

# Werner Munzinger in Eritrea with the goal the Aggressors are Right and the Defenders are Wrong



## Table of contents:

1. Werner Munzinger was born in Olten, Northern Switzerland, on 4 April 1832.
2. He studied science and history at the University of Bern, then later took courses in Oriental studies.
3. At the age of twenty he went to Egypt to study Arabic.
4. On 8 August 1853 he sailed from Suez to Massawa and arrived there after 51 days, on 29 September.
5. In 1854 he was a French consular agent in Massawa.
6. From 1855 to 1861, for six years, he resided in Keren, during which period he had the opportunity to explore not only the present-day Eritrean lowlands, but also the province of Seraye/ሰራዮ, on the plateau.
7. Thanks to this, he wrote 4 books that have the power to connect a reader with past culture, history, law, custom, etc. of that vast region.
8. In 1861 he joined the German scientific expedition led by Heuglin.
9. In 1865 he was appointed British consul in Massawa, and he accompanied the English troops to Abyssinia in 1867-1868.
10. After the campaign, he again passed into the service of France.
11. In 1871 he was appointed Egyptian governor of Massawa, and the following year that of general governor of Eastern Sudan. Massawa was under the rule of the Khedive of Egypt with Ottoman consent since May 1865.
12. In 1875 Werner Munzinger on an expedition of no return.
13. In 16 November, 1875, two days after the death of Munzinger, the battle of Gundet (Guda-Gudi, Western of Eritrea)
14. On 7 March 1876, almost four months later, the battle of Gurae'/ጉራዕ,

## I. **Werner Munzinger's Early Life and Education** (Sections 1-3)

Werner Muzinger was born in Olten, Northern of Switzerland, in 4 April 1832. He studied science and history at the University of Bern, then later took courses in

Oriental studies\* at Munich University and the Sorbonne (\*Oriental studies is the academic field that studies Near Eastern and Far Eastern societies and cultures, languages, peoples, history and archaeology).

But this was not enough, because to align oneself with the colonial policy of the time it was necessary to abandon one's homeland and land in a foreign country. As he says in the introduction of his work, page 9-10, "Studi Sull'Africa Orientale", Rome, 1890.

'We Europeans, in the struggle with the barbarians (let us call ourselves Europeans for short), find ourselves at a material and moral disadvantage in several respects. First of all, we seek them out, while they avoid us. We are the attackers, while they have all the advantages of defense. Our interest is to come to friendly relations with them, because we want to **educate** and **clothe** them. They, on the contrary, are persuaded that they have nothing to gain from our contact; therefore, no one seeks us out."  
[...]

"The natives feel they are in their homeland, for which they are happy to sacrifice themselves. The European fights for money; the barbarian for his country and his freedom. We fight for something that interests us from afar/ርሱቾ, the barbarian fights for his existence; we are wrong, he is right and we feel it." (1)

And here is the third quotation from page 41 of the 64-page-long introduction:

"The cardinal vice of the Abyssinians is pride/አቲ አውራ አመል ናይ እቶም ሐበሻ እያ እታ ትዕቢይት (ተዕብባዩ): they inflate themselves with every small success/ ይንፍሑ ወይ ይሒብጡ ናብ ኩልሉ ንኡስ ዐወት ወይ ድል; they believe they are above everything and everyone and rarely heed the advice of foreign missionaries. Therefore, we must admire the wisdom of the canon that excludes Abyssinians from the dignity of bishophood/ጳጳስ." (2)

Last but not least, quotation from page 54 of the long introduction:

"The Africans are all fatalists, whether they are pagans, Muslims, or Christians; life and death, fortune or misfortune, virtue and vice, they attribute everything to the hand of God. With this blind fatalism, the wrongdoer excuses himself, and the unhappy find consolation; trusting in destiny, which cannot be changed, the Muslim laughs in the face of death. Even the smallest events, God has foreseen and written them; who could escape them? It is true that, in practice, almost instinctively, the sick take medicine, and no one, out of love for logic, throws themselves off cliffs; nevertheless, there is no doubt that the belief in fatalism is deeply rooted and innate in every African, and that it is a great aid to the propagation of Islam." (3)

What does fatalism mean? The paragraph conveys that fatalism—a belief that all events are predetermined (ቀደምወ-ስሱን) by God—is deeply ingrained in African culture, regardless of religious affiliation (paganism, Islam, or Christianity). This **mindset** serves as both a justification for wrongdoing and a source of comfort in adversity. (affiliation means: እትወት ኣብ ሐንቲ ሻራ, ኣብ ሐደ ፓርቲቶ, ኣብ ሐንቲ ማሕበር Entrata in una setta, in un partito, in una società)

The quotes highlight two very important elements: pride and fatalism (ፋታሊዝም/ ጊላውንነት/ ግዝገዝነት). Do these two very serious accusations against Abyssinia have a place in Abyssinian culture or not? Let us admit that they are deeply rooted in Abyssinian culture due to the fixed mentality (or mindset) of the two institutions, the church and the state, that have existed since the 4th century. As for the saying "we want to educate and clothe them", without saying anything about the stolen Abyssinian manuscripts, I would like to remind the reader that cotton grows in Abyssinia, not in Europe. Nevertheless, the situation will continue as it is until Abyssinia shows a growth mindset or mentality. And it should not be forgotten that these two internal, not external, mortal enemies, used as tools by the aggressors to harm Abyssinia and its people, have no equal. For example, the periods of slavery, colonialism, etc. have passed, but the periods of fixed mentality that began to exist before them continue to this day.



ነባር (ነበረ) አእምሮ/ቀልቢ

ዕብዮት, ፍርርዮት አእምሮ/ቀልቢ

## II. Munzinger's Arrival in Massawa and Early Roles (Sections 4–5)

At the age of his 20<sup>th</sup>, in 1852, Munzinger went to Egypt to study Arabic. On 8 August 1853 he sailed from Suez to Massawa and arrived there after 51 days, on 29 September. This means that he first set foot in Massawa (island), Taulud (island), and the mainland respectively (see map below). Let's hear it from his book.

"Massawa is situated like Suakin and Akik, and like these, it owes its origin to foreign traders from all parts of the world; who, from its secure location, sought to establish commercial relations with the mainland. Even today, all business is conducted on the island, and no one thinks of entrusting their goods to the mainland." <sup>(4)</sup>

"At one time, many natives lived there. Among them, the former French consul, Mr. Dégoutin, had settled; he built a small house with his own hands, which in 1848 was purchased by the Lazarist missionaries and transformed into a church. Over time, various Europeans took residence in Moncullo; but they did little or nothing to make the place more pleasant." <sup>(5)</sup>

[...]

"A simple glance at the map is enough to demonstrate that Massawa could take on an important position in the trade of the Red Sea. It is the natural port of northern Abyssinia and is situated opposite Yemen, just two days away, the land of coffee. Even the journey to Jeddah is not long, and along the way are the Dahlak Islands, which must necessarily trade a significant part of their marine products in the Massawa market." <sup>(6)</sup>

## III. Exploration of Eritrea and Abyssinia (Sections 6–7)

From 1885 to 1861, for six years, Munzinger resided in Keren, during which period he had the opportunity to explore Abyssinia in general and the present-day Eritrean lowlands, the province of Seraye/ሰራዩ, etc. in particular.

His particular exploration or research had turned many stones to discover what they hid. Consequently, today, after many years, the following four works, three in German and one in French, with their English translations, speak more.

1. Über die Sitten und das Recht der Bogos (1859)	1. About the customs and law of the Bogos (1859)
2. Ostafrikanische Studien (1864; 2nd ed., 1883)	2. Eastern African Studies (1864; 2nd ed., 1883)
3. Die deutsche Expedition in Ostafrika (1865)	3. The German expedition to East Africa (1865)
4. Vocabulaire de la langue de Tigré (1865)	4. Vocabulary of the Langue de Tigré (1865)

In addition to the four named writings, Munzinger also wrote numerous geographical papers, and a memoir on the northern highlands of modern-day Ethiopia and Eritrea for the Journal of General Geography, new series, volume 3. <sup>(7)</sup> Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: Werner Munzinger

Regarding the challenge work, Munzinger wrote the following in end of the Preface of the Vocabulary (Dictionary) of the Tigre Language in August 1863.

“The words recorded here are used from the sea to the Gash. I collected them during my ten-year stay. My reports brought me into close contact with all the tribes that use Tigré; during all this time I used it almost exclusively. The language being living, one cannot wait until the material is exhausted; but what I can guarantee is that I have used all possible accuracy in the vocabulary that follows.” <sup>(8)</sup>

Aside from the historical lack of dictionaries and grammar books, the book addresses numerous critical issues fundamental to the people and their land. For instance, it discusses the absence of essential communication systems, such as printing presses to produce newspapers, journals, and other means of connecting people—comparable to the absence of railways for physical connectivity. It also highlights the outdated, primitive industries producing goods like knives, arrows, axles, and cotton fabrics, emphasizing their urgent need for development. Furthermore, the book underscores the people's singular focus on agriculture, portraying the Abyssinians as inherently inclined to be farmers, herdsmen, soldiers, and taxpayers. This is accompanied by a clear division of labor, in which the woman takes care of the housework and the countryside, while the plowing (አሐራርሳ ወይ አትተሐራርሳ) is reserved for the man. This is accompanied by a clear division of labor: women handle housework and countryside tasks, while men are responsible for plowing. To achieve this, they work tirelessly, without a break.

Of course, the book discusses ancient traditions, beliefs, customs, religions, intelligence, traditional democracy, autocracy, and more. Here is an example:

"We have found among the Kunama and the Barea\* the true democratic people, perhaps never seen before in any other part of the world; everyone feels entirely free in relation to others and equal to them; no one wishes to be above another." <sup>(9)</sup>.

"I Barea, and, as far as I know, even the Kunama, celebrate every year in the month of November, after the harvest, a solemnity called 'Thijot' by the Barea. It is undoubtedly a thanksgiving feast for the abundant harvest, as well as an expression and commemoration of the dead. Each household (አንድ ቤት ገዛ) prepares a large quantity of beer for that day; for two days, a jug (ሳርማ) of beer is dedicated to each deceased person, and it is later consumed by the living. It is customary during this celebration for the entire population of the same district to gather in a special place, where the day is joyfully spent with dances and festivities." (10)

To summarize the long story, the book is one of those works—regardless of who authored it—that deserves to be considered a textbook for better understanding our history.

There is little doubt that this book served as a valuable guide for the Italian colonial administration in Northern Ethiopia. This practical utility may well explain why it was translated into Italian.

Can we adapt Munzinger's works for our own purposes, as the Italian colonizers did for theirs? Although not yet published, I have translated the fourth work into Tigre-Tigrinya-English, along with an English-Tigre-Tigrinya repertoire, to strengthen the bond between these two sister languages. Here is an example:

- a. ለ ሐወረ (haueie) to lose speech (due to weakness). ለ አጥፍአ (ጠፍአ) እታ ቃል (ናብ ምኽንያት/ሰንኪ ናይ ድኸመት/ደቦለዝዛ) አ.ተ.
- b. English-Tigre-Tigrinya Repertoire: to **lose speech** (due to weakness) ለ ሐወረ (haueie) ለ አጥፍአ (ጠፍአ) እታ ቃል (ናብ ምኽንያት/ሰንኪ ናይ ድኸመት/ደቦለዝዛ) አ.ተ.

#### IV. **Munzinger's Role in Colonial Campaigns** (Sections 8–11)

In 1861 Munzinger joined the German scientific expedition led by Theodor von Heuglin. Heuglin was in Egypt in 1850 to learn Arabic, and visited the Red Sea and Sinai. He travelled in Ethiopia and Kordofan, making a valuable collection of natural history specimens.

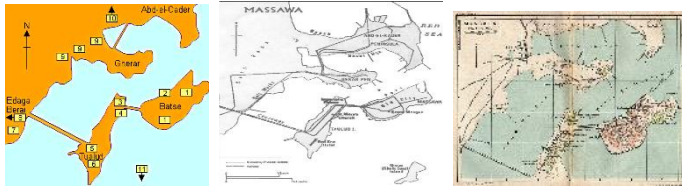
In 1865 Munzinger was appointed British consul in Massawa, and he accompanied the English troops to Abyssinia in 1867-1868. The English expedition against King Theodoros had to face a challenging problem regarding transportation. The donkeys brought from India were not suitable for the Abyssinian land. But Munzinger solved the problem by bringing hundred Eritrean camels to replace the Indian donkeys. Because of this Indian donkey were left to lead a life like that of the Abyssinian zebra.

After the campaign, he returned to French service, but soon left because, "the Franco-Prussian War broke out, and French resources were diverted to this higher priority."


The Lazarists who were in Massawa had an unrealized plan to make Ekkeleguzai a colony of France. But it is not known whether this happened with Munzinger's involvement or not.

In 1871 he was appointed Egyptian governor of Massawa, and the following year that of general governor of Eastern Sudan. Massawa was under the rule of the Khedive of Egypt with Ottoman consent since May 1865.

“ With the Egyptian occupation, the governor became the Swiss adventurer Werner Munzinger, who is credited with the construction of the governor's palace (which later became the imperial palace of Haile Selassie) and the two dams connecting the two main islands to the mainland (ቅዳምመሬት-terraferma). The first dam, about 420 meters long, connects Massawa (ምጽዋፅ) proper to Taulud (ጥዋለት), while the second, about 1,030 meters long, connects Taulud to the coast.” (11)



Mainland, Taulud and Massawa

<p>Governors Palace - ruined imperial palace of Haile Selassie ...</p> 	<p>There is no doubt that the governor's palace, which later became the imperial palace of Haile Selassie, and the two dams were built by Abyssinian slaves or condemned to death. So, it is clear that one of the Eritrean legacies thrown away by the Eritrean dictator, Iseias Afewerki.</p>
--	---

**V. In 1875 Werner Munzinger on an expedition of no return/አብ ኢት 1875 ወርካር መንዚንገር አብ ስፕ-ዲዥዮን ብዘይ ምልልስ / Nel 1875 Werner Munzinger in spedizione senza ritorno (section 12)**

At the age 43, Munzinger was selected to command a small expedition intended to open up communication with Menelik II, king of Shewa, a potential ally of Egypt. He led an Egyptian force of 350 men from the port of Tadjoura towards Ankober (a town in central Ethiopia) with the objective of joining forces with Menelik through the Awash Valley. However, on the night of November 14, 1875, warriors of the Afar and Issa tribes attacked the Egyptian force on the outskirts of Aussa. This resulted in the massacre of Munzinger, his wife from Hamasien, and most of the Egyptian soldiers.

**VI. Battle Animations (sections 13 and 14)**

Two days after Munzinger's death, the Battle of Gundet (Guda-Gudi, western Eritrea) took place between the Egyptian attackers and the Ethiopian defenders on November 16, 1875. Here, the attackers were completely annihilated by the defenders, namely the Abyssinian lions.

Almost four months later, the battle of Gundet was followed by another battle of Gurae'/ጉራዕ, on March 7, 1876. Here too the usual defenders, i.e. the Ethiopians, made another success story. This was a decisive battle that put an end to the Egyptian colony in the land of Abyssinia. But it must be clear that the spirit of the colony had died a year earlier, due to the death of its war architecture or strategist Munzinger.

..... End .....

NOTE:

1. Studi sull’Africa Orientale, di Werner Munzinger, tradizione dal Tedesco, per Cura del Corpo di Stato Maggiore, published in Rome in 1890, page 9-10.

2. Studi sull’Africa Orientale, di Werner Munzinger, " " " " " " " page 41.
3. Studi sull’Africa Orientale, di Werner Munzinger, " " " " " " " p. 54.
4. Studi sull’Africa Orientale, di Werner Munzinger, " " " " " " " p. 91.
5. Studi sull’Africa Orientale, di Werner Munzinger, " " " " " " " p. 94.
6. Studi sull’Africa Orientale, di Werner Munzinger, " " " " " " " p. 95.
7. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: Werner Munzinger
8. Studi sull’Africa Orientale, di Werner Munzinger, tradizione dal Tedesco, per Cura del Corpo di Stato Maggiore, published in Rome in 1890, p. X.
9. Studi sull’Africa Orientale, di Werner Munzinger, " " " " " " " p. 440.
10. Studi sull’Africa Orientale, di Werner Munzinger, " " " " " " " p. 391.
11. Wikipedia, Encyclopedia libera, Massawa.
12. Barea\*, now days is ‘Nara/ናራ’.

Eyob Ghebreziabhier

Sewwit.org

06.12.2024