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### **Colonial history and biography: notes on a new research project**

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My project focuses on the biographies of Sengal Workneh and his daughter Elena Sengal, it centers on the story of a family that is strictly intertwined with the history of Italian colonialism from its very beginning until postcolonial time. This case study reveals unique perspectives about an essential chapter in Italian history. The story of the family begins and ends in the Horn of Africa and stretches over a period of around eighty years. The starting point is the birth of Sengal Workneh in Northern Ethiopia in 1880. Born at the cusp of the colonial expansion of the Kingdom of Italy, he received an Italian education and completed his military service in Italy. Over the course of his life he played different roles in the service of the Kingdom, both in the metropole and in the colony of Eritrea. Shortly before his death, under fascist regime Sengal Workneh was granted Italian citizenship, which had been denied to him in his earlier years. Among other responsibilities, he was in charge of the teaching of Amharic and Tigrinya at the Istituto Orientale in Naples. The same teaching position was held, in the 1930s, by Elena Sengal, the daughter born to him by his Italo-Eritrean wife. Elena Sengal was born in Eritrea in 1911. After relocating to Italy with her family at a very young age, she – like the father – taught Amharic and Tigrinya, while also becoming a scholar in Ethiopian literature. Nevertheless, in her lifetime she was known – if at all – less for her academic writing than for her controversial love affair with an Italian military officer, Guido Cucci (1907 – 1939), who became the father of her son and perished in Ethiopia in 1939. After this tragedy, Elena Sengal's life became very difficult. Both during and after World War II she experienced marginalization, racism, and poverty, and decided to quit Italy for Ethiopia. She died in Addis Ababa in 1962. The aim of the project is: 1) to offer an investigation of Italian colonialism based on the experiences of colonized individuals rather than colonizers; 2) to set the biographies of Sengal Workneh and Elena Sengal within the broader context of European (colonial) history and global entanglements; 3) to analyze the colonial racism, social exclusion, and cultural prejudices that marked fraught moments in their lives, as well as the agency, resistance, and self-reliance of both individuals in navigating their life events.