocentric approaches that have often privileged European experiences of imperial expansion, political domination, and the governance of diverse societies across the African continent.

Recognizing that traditional definitions are historically tethered to European industrial capitalism, maritime logistics, and racialized extraction, this workshop adopts a plural and historically situated approach to colonialism and imperial formations. Rather than taking a single historical experience as the universal model against which other forms of expansion and domination are assessed, it explores the multiple ways in which political authority was established, extended, and negotiated across African societies. Our central premise is that African societies were never passive recipients of external influences; rather, they were historical actors who simultaneously engaged in everyday resistance, diplomatic maneuvering, and their own substantial projects of territorial expansion, political centralization, and regional governance. A comprehensive history of colonialism and empire in Africa must therefore account for African agency while examining the broader and interconnected histories of power within which these processes unfolded.

The workshop approaches empires as historically variable political formations that exercise authority over diverse territories and human societies through differentiated hierarchies of power and shifting practices of incorporation, subordination, and governance. Particular attention is paid to the “politics of difference”, the ways in which imperial formations organized and governed the societies incorporated into their structures of power by negotiating, managing, and reproducing political, social, and cultural distinctions. This perspective opens up possibilities for investigating the convergences, interactions, and entanglements between African and European imperial trajectories, including contemporaneous projects of territorial expansion and the different ways in which imperial authorities sought to incorporate and govern diverse societies. The workshop, therefore, seeks to understand how distinct imperial projects can be examined in relation to one another, revealing shared dynamics, historical connections, and divergent outcomes.



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Focusing on scholarship on the Egyptian and Ethiopian cases, the workshop invites critical reflections on empire-state building within Africa. By situating Italian colonialism - particularly its early phase and its entanglements with figures such as Luigi Robecchi Bricchetti - within a broader, multi-layered imperial landscape, the workshop aims to reassess imperial histories as interconnected, contested, and plural processes. Contributions are encouraged to explore how African imperial projects intersected with, negotiated, resisted, appropriated, or were transformed by European colonial ambitions, and how these dynamics continue to shape historical narratives, collections, and memories in Africa and beyond. Complementing the previous project workshop, held at the Egyptian Geographical Society in Cairo in June 2026, this meeting foregrounds African perspectives on colonialism and post-colonial paradigms situating Italian colonial expansion within a wider landscape of African and European projects of power.

We invite scholars from a range of disciplines—including history, geography, anthropology, museum studies, African studies, postcolonial studies, and heritage studies—to submit proposals engaging with (but not limited to) the following thematic clusters:

1. African Politics, Territorial Expansion, and State-Building

- African forms of political authority, sovereignty, and territoriality;
- Processes of state formation, centralization, and territorial expansion;
- Tributary systems and regional hegemonies;
- Relations between centres and peripheries;
- Mobility, frontiers, and shifting political boundaries;
- Ethiopian and Egyptian projects of expansion and consolidation in comparative perspective;
- Encounters between different African political formations

2. Religion, Imperial Networks, and Political Authority

- Christian missions and European colonial expansion;
- Islam and transregional networks of political and religious authority;
- Ethiopian Christianity, sovereignty, and imperial state-building;
- Religious diplomacy and transcontinental connections;
- Conversion, education, and knowledge production;
- Religious identities and colonial classifications;
- Faith-based networks of mobility, solidarity, and resistance;

3. Rethinking Colonialism and Empire from Africa



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- African perspectives on colonialism and empire (Euro-Centric, Afro-Centric, Alternative Approaches can be included);
- Connected and comparative histories of African and European empires;
- African historiographies of colonialism; alternative temporalities and periodizations of colonial encounters;
- Decentring European colonial archives and epistemologies.

4. Colonial Afterlives: Knowledge, Collections, Memory, and Postcolonial Legacies

- African objects and manuscripts within (post-)colonial knowledge regimes: archives, libraries, museums, and collections;
- Provenance, displacement, restitution, and recontextualization;
- Colonial borders, (post-)colonial state formation and their political afterlives;
- Contemporary forms of economic and cultural influence;
- Public history and the reinterpretation of colonial heritage.

Submission Guidelines

Please submit an abstract of no more than 500 words, together with a short biographical note (maximum 150 words), by 15 December 2026 to lrb@unipv.it. Notifications of acceptance will be sent by December 22nd.

Scientific Committee

Emma Bond; Federica Ferrero; Takele Merid; Mohamedrabi Mohamed; Antonio M. Morone; Chiara Pagano; Amir Remedan; Ismail Youssef.