

Luigi Amedeo of Savoy, Duke of the Abruzzi

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The first extra-European expeditions

Luigi Amedeo Giuseppe Maria Ferdinando Francesco of Savoy, appointed Duke of the Abruzzi by King Umberto the 1st, was born in Madrid in 1873. At that time his father, Amedeo of Savoy - third born of King Vittorio Emanuele the 2nd - was king of Spain, but the same year of Luigi's birth Amedeo abdicated from the Spanish throne after only three years of reign. The family went back to Turin, where Luigi's mother soon died of tuberculosis, leaving three young kids who were then educated in the Army. At the young age of six, Luigi was recruited in the Royal Military Navy, then following all the steps of the military career to become admiral at the age of 36.

During his early years, Luigi used to leave the Naval academy only during the summer, to spend his holydays climbing the Alps. After the sea, his other passion was the mountain, an interest he shared with other members of the Piedmont royal family that quite recently had become the Italian monarchs. The Italian Alpine Club had been founded in 1863 by Quintino Sella (ministry of Finance in the first Italian Government), only three years after the unification of Italy. Luigi was a member of the Turin section of the Alpine club, the oldest of the entire club. During his youth, he climbed the most important peaks of Vallé d'Aoste and Piedmont together with other mountaineers and alpine guides from Courmayeur (Mont Blanc). At that time, Luigi entered in contact with the famous British climber Albert Frederick Mummery, with whom he succeeded to reach the top of the Matterhorn (that in Italy goes by the name of Cervino), at 4.478 mt.

In the meanwhile, he had several experiences of long navigation on the sea, that culminated in a 26 months' mission around the world on the Cristoforo Colombo cruiser. Back from this trip, having known about the death of his friend and fellow mountaineer Mummery, Luigi decided to dedicate him an extra-European mountaineer expedition, organized with the financial support of the Queen of Italy Margherita, a climber at her turn. The defeat of Adua, suffered by Italy in 1896, and the hot debate ongoing in the country and in the Parliament on the issue of colonialism encouraged the royal family to organize a spectacular extra-European expedition led by the Duke of Abruzzi, so to divert the public debate giving back some symbolical dignity to the Royal family. On May 17, 1897, the Duke left Turin for a long journey through United States and Canada, that took him in the Yakutat Bay in Alaska, where he climbed mount Saint Elia, a colossus high 5.493 mt. that have never been conquered by anybody. The Duke was 24 years old at that time and this was his first big success.

The team accompanying him included some of the men who will be with him in many other expeditions: the medical doctor Filippo de Filippi, the guides from Courmayeur led by Joseph Petigax, the wonderful photographer Vittorio Sella, nephew of the Minister Quintino Sella, author of many of the pictures of the Duke expeditions. Vittorio Sella was a very gifted photographer native in Biella, belonging to an important industrialist family. He inherited the passion for photography from his father, who published one of the first Italian book on photographic technique. During his whole life, Vittorio Sella cultivated mountain photography inside and outside Europe. The quality of his pictures attracted the attention of Douglas Freshfield, at the time secretary of the Royal Geographical Society, who invited him to join his second expedition to Caucasus. After the Caucasian experience, Sella was involved in three expeditions led by the duke of Abruzzi: Mount St. Elias in Alaska, the Northern Pole and the Rwenzori. These expeditions will be described in three books written by the zoologist Filippo de Filippi, and illustrated by Vittorio's pictures.

After the Mount Saint Elia exploit, the Duke had in fact continued to organized extra-European expeditions. At the end of the Nineteen Century one of the biggest geographical challenge was the exploration of the Northern Pole. The Duke decided to engage in this challenge and bought the ship used by Nansen, another explorer who had travelled in Greenland few years before, and set it up for the needs of its expedition. The ship set sail from Christiania (Oslo) with a crew of 8 Norwegian sailors and 9 Italians. They reached the Teplitz bay but the first cold wave blocked the ship in the ice pack. The explorers waited months near it and in March, when the rigid weather started to change, they left in search of the Pole. The Duke was not among them, because he had suffered for the frostbite of some fingers of his hand that had to be amputated, and remained at the base camp. The Italian team never reached the Pole because the season was already too hot, but it was nevertheless a success because they arrived at the most Northern point ever touched by someone. And in the following years, the Duke started to work to his next marvelous project, the Rwenzori expedition.

The Rwenzori

The Rwenzori mountain has struck European imagination since ever: a classical tradition reported by the Greek geographer Ptolemy, but going back to Aeschylus and Aristotle, speaks of the *Lunae Mons*, the “mountains of the moon”, high mountains covered by snow located in the inner equatorial Africa, that were supposed to be the sources of the Nile. In XIX century, different explorers have been trying to solve the enigma of the sources of the Nile and of the snowy mountains. The very bad climatic condition of the Rwenzori region, almost always covered with clouds and fog, together with the great distance which separated European travellers from local people, seemed to have prevented to reach and even to see the mountain. Henri Morton Stanley, the American journalist and explorer, saw it briefly in 1888 quoting it in his book “In the Darkest Africa” (1890), and from this

moment several expeditions were undertaken to reach the top of the mountain, all hindered by climatic condition. The Duke of Abruzzi, with his faithful companions and collaborators, will finally reached and climbed 13 of the main peaks of the Rwenzori on June 1906.

As I already said, the colonial aspirations of Italy at that time had been disappointed by Dogali and Adwa defeats, but at the beginning of the century Italy still had some colonial ambitions, which will later find a brief satisfaction with the conquest of Ethiopia in 1935. Actually, the expedition to Rwenzori didn't have any political aim, but it was used to divert the political internal debate on a fascinating exotic and colonial dream that was still alive among the majority of Italians. Even if Britain had already stated its power on Uganda at the time, the idea of a symbolical appropriation of the legendary territory of the "mountains of the moon" – shared by British and Italians - seems to have motivated the expedition. In this symbolic appropriation, the act of naming the mountains and the passes, drawing the map and photographing the region, the plants and the inhabitants were essential moments of a process of colonial "territorialisation" (Turco, 1986).

The expedition of the Duke departed from Naples, sailed through the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, crossed the Suez Canal arriving in Mombasa. Then, using the British railway the Italians reached Kisumu (at the time called Port Florence) in Kenya. It was probably at Kisumu market that the "explorers" had their first close experience of diversity: "The market here in Kisumu take us fully in Equatorial Africa. On our way we meet different populations less or more covered, but it's not proved that the extension of the dress implies a minor morality" (Sella 1907, p. 7). The photos emphasize the theme of nakedness and clothing, together with an attention to the aesthetic of the body. The observation and the visual representation of naked, decorated African bodies anticipate practises of dressing, covering, transforming those bodies which are central in missionary action.

From Kisumu, the Italians crossed Lake Victoria with a steamer, arriving in Entebbe, where the British colony had its headquarters. We can appreciate some pictures of the ganda villages and traditional huts and houses, and some portraits of people staring at the spectator. Then the expedition left from Entebbe on May 14, with 220 porters and a group of Sudanese Askaris. They walked for 600 km., to reach the slopes of the Rwenzori. During the journey, they came in contact with different local groups (mainly Baganda, Batoro and Bakonzo), having with them some interactions that were necessarily superficial due to the lack of time, the ignorance of the local languages and cultures and moreover because of the prejudices which limited the European view. But beyond this gap, the Italians seemed to be interested in social differences which marked Ugandan society at the time. The photos create a sort of visual classification of men, women, children, of different ranks, occupations, and ethnic groups. But we are not dealing with scientific representation of human types, as was common in the visual anthropology of that period. On the contrary the pictures of the expedition are wonderful portrait of high quality with a clear pictorial aesthetic value.

On the first of June, the expedition arrived in Kabarole, the palace of the Toro king Kasagama, son of Kabarega. The Duke paid a visit to the king, but it was on their way back that they had an opportunity of being received by the court inside the palace. The court was described with these words by Vittorio Sella “I go with His majesty to visit the King of Toro. Big gathering of servants and followers - the minister Katekiro, ten Saza (provincial heads), many muami (under chiefs). He receives us in a hall measuring 15 meters times 10, with a throne, two chairs with marvellous leopard skins at their feet. His Majesty the Duke seats on the left of the King while I’m sitting in another chair near the stairs...We do not have positive news about the presence of elephants in the surroundings” (Sella, journal, p. 107).

In the same region, not far from Fort Portal, they met some French White Fathers at the Catholic Mission *Notre dame de la neige* in Butiti. Beside the admiration that the members of the expedition reserved to the British colony, they often mark the crucial role played by missionary in the “civilization” of African people. Missionaries had the duty of making people changing behaviour in very important areas of life: marriage, sexual behaviour, gender roles, and of course religion.

From Fort Portal they had a first view of the mountains. Rwenzururu means “the place of the snow” in Lukonzo, the language spoken by the agriculturalist group living in the higher part of the massif. Under the British indirect rule the Bakonzo were subdued to the Batoro, the pastoralist group who gained power in the complex ethnical policy of colonial Uganda. At the time, the Toro king Kasagama had quite recently obtained power from the British administration, and the visit of the expedition recognized this new order, which raised many conflicts in the region that remain partially unsolved even today.

After having crossed the Mobuku river, the expedition entered in the Konzo area. They were about to start climbing the mountain. They established the camp in the village of Ibanda. The Italian flag is often at the centre of the pictures, representing a sort of symbolic appropriation of the territory. On the slopes of the mountain the Italians met the Bakonzo: “Bakonzo villages are gently nested on the spur of the Mobuku valley, up to 2.300 meters of altitude...men and women are good cannabis and tobacco smokers...they don’t wear any dresses when they are at their homes, but when they go hunting they cover their head with a monkey skin. His majesty wanted them uniformly covered”.

The Bakonzo porters substituted the ganda ones to guide the expedition up to the mountain. Conditions of life for the porters were quite hard. During the trekking at least two of them lost their life because of the coldness (Sella’s journal, p.92-93). The food should have been provided by the local chiefs, that sometime delayed or omitted to do it. Corporal punishments could be inflicted to “keep the discipline”. Probably the Bakonzo porters were also very anxious because they were pushed to break the tabu regarding the high peaks.

The end of the expedition took place in the scenario of the high peaks. Very few human beings appear in these beautiful pictures, which are the most famous photos of the expedition. There, the Duke and his European partners were alone with the mountains. The final goal of the expedition was obtained. Here in the words of the Duke, the description of the fundamental act of conquering the territory naming its most important points: “And to this peaks, the only ones I could see at the moment when my efforts were crowned, I gave the names of Margherita and Alexandra, because under the good omen of the two queens can be handed down unite to the descendants the memory of the two nations, of Italy whose name resounded first on this snow in a cry of victory, and of Great Britain, which in its marvellous colonial expansion took civilization up to the slopes of these remote mountains” (Sella, 1907, p. 28). Then the Duke raised on the top of Margherita peak an Italian flag with the saying “Ardisci e spera” (“Venture and hope”), “to encourage and support all braves who, in already unexplored and salvage lands of Africa, in perils and difficulties, make the civilizations progresses” (Sella, 1907, p. 29). The apotheosis of the rhetoric of European colonialism is entirely contained in the words and in the gestures of the Duke.

Karakorum

Two years after the Rwenzori conquest, the Duke started to plan his next adventure. This time he planned to reach the Karakorum in the Himalayan region, trying to climb the K2, the second highest mountain in the world (8.609 mt.). With his team, he left Marseille on March 2008 going to India and then to Baltistan. They tried to climb some of the highest peaks of the world reaching 6.000 mt. of altitude. But long distances, rain and bad weather ended to forbid to continue, so the group came back on their path. It was a defeat, that accompanied other personal delusions that affected the Duke’s morale: in the same period an unlucky romantic affair between the Duke and a young American bourgeois, Miss Katherine Elkin, filled the mundane magazine. The apparently strong and passionate relationship was firmly contrasted by the Royal family, that could not accept the marriage of a prince with a commoner from the New World. This delusion, together with other negative experiences in the Navy, pushed Luigi to invest again (and definitely) in the African continent.

Uebi-Shebeli and the myth of the farmer prince

Around 1920, Luigi founded the Italy-Somali Agricultural Society (SAIS) with the project of a vast swamp reclaim and the organization of an experimental agricultural factory that will be concretized in the building of the Duke of Abruzzi village (a big settlement today called Jawhar) in the Uebi-Shebeli region of Somalia. The village, that will become the last residence of the Duke, was organized in a very innovative way, using mechanical agriculture and providing schools and hospitals for the native and

expatriate population. At that time, SAIS became especially famous for the particular small sweet bananas exported to Italy during the Mussolini government in a monopolistic regime.

The need of water for the irrigation of the fields encouraged the Duke to launch his last adventurous expedition to study and map the Uebi-Shebeli, the most important river in Somalia. The expedition took place between September 1928 and February 1929. But the health conditions of the Duke were already deteriorated because of a prostate cancer he was suffering. After a surgical operation he underwent in the Mauriziano hospital in Turin, he finally decided to spend his last years in his village in Somalia, customary “married” to a Somali lady called Regina. He died in his village the 18 of March 1933, and he was buried there following his last wishes. In fact, to the Italian doctor who had operated him in Turin he once said: “Preferisco che intorno alla mia tomba si intreccino I desideri delle donne somale piuttosto che le ipocrisie degli uomini civilizzati” (I prefer that around my tomb intertwine the fantasies of somali women more than the hypocrisies of civilised men). So, the life of the Savoy prince came to an end in Africa, a continent that he had loved maybe because he wanted to escape from the elegant European courts where he did not seem to find himself completely at ease. Thank you.