Curing Bodies to Rescue Souls: Health in Capuchin’s Missionary Strategy in Eritrea, 1894–1935

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The chapter focuses on the role of health care in the missionary practice of Capuchins in Eritrea between 1894 and 1935. Their activity in this field is analysed with regard to its role in proselytising activities as well as in its interaction with local notions of health, disease and the body. On one side it is shown how, in conformity to a wider mission strategy, curing diseases was perceived as instrumental in acquiring new converts. On the other side it is discussed how little knowledge missionaries had of local medical traditions and how this knowledge was often flawed by stereotypes and prejudices.

Indigenous Christianity and missionaries

The region corresponding to the present state of Eritrea, the youngest African nation, has a very long history of missionary endeavours that goes back to the early contacts with Jesuits missionaries in the sixteenth century. The continuity of this interest is also shown by a copious literature of travel – sometimes of a highly imaginative nature – that was kept alive also by an ancient tradition of pilgrimages of Orthodox monks to the main centres of Christianity. Two main factors contributed to determine this strong missionary attraction to the region. On one side, the existence in the region, since the fourth century, of a lively autochthonous Christian tradition and, on the other side, the strategic location of Eritrea and the Horn of Africa, which made it a potential gateway for further missionary penetration into Central Africa. The ancient local Christian tradition was expected to provide a good platform for an easier evangelisation of Africa. In fact, missionaries believed that due to the common monotheist and biblical background, the followers of the Christian orthodox tradition could easily be converted either to Catholicism or to Protestantism. According to Catholic missionaries it was a matter of bringing back what they defined alternatively as heretics or lost brothers to the original pure Ecclesia. On the
Protestant side the aim was to reform the Orthodox tradition, and this was expected to be achieved facilitating access to the Holy Testament by translating it into vernacular languages. Both missionary groups perceived the conversion of Orthodoxes as a crucial step in the further spreading of Christianity in Africa. From this point of view the similarity of perceptions on both Catholic and Protestant side with regard to the missionary potential of the region is quite striking. Both also perceived medicine as being of instrumental value in forging the first contact with the indigenous population and in obtaining their sympathetic reception.

At the same time, missionary activities in the region created a fascinating contradiction that does not appear to have much troubled either the missionaries in the field or their authorities in the metropolis, but which, to a certain extent, helps to make the Eritrean and Ethiopian cases peculiar in the history of Christian missionary endeavours in Africa. This was the anomaly of missionaries working among people whose conversion to Christianity dated back to the Apostolic period. This contradiction left its mark on missionary activity in the region since early Jesuit endeavour in the sixteenth century and it helps to explain the relatively limited success of missionary penetration in the region.

This paper will focus on the role and use of health in the missionary practice of Capuchin fathers in Eritrea between 1894 and 1935. Priority has been given to Capuchin fathers because to extend it also to Protestant missionaries would have enlarged the analytical spectrum excessively and made the paper too general. The analysis of the activity of the Capuchins, who were Italian missionaries in an Italian colony, also provides an opportunity to analyse the interaction between colonial authorities and Christian missions in the domain of health. The rationale for choosing the period 1894–1935 as the chronological span of the present paper lies in the fact that, on one side, 1894 marked the arrival and official beginning of Capuchin activities in Eritrea, following the expulsion of the Lazarist fathers. This was an important development of missionary activities in Eritrea as it meant the end of the presence of the French-based Congrégation de la Mission of St Vincent de Paul, better known as Lazarists, and the ‘nationalisation’ – in the sense of Italianisation – of Catholic missions in Eritrea. On the other side the year 1935 is also a crucial date, as although it did not represent the end of Capuchins presence in Eritrea, it saw a radical change in Italian colonial policies that had a strong impact on health policy. The main factor in this was the fascist invasion of Ethiopia, which led to a substantial change in Italian colonial strategy in the region. This change can be noticed in the more active and organic involvement of the colonial state in all aspects of social policies, including in the health sector. After a brief summary of the main medical traditions and practices in pre-colonial