

Black Figurines. Peoples of the 'Dark Continent' in the Russian Journal "Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia"

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1. INTRODUCTION

POLITICAL, economic and cultural relations between Soviet Russia and Africa are quite prevalent due to their shared anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist dialectic. While the subject has already been the focus of a number of studies¹, less is known about their reciprocal involvement during the late Imperial period. There is, however, growing recognition of importance, with ever more Russian

and Western writers dedicating themselves to the topic in recent decades. Exploring it mostly from a historical perspective and highlighting the Tsarist Empire's interference in European colonial enterprises in North Africa, Abyssinia² and South Africa, these scholars have proved that Russia's alleged lack of interest in the partition of Africa at the end of the 19th-beginning of the 20th century is indeed a misconception³. It was precisely in the second half of the century that Russia's involvement in African affairs increased significantly, due to the opening of the Suez Canal (1869) and the signing of the General Act at the Berlin Conference (1884-1885), which granted Russia the possibility of having a say in the creation of new protectorates by the other signatories. Indeed, the Tsarist Empire became involved in different conflicts: for instance, it supported the German expansion in South-Western Africa against Great Britain⁴, took part in the Anglo-Boer war fighting alongside the Boers (1899-1902)⁵ and tried

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¹ See for example A. Blakely, *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought*, Washington 1986; *Africa in Russia, Russia in Africa: Three Centuries of Encounters*, ed. by M. Matusevich, Trenton 2007; *Afrika v sud'be Rossii, Rossiia v sud'be Afriki*, ed. by A. Davidson et al., Moskva 2019. See also M. Matusevich, *Black in the USSR: Africans, African-Americans, and the Soviet Society*, "Transitions", 2009, 100, pp. 56-75; I. Filatova – A. Davidson, *The Hidden Thread: Russia and South Africa in the Soviet Era*, Johannesburg-Cape Town 2013; M. Matusevich, *Strange Bedfellows: An Unlikely Alliance Between the Soviet Union and Nigeria During the Biafran War*, in *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970*, ed. by A. D. Moses – L. Heerten, London-New York 2017, pp. 198-216; Idem, *Soviet Anti-Racism and Its Discontents: The Cold War Years*, in *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World*, ed. by J. Mark et al., Bloomington 2020, pp. 229-250. On related topics, such as the perception of African-American in Soviet times or the question of race see for instance K. Clark, *The Representation of the African American as Colonial Oppressed in Texts of the Soviet Interwar Years*, "The Russian Review", 2016 (75), 3, pp. 368-385; C. Kiaer, *African Americans in Soviet Socialist Realism: The Case of Aleksandr Deineka*, "The Russian Review", 2016 (75), 3, pp. 402-433; M. Gasper-Hulvat, *Children of the Narod: Early Soviet Children's Books' Racialization of Childhood*, in *Constructing Race on the Borders of Europe. Ethnography, Anthropology, and Visual Culture, 1850-1930*, ed. by M. Morton – B. Larson, London-New York 2021, pp. 207-225; *Ideologies of Race: Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union in Global Context*, ed. by D. Rainbow, Montreal 2019; E. M. Avrutin, *Racism in Modern Russia. From the Romanovs to Putin*, London-New York 2022.

² In this contribution we will use the now outdated terms 'Abyssinia' and 'Abyssinians', as they were deployed in the specific socio-historical and cultural context we write about. Other controversial terms, such as 'negro', 'race' and so forth must be understood accordingly (and not as the expression of the author's own opinions).

³ Cf. P. Rollins, *Imperial Russia's African Colony*, "The Russian Review", 1968 (27), 4, pp. 432-451; E. Wilson, *Russia and Black Africa before World War II*, New York-London, 1974; *Rossiia i Afrika: dokumenty i materialy. XVIII v.-1917 g.*, ed. by R. Viatkina et al., Moskva 1999; E. Iakovleva, *Kolonial'nyi razdel Afriki i pozitsiia Rossii (vtoraia polovina XIX v.-1914 g.)*, Dissertatsiia, Irkutskii gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii universitet 2004; *Rossiia i strany Magriba (Alzhir, Marokko, Tunis)*, ed. by A. Vasil'ev, Moskva 2011.

⁴ Cf. *Rossiia i Afrika: dokumenty i materialy*, op. cit.

⁵ A. Davidson – I. Filatova, *Anglo-burskaia voina i Rossiia*, "Novaia i noveishaia istoriia", 2000, 1, pp. 31-50. The tsar sent officers and soldiers, as well as Red Cross groups and money to build two hospitals. The war caused a considerable stir in Russian society,

to establish its own colony in Abyssinia⁶. Although it was a failed attempt, Russia remained involved in local politics: for instance, the tsar sent military and medical aids to the Abyssinians during the Italo-Abyssinian war (1895–1896)⁷. Relations with North Africa also grew during the same period. In particular, after the Russian victory over the Ottoman Empire (1877–1878), tight bonds were built with Morocco, and until the Russo-Japanese war – which significantly weakened the Tsarist Empire – Russia continued to give support to Moroccans against France, Spain and Germany⁸. When, in 1878, Tunisia became a French protectorate, Russia's interest in the region increased thanks to its pro-French and anti-English politics. As a result, through various scientific expeditions to the country, the Russian Empire tried to acquire knowledge not only on Tunisia and its riches, but also on the French control of the territory: French expertise on colonial matters was useful to Russia, which was having a hard time in dealing with its internal colonies (mainly the Caucasus and the Central Asia area). Finally, in the second half of the 19th century, Russia solidified its ties with Egypt, founding new consulates (Cairo and Port Said, in addition to the one in Alexandria), and developing economic exchanges. Moreover, both Egypt and South Africa became popular destinations for the Russian diaspora between 1880 and 1910, a process favoured by the antisemitic policies of Alexander III and the unsuccessful Revolution of 1905⁹.

and several articles, pamphlets and even books were published on this matter; cf. *Anglo-burskaia voina 1899-1902 gg. glazami rossiiskikh poddannyykh*, ed. by G. Shubin et al., Moskva 2012.

⁶ In 1888–1889 the Cossack adventurer N. Ashinov headed a colonial expedition in Abissinia, promoted by Alexander III and prominent members of the government such as M. Katkov and K. Pobedonostsev; cf. P. Rollins, *Imperial Russia's*, op. cit. A similar, unsuccessful attempt was later made by V. Mashkov's expedition (1889–1891).

⁷ Cf. A. Khrenkov, *Rossii i Ėtiopiia: razvitie dvukhstoronnykh svjazei (ot pervykh kontaktov do 1917)*, Moskva 1992; S. Agureev, *Ėtiopiia v otsenke rossiiskogo obshchestvennogo mneniia v kontse XIX-nachale XX v.*, Moskva 2011.

⁸ N. Podgornova, *Rossii-Marokko: istoriia svjazei dvukh stran v dokumentakh i materialakh (1777-1916)*, Moskva 1999; cf. also *Rossii i strany Magriba*, op. cit.

⁹ A. Letnev, *Afrika glazami ėmigrantov: Rossiiane na kontinente v pervoi polovine XX veka*, Moskva 2002; V. Beliakov, *Russkie politĕmigranty v Egipte v nachale XX veka*, "Vostochnyi arkhiv",

Even from a brief historical overview like this, it becomes clear that these multiple contacts had an impact not only on Russian foreign politics, but also on the development of cultural relations and on the production of knowledge about Africa. To this day, the ways in which Africa, African peoples and Western colonists were represented in Imperial Russia's culture remain widely unexplored. Only a small collection of studies has begun to appear, both with regards to different genres of literature (travelogues, essays, poetry) and to visual art¹⁰.

This essay intends to explore the topic, focusing on a specific case study: that of the representation of black Africa in one of the first and most widespread illustrated journals of the second half of the 19th century, "Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia" [World Illustration]. As Stuart Hall has pointed out,

how things are represented and the "machineries" of representation in a culture do play a *constitutive*, and not merely reflexive, after-the-event role. This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation – subjectivity, identity, politics – a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life¹¹.

While the public's reception of the African materials published in the journal remains uncertain, we can try to assess what image of the 'dark continent' the editors wanted to convey and spread – if any. In this regard, we will understand the word 'image' in the context of imagology, as a

mental or discursive representation or reputation of a person, group, ethnicity or "nation". [...] Factual report statements which are empirically testable [...] are not part of image-formations. Images specifically concern attribution of moral or characterological nature [...]; often they take the form of linking social facts and imputed collective psychologisms [...]. To the extent that a discourse describing a given nationality, country or

2008, 17, pp. 46–53.

¹⁰ See for instance E. Chach, *Orientalizm v obshchestvennom i khudozhestvennom soznanii Serebriannogo veka*, PhD dissertation, Sankt-Peterburg 2012; M. Semĕnova, *Obraz arabskogo Vostoka v russkom obshchestvennom soznanii vtoroi poloviny XIX-nachala XX vv. (Po materialam literatury puteshestvii)*, PhD dissertation, Moskva 2013; A. Maiga, *Afrika vo frantsuzskikh i russkikh travelogakh (A. Zhid i N. Gumilĕv)*, PhD dissertation, Sankt-Peterburg 2016; M. Taroutina, *Exotic Aesthetics: Representations of Blackness in Nineteenth-Century Russian Painting*, "Slavic Review", 2021 (80), 2, pp. 267–279.

¹¹ S. Hall, *New Ethnicities*, in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. by D. Morley – K. Chen, New York 1996, p. 443.

society relies on imputations of national character rather than on testable fact, it is called *imagined*¹².

Given the fact that “the cultural context in which these images are articulated and from which they originate is that of a discursive praxis, not an underlying collective, let alone a ‘national’ public opinion”¹³, and that any given image is the product of a variety of traditions, discourses, cultures, we will also show the materials’ connection to Western colonial literary and visual representation of black Africa. On the other hand, here we will not assess how much “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia” can be considered representative of the more general attitude the Russian editorial market reserved to black Africa at the end of the 19th century. The comparison between our current findings and similar materials in other journals of the time sharing a specific interest in faraway countries, like “Vokrug sveta”, or with memoirs, travel diaries and so forth will be the object of future studies and publications.

2. THE JOURNAL

“VSEMIRNAIA ILLIISTRATSIIA”

“Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia” was one of the first Russian illustrated journals, a form of publishing which, although it originated at the beginning of the 1800s, became popular in its last third of the century, when Russian readership significantly increased¹⁴. Aimed at a middle-low public not yet accustomed to the complexity of thick journals and books, illustrated journals, combining written texts with illustrations (a tradition borrowed from *lubok* literature) intended to familiarize this newly-formed group of readers with a wide range of topics: from history to contemporary politics, from literature to accounts on foreign countries and peoples, from art to scientific discoveries. Apart from “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, others prominent journals were for instance “Zhi-vopisnoe obozrenie” [Picture Review], “Niva” [The

Field], “Vokrug sveta” [Around the World], “Rodina” [Homeland], each with its own subscription price and a slightly different audience¹⁵. It has been noted that the illustrated journal played a complex role in the culture of the time:

[...] with its appeal to the family, the historical past, and religious moral norms, [it] served the purposes of cultural stabilisation, mitigating and reconciling [...] the contradictions present in modern culture. However, at the same time the illustrated journal also helped the reader to find a new support system: the world of science and culture¹⁶.

Their popularity is confirmed by the increasing number of subscribers, which grew from around 100,000 at the end of the 1870s to 500,000 at the beginning of the 20th century¹⁷. While they were originally distributed mainly in the urban centers of European Russia (Saint Peterburg, Moscow and partially Odessa), by the 1870s they also reached the provinces, where they quickly became the favourite medium of the middle class. It should be noted that in general they targeted an ethnically Russian public; this is one of the reasons for which they all had a section devoted to the description of customs, traditions and art of the various ethnicities of the Empire (*Tipy Rossii* [Types of Russian people], *Narody Rossii* [Peoples in Russia] and so on), emphasizing the differences between a collective Russian ‘we’ and the rest of the population¹⁸. Moreover, they were still subjected to preliminary censorship, and thus they could not publish material critical of the government or against the Russian interests. Instead, they were explicitly asked to guard them and spread them

¹⁵ For instance, a subscription for “Niva” cost 6 rubles, accessible more to provincial intelligentsia and law strata of the bourgeoisie, while “Rodina” cost only 4 rubles and was read by officers and militaries of low rank, peasants or provincial teachers; cf. A. Reitblat, *The Reading Audience of the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century*, in *Reading Russia. A History of Reading in Modern Russia*, II, ed. by D. Rebecchini – R. Vassena, Milano 2020, p. 191.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 193.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 190.

¹⁸ Cf. the discussion in Y. Tatsumi, *Russian Illustrated Journals in the Late Nineteenth Century: The Dual Image of Readers*, “Acta Slavica Iaponica”, 2009, 26, pp. 159-176. See also N. Rodigina, *Zhurnal “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia” i reprezentatsii Sibiri na ego stranitsakh*, “Gumanitarnye nauki v Sibiri”, 2013, 1, pp. 76-80. On the popularity of ‘literary ethnography’ in Russian journals at the end of the 19th century see G. Durinova, *L’ethnographie littéraire pour un “lecteur de masse”? La revue Živaja starina et le genre du récit ethnographique en Russie dans les années 1890-1900*, “Revue des études slaves”, 2022 (XCIII), 2-3, pp. 463-481.

¹² *Imagology. The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters. A Critical Survey*, ed. by M. Beller – J. Leerssen, Amsterdam-New York 2007, p. 342.

¹³ Ivi, p. 27.

¹⁴ For an overview of this phenomenon, see J. Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861-1917*, Princeton 1985.

amongst their readership. This was also the case of “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, whose editor, in a letter sent to Nicholas II in 1898 in order to obtain financial support, wrote that the journal had always pursued the Russian common good, as well as the government’s interests¹⁹.

“Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia” was founded in 1869 by editor German Goppe (Hermann Hoppe, born in Germany), who had moved to Saint Petersburg at the beginning of the 1860s. Along with colleague and friend German Kornfeld, he established his own publishing house (1867), which printed books, calendars, address books and periodicals such as “Trud” [Work] and “Modnyi svet” [The world of fashion]. As he had lived in Germany, England and Belgium, he was well acquainted with Western illustrated journals like “The Illustrated London News” or “L’Illustration”, around which he modelled “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”. Targeting a ‘family audience’ of a certain wealth and education (rich merchants and middle-rank officials who could pay a 12 rubles annual subscription), the journal placed side-by-side articles on contemporary political issues, geographic and scientific discoveries, the latest literary and theatrical news, and their respective illustrations, the main novelty and attraction of the periodical. More than fifty artists collaborated with the Goppe and his brother in this enterprise, including the best xylographers of the time (L. Seriakov, I. Matiushin, A. Zubchaninov, È. Dammiuller) and famous painters (I. Aivazovskii, V. Vasnetsov, V. Verezhagin)²⁰. In order to depict internationally relevant events, the editor relied also on a number of (photo)reporters directly involved in the field, especially when reporting news about military conflicts²¹. According to the techniques of that time, the originals (be they drawings or photos) were then made suitable for printing through various processes (e.g. wood engraving and halftone)²². By the time German Gop-

pe died in 1885 and his brother took over the management of the entire publishing house, their typography had become famous for its high standards and quality. However, after some financial troubles and lack of subsidies from the state, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia” ceased publication in 1898.

3. (BLACK) AFRICA IN “VSEMIRNAIA ILLUSTRATSIIA”

Between 1869 and 1898, 229 issues of the journal offered articles, brief reports, fictional stories and, of course, drawings and engravings regarding the African continent²³. Although Africa was not entirely central to the journal, especially considering the wide variety of geographical areas covered, there was undoubtedly a specific interest in political events and cultural traditions of such an ‘other’ place. The majority of the articles is devoted to black Africa, followed by those on North Africa (especially Egypt), and Southern Africa. They are largely concerned with internationally-relevant events (like the inauguration of the Suez Canal, which is discussed over a span of ten issues) or armed conflicts (the uprisings in Egypt leading to the creation of an English protectorate, tensions between France, Algeria and Tunisia, the creation of the Madagascar protectorate under the French, English expeditions in Sudan, armed conflicts between Italians and Abyssinians, Spanish intervention in Moroccan affairs). Others take a more ethnographic approach, describing customs and ways of life of Niam-Niam, Ashanti, Caffre, Abyssinians, Sakara, Fon (Dahomey), or reporting on scientific expeditions (led by Alexandrina Tinne, David Livingstone, Samuel Baker, Henry Stanley, Verney Lovett Cameron, Vasilii Iunker, Alexandre de Serpa Pinto, Aleksandr Eliseev). There are only a few cases of either fictionalised travel

¹⁹ N. Rodigina, *Zhurnal*, op. cit., p. 77.

²⁰ S. Belov, *Izdatel'stvo G.D. Goppe*, in *Kniga. Issledovaniia i materialy. Sbornik*, LIII, Moskva 1986, p. 60.

²¹ Cf. O. Kochukova – S. Kochukov, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia” v sozdanii khudozhestvennykh obrazov russko-turetskoi voiny 1877-1878 gg., “Istoriia i istoricheskaia pamiat”, 2018, 17, pp. 157-175.

²² On the (mis)use of photographs in late 19th century press cf. T.

Gervais, *The Making of Visual News. A History of Photography in the Press*, London-Oxford-New York-New Delhi-Sydney 2017, pp. 13-49.

²³ This estimate was reached through an analysis of the issues’ tables of contents, where African toponyms, names of famous travellers or references to African people, animals and art appeared. It should be noted that in some cases there is more than one contribution on Africa per issue, making the total number higher.

memoirs, or plain fiction²⁴.

The articles, as well as the pictures, are almost all anonymous; even the sources from which certain images or even excerpts of text were taken were not always accounted for, which was quite common for the journal²⁵ and calls into question the ties with its Western equivalents: which materials were produced by Russians themselves, and which were translated or adapted from European sources? This goes beyond the scope of the present article and certainly requires its own specific research; here we will limit ourselves only to mention the most obvious cases. In the following analysis, we will focus our attention on the ways in which black Africans were represented in written texts and pictures. As the latter were particularly important for the journal, we will also comment on them within the frame of colonial photography, which at that time contributed to a significant shift in the reception of exotic realms, transferring

“the location of analysis” from distant places to the comfort of middle-class West. Unlike “exhibitions” and museums, however, photographs were individually possessed. Postcards, magazines, tobacco cards, white hunter’s books, and illustrated travel stories all yielded their messages in the safety of urban living rooms and studies. The transition from painting to mechanical reproduction, whatever else it accomplished, clearly engineered a shift from public display to private viewing²⁶.

3.1 ETHNOGRAPHIC CURIOSITIES

The interest displayed towards customs, language, and religion of ethnic minorities inside the Empire²⁷ was clearly mirrored by the curiosity about ‘savage’ African peoples, mysterious and distant, mainly

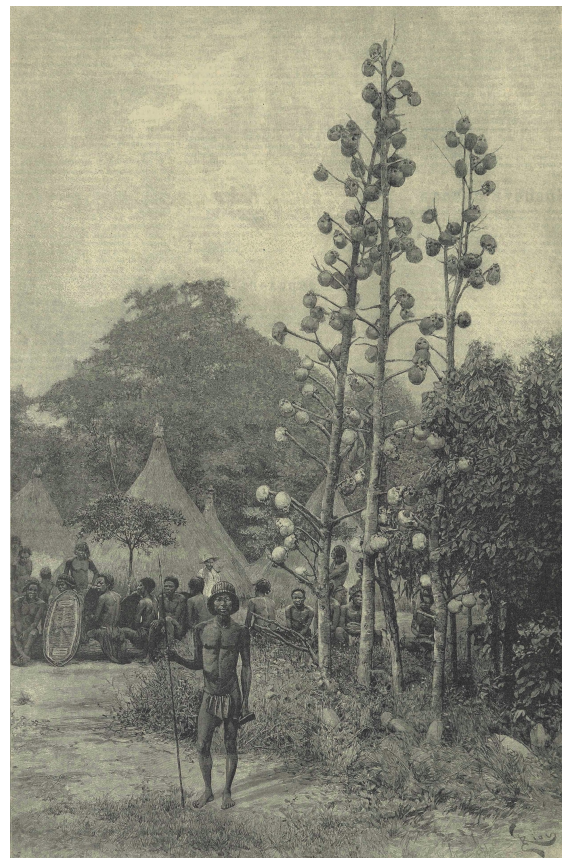


Fig. 1

explored through European sources. The need to learn more by classifying them through measurements, portraits and drawings is visible in the pages of “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”: describing life in a village in Congo, the anonymous author writes that “even though this country is inhabited by savage peoples like Yakoma and Sakara, [...] a considerable number of French observation posts has [now] been established, and the ethnography of these people [...] has been studied quite thoroughly”²⁸. However, in the next few lines, the superficial and highly stereotyped nature of these studies surfaces, thus undermining their intrinsic validity: “Sakara are by nature fearless hunters and tireless walkers. [...] Their savage and bloodthirsty appearance is striking. Nevertheless, it’s possible to perceive a recognizable tenderness beneath their harsh exterior, which gives

²⁴ Cf. V. Nemirovich-Danchenko, *Pod afrikanskim nebom. Putevye vstrechi i vpechatleniia v sadakh Gesperid*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1886, 889–893, 895–899, 901–929; A. Brehm, *Noch v afrikanskom lesu*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1891, 1147, p. 46; *Grëzy i deistvitel’nost’. Iz afrikanskoi zhizni*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1896, 1440 (p. 225)–1441 (pp. 245, 248); A. Rëmer, *Arabskaja svad’ba*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1897, 1467, pp. 253–254.

²⁵ The same has been noticed with regards to the representation of Siberia, cf. N. Rodigina, *Zhurnal*, op. cit., pp. 78–79.

²⁶ P. S. Landau, *Empires of the Visual: Photography and Colonial Administration in Africa*, in *Images and Empires. Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, ed. by P. S. Landau – D. D. Kaspin, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 2002, pp. 144–145.

²⁷ Cf. for instance *Russia’s Orient. Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700–1917*, ed. by D. R. Brower – E. J. Lazzarini, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1997; M. Kunichika, *The Penchant for the Primitive: Archaeology, Ethnography, and the Aesthetics of Russian Modernism*, PhD dissertation, Berkeley 2007; *An Em-*

pire of Others. Creating Ethnographic Knowledge in Imperial Russia and the USSR, ed. by R. Cvetkovski – A. Hofmeister, Budapest-New York 2014.

²⁸ *Derevnia sakarasov v Kongo*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1894, 1329, p. 43. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine – A.F.

their women a particular allure”²⁹. Far from being a detailed and informative article, this brief text serves to contextualize an engraving by the renowned French illustrator Édouard Riou from a photograph by pharmacist and colonial administrator Victor Liotard, who served in Sudan (1886), Congo (1891) and later Dahomey [Fig. 1]. In the picture, the small figurines of Sakara warriors gathered in a village made up of what seem to be straw huts are completely overshadowed by three slim and bare trees, whose branches display war trophies: the skulls of dead enemies. The warriors welcome the lens with an impenetrable and at the same time defiant look, while a white man stands out amongst them, the only one dressed in a ‘proper’ manner. The prominence of the macabre trophies stresses the fierceness and ferociousness of the Sakara, who still, “despite their flaws and their savage customs, are capable of growth. They gladly trade with Europeans, learn cultured habits and adapt to other ways of life when they are around civilised people”³⁰. While the explicit message expressed by the concise caption (“Africa. Congo. Tree with war trophies in a Sakara village”) has a denominative intent, i.e. in Barthesian terms functioning as an ‘anchorage’, the short article matches the ‘function of relay’, which occurs when “text [...] and image stand in a complementary relationship; the words, in the same way as the images, are fragments of a more general syntagm and the unity of the message is realized at a higher level”³¹. This is, indeed, the very mechanism that regulates the functioning of the construction of black Africa in the journal. It is the text and image together that create a single message addressed to the readers. The captions, on the other hand, are purely denotative and



Fig. 2

do not provide any sort of details or evaluations of the African reality, nor do they ideologically guide the readership’s perception.

The Sakara village is also one of the very few cases in which African peoples are depicted, or photographed, inside their natural environment: in the vast majority of pictures, they have been removed from the context and reduced to mere abstractions, to ethnographic ‘types’ open to any kind of interpretation (mediated by the text, not by the image per se)³². A two-page piece about the reign of Dahomey and its surroundings is particularly emblematic in this regard: eight pictures from a place still “relatively unknown to Europeans” are presented to the Russian reader, who is guided in interpreting them by the accompanying article³³. Three of them are portraits of local people, all removed from their environment [Fig. 2]. A wealthy family from Porto-Novo stands out at the centre of the page. Signed by French illustrator Henri Thiriat and published in the same period in France, (“L’illustration”, 10.05.1890), the

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ R. Barthes, *Rhetoric of the Image*, in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. by A. Trachtenberg, New Haven [CT] 1980, pp. 275–276. For Barthes, “in every society various techniques are developed intended to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs; the linguistic message is one of these techniques. [...] The text helps to identify purely and simply the elements of the scene and the scene itself; it is a matter of a denoted description of the image (a description which is often incomplete) [...]. The denominative function corresponds exactly to an anchorage of all the possible (denoted) meanings of the object by recourse to a nomenclature”, Ivi, p. 274.

³² The decontextualization of colonial subjects in photographs and drawings is indeed a pattern in colonial discourses. For instance, talking about Abyssinian portraits taken inside a studio by Italian photographers, Silvana Palma has underlined how this has resulted “in the production of figures that are totally decontextualized and isolated from their external environment, and they can, in a changed context, become charged with negative or, at any rate, different connotations from those originally foreseen”, S. Palma, *The Seen, the Unseen, the Invented. Misrepresentations of African “Otherness” in the Making of a Colony. Eritrea, 1885–1896*, “Cahiers d’études africaines”, 2005, 1, p. 48. In the Russian context, this seems relevant not so much with regards to a change in the perception of particular indigenous figures switching sides, but instead in relation to the original purpose of these Western colonial images and their (potential) resemantization once they became part of the Russian discourse.

³³ *Korolevstvo Dagomei*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1890, 1113, pp. 351–352.

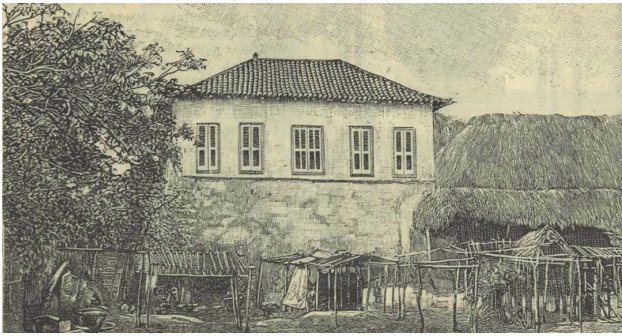


Fig. 3

picture (originally a photograph) abides by the rules of Western family portraits realized in studios by professional photographers. The gap between the (traditional, European) form and the (novel, black) content is promptly filled by the anonymous author of the article, who stresses the ‘domestication’ of the family, now more European than African:

They are no longer savages; as a matter of fact, they will object to this label: thanks to their proximity to the white man, they have become civilised; the father and the mother wear European clothes. The head of the family proudly wears a tall top hat at a jaunty angle – an enviable possession to all his compatriots, while his wife, disregarding the heat (35°), shines in a magnificent velvet dress³⁴.

Interestingly enough, to wear European clothes becomes a synonym for ‘growing up’: the author emphasizes the fact that the youngest son of the couple is simply clothed with a tunic, because his parents “consider him still very young to be Europeanised [*ob' evropeit'sia*]”. Likewise, the female slave is left naked “like Eve”³⁵. Thus, traditional clothes and nudity are perceived as belonging to either a state of childhood, or to an ahistorical era, far away from Western (and therefore, implicitly, Russian) civilised societies. In the colonial discourse, “the savage [...] lives in a continual state of self-presence, unable to leave that trace on the world which serves as the beginning of [...] progress. [...] This way of defining the African, as without history and without progress, makes way for the moral necessity of cultural transformation”³⁶. If the prestigious social status

of this family allows the usage of European portraiture’s standards, natives from lower backgrounds are reduced to the genre of ethnographic portraits and illustrated as specific ‘types’, according both to their race and to their function within their society. This is the case of the two smaller portraits which, according to the caption, represent “a porter” [*nosil'shchika*] and “a seller” [*torgovka*]. In the article, the former is cryptically described as “one of the most unhappy representatives of the human race in Africa”, and she seems to serve only as an excuse to illustrate to the Russian public the custom of carrying a children on the back: “this way of carrying along a child is common throughout Africa, and we have to acknowledge its convenience, as it leaves the mother with full range of movement; children get used to it quickly and it’s very rare to see a child cry or complain from discomfort”³⁷. The latter, “a negro woman” [*negritianka*], is a chance for the author to describe the “national costume” she wears: “Aso (*asho*) consists of a piece of paper fabric, almost always striped or chequered, 4 feet wide and 6 feet long; they wrap themselves up in them, sometimes with much coquetry and elegance”³⁸. The remaining five pictures depict the landscape (two trading villages, Porto-Novo’s palace, a street view, a local settlement near Abeokuta), from which people have conveniently been removed. The emptiness of these places and the striking absence of natives makes them even more open and prone to colonial appropriation, symbolised by the European style ‘palace’ [Fig. 3]: “their zero-degree of existence provides both a justification for the colonizing enterprise and an imaginary empty space [...]”³⁹. When present (as in the case of the street view), the natives are part of the background, with the faces turned away from the lens, nameless and featureless. In the accompanying article, the only time they are mentioned is in relation to the surroundings of Abeokuta, whose “courageous inhabitants have become true allies of the French”⁴⁰.

³⁴ Ivi, p. 351.

³⁵ Ibidem.

³⁶ D. Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire. Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*, Durham-London 1993, p. 99.

³⁷ *Korolevstvo Dagomei*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1890, 1113, p. 351.

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ D. Spurr, *The Rhetoric*, op. cit., p. 96.

⁴⁰ *Korolevstvo Dagomei*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1890, 1113, p.

Usually, natives appear inside the frame when their interactions with white people are portrayed, or when the scene depicted stresses their savageness and backwardness. In another piece about Dahomey, two pictures of their Amazon army are provided⁴¹. The first one [Fig. 4], a drawing by Auguste Gérardin simply titled “Amazons” [*Amazonki*], shows a group of Dahomey Mino in the act of slaughtering their enemies, fully armed with daggers, arrows and rifles, their faces twisted in fury⁴². The second one [Fig. 5], “At the execution; amazons tear apart a man sentenced to death” [*Pered kaz'niu; amazonki terzaiut osuzhdennogo na smert'*]⁴³, highlights the ‘backwardness’ of Dahomey’s ritual ceremonies. In the accompanying article, which provides information about local traditions and especially religion (fetishism), the author explains that during the “great customs,” around five hundred people are killed so that they can serve the dead kings in the afterlife:

Usually, this procedure is conducted by the Amazons: they put the victim in European clothes, they make him sit on a log with an umbrella between his legs and they begin the torture. They begin performing a war dance around the poor man, leading him to believe that they are about to end his life with a knife stab or a rifle’s shot, only to behead him when he is morally wounded⁴⁴.

Despite a previous attempt to extinguish this tradition, the current king Gléglé prefers to preserve it: “even though he has studied in Marseille, [he] fully is a bloodthirsty barbarian [*krovozhadnyi varvar*]⁴⁵. The piece relies heavily on an article published in “L’illustration” just a few days prior (15.03.1890), and misleads the audience to believe that the use of European costume was common in human sacrifices in Dahomey. On the contrary, this was a sporadic



Fig. 4

deviation from the norm with the intent of offering ‘whites’ to the dead kings⁴⁶. In any case, it should be noted that, compared to other descriptions of Dahomey published in European journals at the same time, the Russian one seems relatively mild: the text does not possess the emotional charge present in the French or Italian press⁴⁷. While the Russian de-

351.

⁴¹ *Korolevstvo Dagomei*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1890, 1104, pp. 199, 204.

⁴² The drawing was published in “Le Monde Illustré” on March 15th, 1890 with the same caption (“Les Amazones”) and the name of the illustrator, not acknowledged in the Russian journal.

⁴³ The picture appeared in “L’illustration” on March 15th, 1890 (p. 228). According to the caption, it is the reproduction of a photograph taken by “Choa”, a plausible misprint of Édouard Foà, who is credited as the author of all the other images regarding Dahomey. Foà (1862-1901) was a French photographer and explorer who did indeed live in Dahomey in the late 1880s.

⁴⁴ *Korolevstvo Dagomei*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1890, 1104, p. 199.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ Cf. S. B. Alpern, *Amazons of Black Sparta. The Women Warriors of Dahomey*, London 1998, p. 237. Cf. J. du Vistre, *Au Dahomey*, “L’illustration”, 15.03.1890, p. 227. See also “Le Figaro. Supplément Littéraire”, 08.03.1890, p. 38, where the memoir of Jules Lartigues from an expedition in Dahomey some thirty years prior was reprinted with the title *Les sacrifices humains au Dahomey. Révélations inédites*: “When the first savage ceremonies took place in honour of the late king, Gléglé, the current king, tired of killing according to the customs of the country and of killing only negroes, imagined offering whites to his father and killing them in the way the whites used to do. For this purpose, he took four negroes from among the prisoners, had them dressed in European fashion [...]. Once this burlesque comedy ended, two negroes were hanged in front of the palace gate”. The clear connection between these French articles and the Russian one – they seem to be the only ones describing the practice of disguising Dahomey victims with European clothes – makes us wonder about the ways in which the editors of “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia” selected and obtained the materials they intended to publish. This question remains unanswered, as we haven’t (yet) had the chance to check the Russian archives.

⁴⁷ For the French context, see V. Campion-Vincent, *L’image du Dahomey dans la presse française (1890-1895): les sacrifices humains*, “Cahiers d’études africaines”, 1967 (25), 7, pp. 27-58. The particularly violent and explicit images republished in this essay reaffirm our observation with regards not only to the texts, but also to the iconography of Dahomey. For the Italian context, see for instance A. Brunialti, *Dahomey. La guerra delle amazzoni*, “L’illustrazione italiana”, 1890 (17), 12, pp. 205-207. The article begins quite emphatically: “Horrible, unheard of massacres in which blood runs in streams, battalions of wild Amazons [...]; impenetrable fo-



Fig. 5

piction of Dahomey still relies on Western sources (for instance, Jean-Marie Bayol is explicitly cited as an eye-witness to human sacrifices), the general tone is more that of a (pseudo)ethnographic essay, which nevertheless remains somewhat superficial: the author fails to provide an explanation for these “bloodthirsty” rituals, and he does not bother to understand their meaning within Dahomey culture.

The same superficiality is visible in the pieces aimed at presenting to the Russian public specific African ‘types’. In *Aboriginals of Southern Africa*, the author talks more about the wars between aboriginals and Europeans than about the actual people and their habits⁴⁸. Some commentary on the locals is finally included at the end of the article, only to direct the reader to the eponymous book *Die Eingeborenen Süd-Afrika's* (1872) by Gustav Fritsch, who “gives the most detailed descriptions of the way of life, clothes, physiological peculiarities and thinking of these distant peoples who are now disappearing”⁴⁹. In the following pages, some drawings taken from Fritsch’s study are provided without further in-depth explanations: thus, the figurines of a “Hot-tentot” [*Gottentotka*], “Types of Bushmen” [*Tipy Bushmenov*] and “Girls from a Zulu tribe” [*Devu-*



Fig. 6

shki iz plemeni Zulu], to cite just a few examples, stand completely on their own, open to the interpretation – and imagination – of the Russian reader. A few years later, during the 1879 Anglo-Zulu war, people from Southern Africa came again to public attention. This time, an article entitled *Types of Caffres* [*Tipy Kaffrov*] appeared followed by a page with engravings of Zulus and Caffres [Fig. 6]⁵⁰. Realised by Estonian and Russian engraver Avgust Daugel’, they resemble the ones by Harry Furniss published earlier that year in “The Illustrated London News”, where they were reported to be the reproductions of photographs taken by “Mr. Kisch, of Durban”⁵¹. The text of the article, however, seems rather different from its English equivalent, being entirely devoted to an ethno-anthropological portrayal of South African inhabitants:

All the peoples of the bantu family stand out for their dark [*tëmnyi*] skin and woolly hair, thick as dry grass. The skull of Caffres is extremely different not only from that of Europeans, but also from that of other inhabitants of Africa, since their heads

rests full of feverish swamps, lethal flowers, frightening fauna, all sorts of pitfalls, this is how we imagine Dahomey, one of the last wild countries of Africa that extends to the coast, as if to dishonour the modern civilization or to show its impotence” (206). On the reception of Amazons in Russia see I. Novikova, *Imagining Africa and Blackness in the Russian Empire: from Extra-textual A-rpka and Distant Cannibals to Dahomey Amazon Shows – Live in Moscow and Riga*, “Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture”, 2013 (19), 5, pp. 571-591.

⁴⁸ *Aborigeny iuzhnoi Afriki*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1874, 291, pp. 75-77.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 75.

⁵⁰ *Voina Anglii s Zulusami. Tipy Kaffrov*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1879, 533, pp. 259-262.

⁵¹ *The Zulu War*, “The London Illustrated News”, 22.02.1879, p. 170. For an account of the photographic oeuvre of the brothers Kisch in South Africa, see <https://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/south-africas-three-photographers-named-kisch-1863-1902> (latest access: 10.12.2022).

have the anterior-posterior diameter longer than the transversal one, so that they belong to the dolichocephalic type. [...] Their body is able to fight every threat of nature, and in this regard they are exceptionally close to beasts, not needing any clothes to protect themselves from bad weather. Their face [...], generally speaking, is not beautiful [...]. Their skin is dark, and according to the geographical area in which they live it can assume different shades, from a thick sepia to bluish black.

The eyes of the Zulus can be even called very expressive, and they do not possess that sleepiness and apathy that can be seen in other inhabitants of Southern Africa. [...] Superstition is more rooted than religion, and there exists among them a widespread belief in sorcery⁵².

The same treatment is reserved to Abyssinians, who, despite being far more ‘civilised’ than other Africans (thanks to their Christian faith), are represented as relics of more prosperous times: “the moral and intellectual development of Abyssinians is very low”⁵³, “Abyssinia was once pretty developed, but now its trade is limited to rough agricultural tools, knives, tanned skins [...]”, this “weakness” being caused by “the lack of a large regular army” and the “variety of tribes” which prevents unity⁵⁴. In this case, too, stereotypes are integrally woven into the narrative (for instance, Abyssinians possess “courage”), while ethnographic passages are devoted to describing specific tribes and their different skin colours, way of life, dwellings, religion and ceremonies. One small piece that serves as an excellent example of this is *Svad’ba v Adove* [A Wedding in Adua], based on the recollections of William Hewett. Here, the anonymous author stresses how, out of all Christian nations, Abyssinia is the only one where the ancient ritual of the abduction of the bride is still common, thus implying that this country remains backward and at the lowest step of the ideal hierarchy of Christian peoples⁵⁵.

On the other hand, an article that discusses two pygmies from Aka, bought by Italian explorer Giovanni Miani and sent after his death to the Italian Geographical Society in order to be studied, exemplifies the penchant for curiosities, anomalies, deformities, ‘strange’ natural phenomena which was

widespread in Europe at the time⁵⁶. Followed by a wood engraving by Daugel’ from an anonymous photo, the piece cites the discoveries of Georg Schweinfurth, one of the first Europeans to have encountered pygmies, and later describes them according to the measurements and observations made by Italian scholars:

The first one is one metre and two centimetres tall, the second one is one metre and fifteen centimetres. Their faces are blackish, rather than black, their eyes expressive and their forehead well built. They have curly hair, quite a flat nose, pronounced abdomens and very short legs. Nevertheless, these dwarves stand up straight and their backbone isn’t as curved as that of gorillas⁵⁷.

Aside from their physical appearance, the Russian reader is also informed about their personality and behaviour (“They are curious about everything, yet they do not like being looked at for too long and they especially do not like being touched”), which is highly accentuated (“They look at women in the most African way”)⁵⁸. Their ‘strangeness’, ‘oddity’, diversity is asserted once more at the end, when the reader is presented with a popular theory (suggested by Schweinfurth and somewhat embraced by Cesare Correnti, president of the Italian Geographical Society), according to which pygmies were the relics of a pre-historical race [*ostatki doistoricheskogo roda*] and therefore useful to the ethno-anthropologist studying the development of human races. In that sense, the anonymous photograph of the two pygmies from which the engraving was made serve to preserve or “[freeze] images of the ‘primitive’ people whom the universalizing and homogenizing tides of modernity were otherwise washing away”⁵⁹.

3.2 NOTABLE OTHERS

Even though the majority of the articles are devoted to abstract ‘types’, and the related pictures,

⁵² *Voina Anglii s Zulusami. Tipy Kaffrov*, op. cit., p. 259.

⁵³ *Sobytiia v Egipte. Èkspeditsiia v Sudane. Abissiniia i abissintsy*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1884, 804, p. 467.

⁵⁴ Idem, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1884, 807, p. 10.

⁵⁵ *Vidy, stseny i tipy v Abissinii. Svad’ba v Adove*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1884, 814, pp. 143, 145.

⁵⁶ *Pigmei Akka*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1874, 287, pp. 11, 16. For an account on the pygmies’ destiny, see S. Puccini, *Gli Akkà del Miani: una storia etnologica nell’Italia di fine secolo (1872-1883). Parte prima: dall’Africa selvaggia all’Europa degli scienziati (1872-1874)*, “L’uomo. Società. Tradizione. Sviluppo”, 1984 (8), 1, pp. 29-58; Idem, *Parte seconda: a Verona e nel trevigiano; vita e studi italiani di Thiebaut e Keralla (1874-1883)*, “L’uomo. Società. Tradizione. Sviluppo”, 1984 (8), 2, pp. 197-217.

⁵⁷ *Pigmei Akka*, op. cit., p. 11.

⁵⁸ Ibidem.

⁵⁹ P. S. Landau, *Empires*, op. cit., p. 144.

in a clear colonial fashion, portray people “deindividualized and nameless”⁶⁰, some of them are actually committed to representing notable African figures, whose names were well known by the Western press. This was the case for kings, warriors or local emissaries who held meetings (both in Africa and abroad) with European colonial representatives and were thus granted non-anonymity.

An 1888 article on the reign of Amatonga in Southern Africa, which almost plagiarises an eponymous one published in “The Illustrated London News”, offers the portrait of Majove, a local man [*tuzemets*] sent to England as a representative for his Prime Minister⁶¹. The picture clearly obeys the rules of official portraiture, and it is stylized in the same fashion as the ones of Jesser Coope and Robert Grantham, the other (white) members of the diplomatic mission. Nevertheless, the article explicitly defines what made Majove different, i.e. the combination of his African heritage (the war paint allegedly covering his face) and European clothes, a cultural clash enhanced, in the Russian version, by the conjunction “but” [*no*] separating the two components. His portrait literally illustrates a partial domestication, while other, less educated locals were resistant to and even fearful of portraits and photographs: “ignorant [*nevezhestvennye*] Africans believe photography to be akin to sorcery”⁶².

The very same partial ‘savagery’ or ‘backwardness’ attributed to Majove is noticeable also in the description of Abyssinian leader and warrior Ras Alula, who is simultaneously “the hero of the battle of [Saati]” and “the son of simple Abyssinian farmers”, “not able to read or write, since he has no education” and yet “not at all a stupid man”, “cunning, but also pious and superstitious”⁶³. Portrayed

along with his wife and his general quarters in a composition that – if not for the caption – could very well be read as ‘Abyssinian types’ in terms of abstraction from the context and overall iconography, Ras Alula is nevertheless depicted as an elegant and wealthy man, bearing symbols of power (the crown with Christian crosses, the elaborate hairstyle, the rich fur). The sophisticated embroidery on his wife’s tunic, the adorned shields and expensive weapons of his comrades (carefully named in the caption) further characterise Gustav Mützel’s drawing as a representation of power, albeit a backward, primitive one. Not surprisingly, such a prestigious status is generally granted only to Abyssinian key figures, the closest – as far as black Africa goes – to Western (and Russian) culture by virtue of their religion⁶⁴. Thus, Menelik II and his wife, along with the ambiguous figures of Bahta Hagos and Ras Mengesha (at times allied of Western powers) are portrayed in quite a sumptuous way. As Palma has suggested, “a specially prominent role was assumed by the images of local notables who allied themselves with the new colonial power: the weight and authority they possessed in native society, which the photographs sought to enhance, made their acceptance of the traditional colonial system even more significant”⁶⁵. In the Russian context, prone to an alliance with Abyssinia, the resemantization of photos almost entirely taken from Italian journals (a task entrusted to the accompanying articles) becomes quite clear. Far from an explicit appreciation of allied Abyssinians or depreciation of them as enemies, the Russian point of view maintains a certain balance, if anything minimizing the Italian victories. For example, in the Italian press, ally-turned-rebel Bahta Hagos, was depicted as having undergone a true metamorpho-

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 151.

⁶¹ *Strana Amatonga v juzhnoi Afrike*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1888, 1002, pp. 276-277, 284. Cf. *Amatongaland*, “The London Illustrated News”, 11.02.1888, pp. 140, 142. The article in Russian is a free translation of the English one, minus the references to the original photographers (A. Frères, London Stereoscopic Company, Mr. Payer).

⁶² *Strana Amatonga*, op. cit., p. 284. In this case, the English version contains no explicitly negative judgement of Africans, omitting the word “ignorant” from the description.

⁶³ *Abissinskii polkovodets Ras-Alula*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1887, 954, p. 358.

⁶⁴ An exception would be Ranavalona III, queen of Madagascar, in a photo taken by Léon Suberbie, as well as in the anonymous accompanying article. In the portrait, the young queen sits on an ornate throne wearing a refined crown and a very elegant European dress, as she used to do both in public and in private (according to the article). The article stresses her habit of following English, and later French, fashion. On the contrary, her entourage is mentioned as wearing partially European, partially Malagasy clothes. Her European look grants her a place among the ‘civilised’. Cf. *Ranavalona III, Koroleva madagaskarskaia*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1895, 1394, p. 284.

⁶⁵ S. Palma, *The Seen*, op. cit., pp. 46-47.

sis as a result of his political choices⁶⁶. Instead, in the Russian account, he is simply portrayed as a valid military man, and his death at the hands of the Italians is neither tragic, nor celebrated, but stated matter-of-factly⁶⁷. The engraving [Fig. 7], realised from a photo taken by Schweinfurth, dates back to the time when Bahta Hagos was still allied to the Italians, and it shows him in the company of lieutenant Grassi, his son and members of his guard. While the latter are merely in the background, the Abyssinian warrior is in the foreground near Grassi, thus hinting at an equality between them. Interestingly, the author of the article suggests that the Russian reader should consider Bahta Hagos to be an emblem of that Abyssinian ‘type’ who was obstructing Italian possession of the territory. In that sense, he too is transformed into an abstract ‘type’, into the very essence of Abyssinian resistance: not a real – and notorious – human being anymore, but a symbol. The same strategy – abstraction – is also employed in the case of two other pictures, which portray Ras Mengesha and his courier Basha John. Originally taken by Luigi Naretti, one of the most significant and prolific professional photographers of late 19th century Abyssinia and yet not acknowledged by the Russian editors, these photos in themselves communicate wealth and power, following the highly codified rule of equestrian portraiture (Mengesha) and studio staged portraits (Basha John): “Transformed into icons, the subjects of these [Luigi Naretti’s – A.F.] photographs are reified through a process of isolation from their natural environment, often artificially recreated and presented in a highly schematic way”⁶⁸. Before their betrayal, they were both held in high regard in the Italian press, and their elegant appearance fascinated the public⁶⁹. In



Fig. 7

the new, Russian context reification occurs twice, as the article does not cite the subjects’ names (briefly provided in the captions) nor their role within the Italo-Abyssinian conflict, referring to them only as “other pictures related to the conflict between Italy and Abyssinia”. Without more specific information, the Russian reader remains uncertain as to how to interpret those shots: are Ras Mengesha and Basha John friends or enemies, elegant and powerful men or backward savages? There are no remarks, for instance, about the fact that Ras Mengesha’s war outfit did not include socks and shoes – something the Italian press had mocked as a sign of savagery⁷⁰. Without the written text to provide the ‘function of relay’, and a merely denominative caption for the image, a process of signification inevitably occurs: far from being actual individuals, Ras Mengesha and Basha John become signs, ‘types’ of Abyssinian soldiery.

As far as the iconography of Menelik II is concerned, it clearly shows a process of ‘domestication’ during the years, following the development of close bonds between him and the Russian tsar. In 1890 his exoticness still played a constituent part, both in the image chosen by the journal (an official portrait by G. Amato, showing Menelik and his entourage in traditional clothes)⁷¹, and in the text of the related article,

very handsome man, a magnificent Oriental emperor”.

⁷⁰ Cf. *Le vittorie delle armi italiane in Africa*, “L’illustrazione popolare”, 27.01.1895, p. 130.

⁷¹ Once again, we must note the neutrality of the Russian caption (*Abyssinia. King Menelik and his Entourage* [*Abyssiniia. Korol’ Menelik i ego svita*]) in comparison to the original (Italian) one

⁶⁶ Ivi, pp. 50-53, “[...] in the construction of his image we find heavily manipulated and selected representations that give rise to elaborations which may result either negative or positive but which are always evocative of stereotyped images, robustly sedimented in the collective imagery, such as those of the ‘rebel bandit’ or the ‘noble savage’” (52).

⁶⁷ *Bat-Agos. K ital’janskim delam v Afrike*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1895, 1356, pp. 78-79, 81.

⁶⁸ S. Palma, *Fotografia di una colonia: l’Eritrea di Luigi Naretti (1885-1900)*, “Quaderni storici”, 2002, 1, p. 97.

⁶⁹ Cf. for instance *Scontro di Halai – Ras Mangascià*, “L’illustrazione popolare”, 13.01.1895, p. 98, where Ras Mengesha is called “a

which heavily relies on Orientalist tropes usually applied to North Africa rather than black Africa: "The life of Menelik is a whole poem, of course, embedded with all the peculiarities of the Orient: there are love, vengeance, betrayal, victories and losses, rivers of blood. His own birth bears a touch of legend", and his second wife Bafena is called "a typical woman of the *harem*: a greedy, envious, ambitious and skilled schemer"⁷². Nevertheless, while being a proper 'Oriental man', he is also remembered as accommodating when dealing with Europeans, who fascinate him both for their culture and their scientific discoveries. Five years later, in conjunction with an Abyssinian diplomatic mission to Russia, Menelik is transformed into a "fervent and committed Christian, protector of the Orthodox faith" and his third wife Taytu is labelled "very religious, [...] a patron of the clergy, and especially of monasticism"⁷³. This tie with (Orthodox) religion is enhanced by means of a famous portrait by Italian engraver Cantagalli, where the emperor, soberly dressed, displays a big cross around his neck. Now, as he is becoming a more and more valuable ally of Tsarist Russia, Menelik is not an 'Oriental other' anymore; instead, he is a champion of civil society and modernity, appearing as a partner or ally: "He is a man of great intelligence, curious, aware that the good of his country lies in civilisation. In his palace, the *negus* has a museum with objects gifted by Europeans, among which are photographic devices, geodesic and astronomical instruments, [...] a telephone"⁷⁴. Now the Russian reader is reminded more of the similarities shared with the Abyssinians, than of the mutual differences.

3.3. EMBRACING WESTERN POSES

As African countries were colonies of the West, it is indeed rare to see, in the pages of "Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia", direct encounters between Russian and African people. When this occurs, however, it

is revealing of two coexisting tendencies: to represent (certain) Africans as more civilised than the European press would allow, and, at the same time, to mimic European colonial stances and attitudes particularly with regards to the portrayal of Russian explorers and the exhibits of collected African objects. This ostensible contradiction can be explained as the Russian desire to prove its place and relevance to the Western world, and to promote itself as an equal of European empires. Yet purporting to be a 'proper' Western empire, Russia could not risk being allied with a country viewed as backward or barbarian: therefore, in some contexts, Abyssinia was stripped of all connotations possibly related to savagery, and raised, with its representatives, to the ranks of civilised, Christian countries. A photo by Dmitrii Zdobnov [Fig. 8] shows the most prominent members of the 1895 Abyssinian diplomatic mission to Russia, among which prince Damto, Menelik's cousin. The three Abyssinians, who wear traditional yet somehow not-so-exotic clothes (along with boots), sit in a stern and sober pose alongside Russian officer Nikolai Leont'ev, who had already visited their country in 1894 as a member of the expedition led by Aleksandr Eliseev⁷⁵. Sharing pose and attitude, Leont'ev and the Abyssinians are portrayed as equals, and throughout the article there is a clear attempt to differentiate this particular population from other Africans. For instance, describing two Somali "non-Christian" slaves who were part of the mission, the author writes that "not as beautiful as the Abyssinians, they are beardless, without moustaches; they belong to a more negro type with very curly hair, and they wear colourful shawls and sandals on their bare feet"⁷⁶. On the contrary, prince Damto, who is "extremely pious as all Abyssinians", is a "tall, well built, handsome brunette with a black beard and expressive eyes, with fine aristocratic hands, solemn gait and distinctive features.

(*Menelik and his Commanding Officers in War Clothes*), which instead emphasizes their belligerence.

⁷² *Menelik II, imperator èfiopskii*, "Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia", 1890, 1096, pp. 68, 70.

⁷³ *Negus Abissinii Menelik II i supruga ego tsaritsa Tsegaitu*, "Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia", 1895, 1380, p. 23.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁵ Nikolai Leont'ev would later lead another mission in Abyssinia (1895-1896). Cf. for instance S. Agureev, *Italo-èfiopskaia voina 1895-1896 gg. glazami russkogo ojtsera podporuchika N.S. Leont'eva i ital'ianskogo maiora Dzhiiovanni Gamera*, "Voenna-istoricheskaiia antropologiia. Aktual'nye problemy izucheniiia. Ezhegodnik", 2005-2006, pp. 73-81.

⁷⁶ *Chrezvychainoe abissinskoe posol'stvo*, "Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia", 1895, 1380, p. 25.



Fig. 8

Even though his skin is almost black, His highness is extremely pleasant to look at, thanks especially to his posture”⁷⁷. Thus, the habit of classifying indigenous people according to their alleged degree of civilisation (a trait of late 19th century Western and Russian discourses over the ‘other’)⁷⁸, becomes here instrumental for the construction of the Russian self and its politics. The journal goes on detailing the official greetings in honour of the Abyssinian guests – among which a traditional Cossack *dzhigitovka*, apparently highly appreciated by them – and recounting their reception by Nicholas II, as well as the ceremony of putting an Abyssinian golden crown on the grave of the late Alexander III as a sign of respect and alliance⁷⁹.

There was, however, still an apparent need to stress Abyssinia’s status as an exotic and ‘second rate’ Christian country, inferior to ‘European’ and civilised Russia. The obituary of Russian doctor and explorer Aleksandr Eliseev, who died in 1895, seems particularly suggestive. Eliseev’s multiple travels throughout the vastness of Russia, the Baltic region, Asia Minor, Palestine and Africa are remembered and detailed extensively also with regards to their



Fig. 9

purpose (for instance his journey to Ussuri krai “to study the Russian colonisation [*rusaskaia kolonizatsiia*] of the region”, or his stay in the Novgorod area to deepen his understandings of kurgans). Curiously, though, the photo chosen for the obituary [Fig. 9], as well as the other pictures of the article, link him exclusively to Africa. Moreover, they follow the typical iconography of the white, European coloniser triumphantly exhibiting his exotic findings. The studio portrait shows him wearing an explorer’s outfit and sitting on a chair positioned over a leopard skin, while a young Somali from Abyssinia stands near him with exotic, traditional clothes and weapons. A sort of exhibition in itself, the photo elevates Eliseev to the rank of prominent Western colonial explorers. Meanwhile, the text reveals the Somali’s status of souvenir, listing him among the mementos Eliseev brought to Russia: “Around Easter, A.V. Eliseev returned home, bringing along a small Abyssinian lion, which he gifted to his majesty the emperor, and a number of young Abyssinians”. One of these Abyssinians is described as the epitome of the native worshipping his master: “[...] the Somali named

⁷⁷ Ivi, pp. 24-25.

⁷⁸ On ‘classification’ as a specific rhetorical device of colonial writing see D. Spurr, *The Rhetoric*, op. cit., pp. 61-75. For a thorough survey of the taxonomic nature of Russian imperial discourse over internal or external ‘others’ during the rise of anthropology, cf. M. Mogilner, *Homo Imperii. A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia*, Lincoln [NE] 2013.

⁷⁹ *Korona-shlem, vozlozhennaia abissinskim posol'stvom na grobnitsu Imperatora Aleksandra III*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1895, 1381, p. 46; *Priëm Ikh Imperatorskimi Velichestvami abissinskogo chrezvychainogo posol'stva*, Ivi, pp. 40, 46-47.

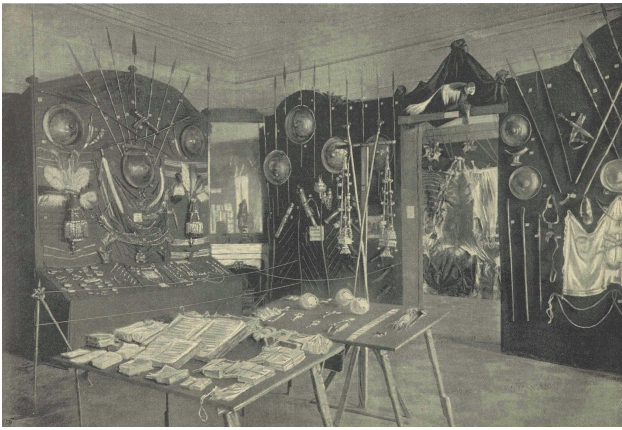


Fig. 10

Atei became very close to the doctor and, when the doctor died, was so sad that he stopped eating”⁸⁰. The other pictures show a collection of objects the doctor had brought from Africa: shields, spears, a mask made with a lion’s head, skins of wild beasts, all arranged like one of the highly popular ethnographic exhibitions of late 19th century Europe, where, as Clifford notes, “collecting [...] implies a rescue of phenomena from inevitable historical decay or loss. The collection contains what ‘deserves’ to be kept, remembered and treasured. Artifacts and customs are saved out of time”⁸¹. Thus, it is not surprising that a photograph of an Abyssinian soldier “with ancient armour and weapons” is also included among the items of Eliseev’s collection, a vivid reminder that a living person can acquire the status of ‘object’ worthy of being collected, becoming a ‘metonymic souvenir’, functioning simultaneously as sign for the whole (Abyssinia, in this particular case) as well as “a specimen and a trophy”⁸².

While in the Russian Empire the penchant for ethnographic exhibitions and the emulation of the Western colonial displays commonly translated into the creation of museums and shows on the different peoples living inside the Russian borders, the long-lasting relations with Menelik allowed the existence not only of private collections of Abyssinian mate-

rial culture, but also their opening to the public. For instance, in January 1897 one such ethnographic exhibition was held in Saint Petersburg thanks to Konstantin Zviagin, a member of the Russian Red Cross sent to Abyssinia. “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia” promptly reported on this initiative, with an article and two pictures enclosed (see one of them in [Fig. 10]). Arranged in three rooms, the objects – weapons, sanitary equipment, books, clothes, church items, drawings, hunting trophies and so forth – were intended, in the best tradition of Western ethnographic museums, to “display not individual artifacts but the larger culture they stand in for. Conventionally, in order to be authentic and thus worthy of display, this culture itself must be definable as homogenous, distant and untouched”⁸³. Indeed, under the comprehensive Abyssinian flag, the exhibition gathered together items from ‘Abyssinian’, ‘Somali’ and ‘Oromo’ ethnic groups (quite an arbitrary subdivision in itself), as if they were part of the very same culture. Physical appearance was perhaps the only difference indicated between the three ethnic entities: Abyssinians “can be called beautiful”, while “Somali and Oromo [*gallasy*] are rather ugly”⁸⁴. Despite these surface-level distinctions, they all share the same backward milieu, the same savage and exotic culture: “everything [the sanitary equipment – A.F.] is, of course, primitive and striking in its naivety”, “the religious artifacts are eye-catching for their, so to speak, exoticness”, “even though the number of literate people is very low, the manuscripts stand out for their beauty and they are accompanied by the most primitive miniatures”, “these ethnographic, and in our opinion prehistoric weapons are still used in Abyssinia”, and local people are commonly referred to as “primitive” [*pervobytnye*] or “semi-savage” [*poludikie*]⁸⁵. Thus, reminders of the distance between Russia and Abyssinia are repeatedly presented to the reader, be they comments on the backwardness of this African country, or direct comparisons to the more advanced society and culture of the Tsarist

⁸⁰ A.V. Eliseev, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1895, 1376, p. 462.

⁸¹ J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge [MA] 1988, p. 231.

⁸² S. Stewart, *On Longing. Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham-London 1993, p. 147. On the metonymic function of the souvenir cf. Ivi, pp. 132-151.

⁸³ K. Sturge, *Representing Others. Translation, Ethnography and the Museum*, Manchester 2007, p. 153.

⁸⁴ *Abissinskaia vystavka*, “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, 1897, 1465, p. 193.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*.

Empire (“Their oil paintings cannot be compared with our *lubok* production, even in its most basic form”)⁸⁶. Not even does the Orthodox religion prove to be truly common ground between Russians and Abyssians, since the latter maintained certain conflicting beliefs and practices, especially related to superstitions: for instance, a stuffed monkey (part of the exhibition) is reported to be venerated by Abyssinians, who call it “monk” and believe that it prays twice a day and does not eat fat on Wednesdays and Fridays. The only common ground seems to be the Abyssinian alphabet, which is likened to the ‘ancient’ Glagolitic, i.e. to a Slavic alphabet (now a relic of the past, as Russia has evolved and has adopted another, more practical way of writing). In this sense, here we can trace a typical Western perspective, according to which “the representation of the colonies as timeless, static, collective and absent threw into relief a self-representation of the colonizing societies as historical, dynamic, individual and present”⁸⁷. It is precisely the context of the museum, and particularly that of an ethnographic exhibition, with its intrinsic need to order and classify different cultures and their material products, that determines a shift in the narration and representation of Abyssinia: removed from the diplomatic milieu of political alliances, here it becomes one of the many savage, wild, ‘other’ countries whose culture is ranked as backward. Paradoxically enough, the very act of collecting exotic objects increases the distance between them and the country in which they are displayed and shown to the public; as Clifford puts it, “the reality of the collection itself, its coherent order, overrides specific histories of the object’s production and appropriation. [...] The *making* of the meaning in museum classification and display is mystified as adequate *representation*. The time and order of the collection erase the concrete social labor of its making”⁸⁸.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysed materials show how a relatively novel media (in the form of the illustrated journal “Vse-

mirnaia illiustratsiia”) was used to spread a certain ‘image’ of black Africa – one largely borrowed from the West – among a newly-formed Russian readership. The typical audience of such a publication, that of educated middle-lower class people, makes the usage of Western sources highly significant, as they were undoubtedly considered valid, compelling, and worthy of the attention of the public. The evident connection with European colonial discourse, namely including the creation of ‘images’, the perpetuation of stereotypes, the subjectivity of the remarks and, overall, the rhetorical strategies employed, is enhanced by the usage of colonial photographs and drawings originally made by Western professionals. The way in which these images circulated within the milieu of European illustrated journals is still not entirely known: although it is quite common to find the very same photos (made into engravings or halftones by different artists) published simultaneously in different countries, not much is known about how they actually arrived in European editorial offices, let alone in Russian ones⁸⁹. In any case, we maintain that Russia seems to have employed the typical Western portrayal of black Africa as savage, backward and uncivilised in order to assert its complicated and even problematic sense of belonging to and identification with modern European nations. The lack of actual African colonies, however, has made the Russian representation of black Africa occasionally more nuanced and often contradictory, as exemplified by the case of Abyssinia. If “the concrete activity of representing a culture, subculture, or indeed any coherent domain of collective activity is always strategic and selective”⁹⁰, the contributions published in “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”, far from being innocuous and washed out ‘postcards’ from distant places, conceal identity politics and political actions.

www.esamizdat.it ◇ A. Frison, *Black Figurines. Peoples of the ‘Dark Continent’ in the Russian Journal “Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia”* ◇ eSamizdat 2022 (XV), pp. 175-191.

⁸⁶ Ibidem.

⁸⁷ K. Sturge, *Representing Others*, op. cit., p. 151.

⁸⁸ J. Clifford, *The Predicament*, op. cit., p. 220.

⁸⁹ We hope to clarify this point in future studies, hopefully through archival research.

⁹⁰ J. Clifford, *The Predicament*, op. cit., p. 231.

◇ *Black Figurines. Peoples of the 'Dark Continent' in the Russian Journal "Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia"* ◇

Anita Frison

Abstract

In the second half of the 19th century, the rising interest in the partition of Africa translated into a growth in the number of essays, articles and travel diaries on the 'dark continent' published in Russia. This paper examines how black Africa was represented in the popular illustrated journal "Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia", intended as educational material for a newly-formed middle-class readership. Through written texts and pictures, the journal constructed an image of black Africa quite dependent on Western colonial stereotypes, using colonial-consolidated rhetoric techniques and European sources. While the Tsarist Empire's politics used to meddle in European colonial enterprises, the present analysis highlights how the literary and visual construction of black Africa as backward, savage, and ahistorical may have served to justify Russia's long-debated belonging among Western nations.

Keywords

Imperial Russia, Africa, Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia, Blackness, Representation.

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