BEYOND THE CAMPO CINTATO: PROSTITUTES, MIGRANTS AND ‘CRIMINALS’ IN COLONIAL ASMARA (ERITREA), 1890–1941

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*Kombishtato* is a recurrent word in the urban language of Asmara. This word originated from the Italian expression Campo Cintato (fenced camp), the area in which the Italians, who colonised Eritrea from 1890 to 1941, established their first settlement. During the Italian period, Campo Cintato became the ‘European area’, as a result of the segregationist policies applied by the colonial administration, and was modelled following criteria which had to accommodate the needs of the Italian settlers and reproduce the ‘style of life’ of Italian cities. Today, *Kombishtato* identifies a specific zone of the city—the centre—one of the richest areas of Asmara and the location of political and administrative power.

Amongst elderly *Asmarini* (Asmara’s urban dwellers), however, *Kombishtato* also invokes painful memories of the Italian period: the segregationist policies applied by the colonial administration, the humiliation and struggles caused by the expropriation of lands and spaces, the policy of fragmentation of urban communities and the imposition of models of life and limits which heavily affected the experience of African urban dwellers. In its spatial definition and symbolic meaning *Kombishtato* epitomises the entire experience of Italian colonialism and its implications on the daily life of Africans living in the city, whose stories still remain underexplored by scholars.

Drawing on new archival material found in Eritrea and on interviews undertaken during my fieldwork in the country in 2001–2002, this chapter examines the models of urban order Italian colonial administration attempted to impose in Asmara and the ways in which African men and women experienced the city and shaped the pattern of their own life in a context which limited their freedom of action and generated

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new struggles over resources and space. The analysis will mainly focus on the life of urban migrants, particularly those coming from neighbouring Ethiopia and their confrontational relations with the colonial administration and with other urban communities. For its consistency, social significance and political implications the presence of Ethiopian migrants not only marked the life of the city, but also contributed to redefine patterns of exclusion and inclusion in Asmara which later became expression of broader cultural and political divisions in the Horn of Africa.

The Creation of a Colonial Urban Space

The Emergence of the Campo Cintato: Early Colonial Asmara

The occupation of Asmara in 1889 symbolised for the Italians the establishment of the first African colony, the so-called colonia primogenita (the first born colony), and the possibility of starting a new phase in colonial expansion that viewed the occupation of Ethiopia as its main goal. The Italian defeat at Adwa in 1896, however, redefined Italian aspirations and marked the beginning of a new chapter in Italian colonial history. As well as representing the largest defeat in Africa during the colonial era, the Italian defeat at Adwa became a watershed in Italian colonial policies and practices (Aquarone 1986, Del Boca 1997). Relations with neighbouring Ethiopia remained problematic throughout the Italian presence in the Horn of Africa, heavily affecting the internal situation of both countries and impacting on all aspects of Italian colonial policy in Eritrea. The development of Asmara significantly embodies the confrontational relations between the two countries.

Before the Italian conquest, Asmara was the headquarters of Ras Alula who was appointed by the Ethiopian Emperor Yohannes IV as