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Gianfranco Salvatore
Università del Salento

"CELUM CALIA"

African Speech and Afro-European Dance in a 16th century Song Cycle from Naples[1]

Abstract

Around the mid-16th century, in Italy, a group of anonymous humanists - courtiers versed in the arts of music, letters, and theatre - created a set of songs that depicts African slaves and freedmen singing and playing in an Italian town, probably Naples. While serenading their girls, the African characters in this song cycle cherish to to be freed by their masters. While singing, courting, and quarrelling, they speak an Afro-Neapolitan pidgin that combines the mispronounced local dialect with authentic African words and sentences in Kanuri -- an Afro-Nilotic language still in use in the Bornu region (North-East Nigeria). The songs are known as 'canzoni moresche', meaning Moorish (i.e. black African) songs. Although the 'moresche' were intermittently studied by a handful of European musicologists since the late 19th century, nobody had recognized yet that the most obscure sections in the

[1] This paper has been presented at two recent international conferences: *Afroeuropeans: Black Cultures and Identities in Europe V*, Münster, University of Münster, 16-19 September 2015; and *Musicians in the Mediterranean: Narratives of Movement*, Naples, Palazzo DuMesnil, Palazzo Corigliano, Università "L'Orientale", Conservatorio San Pietro a Maiella, 21-26 June 2016.

lyrics were not a zany made-up of African speech, but a true language. Talking Kanuri, moresche's characters utter conventional greeting formulas and idiomatic expressions of racial pride, summon the black slaves in the neighbourhood, and make reference to song and dance as traditional ways to celebrate and communicate. For a long time, the first known evidence of written Kanuri have been considered those founded in scattered European manuscripts and documents dating around late 18th-early 19th century. Only the 'canzoni moresche' offer earlier traces of written Kanuri. They are also powerful cultural effect of African diaspora. A whole microcosm of African tradition, customs, feelings - and probably also shreds of original melodies and rhythms - appear to be featured in the Italian Renaissance.

Keywords: *African diaspora, African music, African dance, Renaissance music*

1. Bornu people and Kanuri Language in an Afro-European culture

Neapolitan songs of the 16th century display a vivid interest in social and ethnic minorities, reflecting a wider penchant of Italian 'light music' of the Renaissance for a popular taste in the melodies and a disposition for dance in the lively rhythms, together with a frequent use of dialects and folkloric jargon. Such features can be found, for example, in Northern Italian genres like the *frottola* and the *villotta*. But the Neapolitan vogue distinguished itself for avoiding harsh satire and adopting a mild attitude towards its subjects. Prevailing in this Neapolitan repertoire is the genre of *villanella*, a musical portrait of urbanised peasants, farmers, or landowners that, having moved to the capital of the Reign of Naples, run their love affairs trying to serenade correctly their beauties while imitating, with comical approximation, higher styles of courtly rhetoric.

Parallel to these *villanelle* is a minor but unique genre called 'canzoni moresche' (i.e. 'songs of the Moorish people') whose characters are black African slaves and freedmen who imitate villanelle's peasants in courting their African beauties in 'Italian style'. While singing melodies of madrigals and folksongs, under their windows and balconies, imploring, and quarreling, they produce on the whole a parody of second degree: African guys acting like Neapolitan peasants acting as refined citizens. But the caricature is light and sympathetic, revealing the culture of tolerance and respect towards slaves that Neapolitan humanists and intellectuals proclaimed and theorized in their academies[2].

Above all, the small repertoire of 'moresche' (just a dozen lyric texts, many of which used by various composers with different music or arrangements) is the only musical or literary genre in European Renaissance that depicts exclusively black characters engaged in the highs and lows of their everyday life in subalternity[3] (but enjoying a vast amount of freedom in their spare time). Moreover, the jargon they speak -- or, we should say, sing -- is really unique: a lively blend of Neapolitan dialect

[2] For further details and sources see SALVATORE 2012.

[3] The only exception (not a whole genre, but a single occurrence) is the satyrical poem *Gelofe, Mandinga* by Rodrigo de Reinosa, dated between 1480 and 1520 ca (*Comiençan unas coplas a los negros y negras, y de cómo se metejavan en Sevilla un negro de Gelofe mandinga contra una negra de Guinea; a el llamavan Jorge, y a ella Comba; y cómo él la requería de amores y ella dezía que tenía otro enamorado que llamavan Grisolmo. Cántanse al tono de 'La niña quando bayléys'. Hechas por Rodrigo de Reinosa*, Burgos, Juan de Junta, fols. 1-2; critical edition in PUERTO MORO 2010: 168-177). Yet Reinosa's *coplas* does not use any africanism in the speech of the two black character, except for mentioning some probable African chant and/or dance.

and African language. As a matter of fact, in ‘moresche’ songs from Renaissance Naples we find a treasure chest of African speech in written form. We are dealing here with the first historical instances of Kanuri, an important Afro-Nilotic language still in use in the Borno region (North-East Nigeria).

This recent discovery[4] resisted to over a century of modern investigations of moresche’s repertoire. Africanisms in the speech of moresche’s characters was defined by former scholars as fictitious, satirical, or mere gibberish[5]. And yet the discovering of their authenticity was a relatively easy task. In fact most moresche refer to the identity of black slaves in Naples as ‘Burno people’: i.e. slaves from the Muslim empire of Bornu, West of lake Chad, the main suppliers of the slave trade south of Fezzan, in the central area of subsaharian Africa.

Such discovery pushes the boundaries of Afro-European research, deepening the historical perspective of the cultural effects of African diaspora, and revealing how considerable were the size and quality of transculturalism in Southern Italy since the 16th century.

If we look at the moresche as an early depository of African language in European literature and vocal music, and as a display of realistic evidence of bilingual attitudes in Naples (both by Africans and natives), it is possible to consider moresche songs as true monuments of Afro-European identities since the dawn of modern times.

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[4] First presented at the international symposium *Facing Africa: Cultural Effects of African Diaspora: Ancient and Early Modern Europe*, Università del Salento, Lecce, Italy, June 15-17, 2011, then in SALVATORE 2012.

[5] SANDBERGER 1904: 416; EINSTEIN 1949: 373; FERRARI-BARASSI 1970/1991: 55, 57.

2. African feelings in Renaissance Naples

First of all, these songs reveal to what extent the European -- here, Neapolitan -- public perception and opinion was interested to traditional African ways in communicating and celebrating via music and dance. We can only imagine the range of African influence in reinforcing, perhaps also steering, the proverbial attitude of the passionate people of Naples in expressing their feelings through songs, as in celebrating life through dance. Supposedly, also the local tolerance and sympathy towards African slaves may be ascribed to this sense of affinity[6].

Furthermore, this astonishing and scarcely studied repertoire offer relevant insight not only in African ways of communication but also in the European perception of it. More specifically, for what concerns inter-ethnic communication between Africans, they convey precious information in at least three fields of interest: (i) rivality between different tribes, sometime expressed during romantic exchange; (ii) forms of

[6] Also today, Neapolitan popstars of great prestige and following like Pino Daniele or Raiz claim their own 'quasi-African' nature, with reference to their deep feelings for life and music: moresche songs of the 16th century offer historical roots to these claims, idealistically referred by Neapolitan artists to some ancient mixing of races (imagining it around the time of Sarracen raids in the South of the Peninsula, or even back to Hannibal), but whose origins are to be intended in cultural rather than racial sense: the moresche being the representation of an Afro-European meeting of languages, behaviours, and feelings.

solidarity in African slaves' multiethnic communities, and (iii) conventional formulae of ethnic and racial pride[7].

Up until now, the history of African pidgins in the West has been prevalently consacrated to Afro-Spanish occurrences, mainly produced by the African diaspora to the Americas, beginning with the slave trade there, since the 17th century[8]. A considerable amount of studies has been also devoted to Afro-Spanish jargons as stylized in Iberian literature and, mostly, theatre, beginning in late 15th century Portugal and slightly later in Spain[9]. But in Lusitan and Spanish theatre we never find any linguistic Africanism: the black characters speak a pidginized Spanish, distorting the local vocabulary and grammar and occasionally using Arabic terms, but never any African sentence or combination of words.

Besides lyrics of great linguistic and sociological interest, the music of moresche songs presents whirling, dazzling episodes that seem to allude to the way African music and chant could impress Western ears, even if these bizarre artifacts must be

[7] Being the aim of this presentation focused on a sampling of African speech, we will restrict our analysis to the textual occurrences of Afro-European topics in moresche's lyrics. For the other topics just mentioned see SALVATORE 2012.

[8] See LIPSKI 2005.

[9] Standard researches in this field are GIESE 1932, CASTELLANO 1961, DE GRANDA 1971, KURLAT 1962, KURLAT 1963, KURLAT 1965, RUSSELL 1973. Among the most recent papers on the subject see also BALLESTEROS 1984, LIPSKI 1986, MULLEN 1986, LÓPEZ 1987, BARANDA LETURIO 1989, ORTIZ 1994, MARTÍNEZ 1996, CAZAL 2001, BRANCHE 2006, BARBIERI 2007, CASARES/BARRANCO 2008, KIHM/ROUGÉ 2000, PANFORD 2000, MORILLO 2011.

considered as impressionistic renderings of a sense for music hardly understandable and quite impossible to reproduce at such an early date for any European musician or composer.

In adopting the local practice of serenading their beauties under their window, Giorgio and the other black characters in moresche shape an exquisite Afro-European artifact. In fact they not only sing verses, they also dance as a homage to the girl. In this Afro-European adaptation of romantic habits, the black suitors in Naples infuse their own way to conceive dance: heavy percussion, loud sound, and lively participation (including collective shouting). There are so many ways to be romantic, worldwide. Syncretic ways included.

3. Two moresche: African music and dance, and ethnic pride

Let's consider the moresca *Lucia celu*, that means 'Lucy the black'. The moresca opens with a dance sequence accompanied by a tambourine or some other hand-drum, of which we hear a thunderous onomatopoeia, «tambililililì». Having summoned the girl, Giorgio uses the Kanuri expression «hai, hai, biscania». In Kanuri *Ái* is a plain assertive, like 'really', reinforcing what is in fact an invitation to dance, while "bischania" recalls Kanuri terms like *bésge*, a dance party[10], or *bésgema*, 'smart dancer'. But here we get the verbal form, *besgéngin*, 'to dance'. The final /-a/ has multiple explanations, pronunciation-wise or grammar-wise[11].

[10] In modern Kanuri is *biské* (CYFFER 1994: 45, s.v. *dance*).

[11] For instance, as a syllabic rendering of the nasal desinence (WARD 1926: 141), or as a future 1st p. p. (*-niyen*). Cyffer kindly suggests an alternative reading: *ai biske* (dance) *-nyi* (my) *-a* (associative), meaning «with my dance» (Norbert Cyffer, personal communication, Aug. 27, 2015). I detect a

The dance of Giorgio with Christophona (Christopher), his fellow drummer, and with the black slaves drawned by his call «Hai biscania!», is marked by a series of ideophones, short phonosymbolic sounds often reiterated, that Clement Martyn Doke defined in 1935 as «A vivid representation of an idea in sound. A word, often onomatopoeic, which describes a predicate, qualificative or adverb in respect to manner, colour, sound, smell, action, state or intensity»[12]. Here we find the ideophone «guà guà», alterned with «ciri ciri». In Kanuri the ideophone *wáwá* represents any vivacious and noisy sound, like a stomping or a din, and in combination with *círin* can also means a loud shouting or shrilling. They merge effectively with the drum sound, «tambililì», in describing a joyous party mood. The dance is a whirling one, as suggested by the serpentine melody on which the words «cirì cirì cian» are sang.

A second dance *intermezzo* occurs at mid song, after Lucia has ignored Giorgio's promises of a rich *trousseau* if she accepts

numer of simple verbs class A (BENTON 1917: 40 ff.), like *besgéngin*, in many moresche's lyrics. We have the verb *kálánggin* (expressing a turning or tumbling motion) in the moresca *Catalina* (in syntagm «già calagià», where 'già' is probably an ideophone); the verb *kídângin* (to work) in *Tichi toche* («Ni machida ginacache»: *Ni* = you; *-ma* = agent marker or simple emphasis; verb *kídângin*; *kakkê* or *kágê* = my); verb *kasángin* (to agree) in *Ay cason ganya*; etc. In moresche, all these verbal forms are used in speeches addressed by the main male charachter, Giorgio, to his friends and/or to the community of black slaves in general. But we find the syntagm «ai bischania» also in the *Bataglia moresca* by the Flemish composer (briefly active in Naples) Anselme de Reulx, as an invitation to celebrate with a dance Africans' victory in the battle.

[12] DOKE 1935: 118.

to marry him: another sign (ironic as it may be, however not unrealistic) of Afro-Europeism, as the promise of a nice skirt goes back to the popular courting style in Italian literature and music since the lyric poetry of late Middle Age, besides being featured in peasants' courting tactics in Neapolitan *villanelle*. This second dance episode shows a growing excitement, because Giorgio marks it with the curious expression «U, u, gricachè, za za barazà, / Tirì, tirì, guà guà»[13]. In Kanuri the prefix *wu-* means 'look [here]', while the term *bará* designates a male dance with sticks, and *záuzáu* a double-skinned drum (not a tambourine as before): together with *tərəm* ('much' or 'many', adj.) and *wáwá* we have here a more thunderous rhythm and a fierce dancing, in response to the girl's offensive indifference. In fact, after this second attempt to attract Lucia's attention, Giorgio insults her vehemently and asks his fellows to retire by pronouncing a combination of ideophones, «zu zu beré» -- since in Kanuri *zúú* indicates sudden motion, or a group of people getting away, the analogous *bərət* a sudden scattering (or falling down) of persons or things.

Let's consider another moresca, *Alla lapia calia*, where the general context is again a dance scene under the girl's window. Here more fellows are involved, because Giorgio begins his chanting with the Arabic expression «Allah lafia» followed by the Kanuri *kalea*, meaning 'Hail slaves!'[14]; then he uses the exhortative imperative *áre*, 'come (here)!', followed by 'buscanì', a different vocalization of the term 'biscania'

[13] In the lyrics' version used by Roland de Lassus.

[14] *Afia*, o *Afiyya* is arabic for 'Hail!' or 'power'; the article *'al* often looses the /*a*-/ in Western sub-Saharan languages (WARREN-ROTHLIN 2014: 286).

encountered in *Lucia celu*. In uttering the syntagm «are buscanì» he is inviting the fellow slaves to dance with him. Here we find again the sound of tambourine, «tambililililì», with the statement «siamo bernagualà». This frequently occurring expression, 'bernagualà' (or 'burnogualà'), means 'We are from Bornu [or 'Bornu people'], for Allah!"[15], a way of expressing ethnic pride and fierceness and asking for tribal solidarity at the same time.

4. The 'catubba': Neapolitan embracement of African dance

The numerous references to dance in *Alla lapia calia* culminate in one of the most impressive clue of Afro-European culture in Naples. In fact here the dance is designed with its specific name, 'catub[b]a': following a sequence of ideophones, the dance appears emphatically mentioned. We have a description of this dance in Filippo Sgruttendio's poem *La tiorba a taccone* of 1646. The section in which he dedicates to his fiancé Cecca the catubba (*A Cecca la catubba*) describes it as a frenzied turning, jumping, and stomping *tour-de-force*, also mentioning the character of Lucia to which the dance is traditionally related (see ll. 99-109, 118-128, 137-147), and using the exclamation 'Bernagualà!' (now distorted as 'Pernovallà!', l. 128). The poem certifies that around the middle of 17th century the African 'catubba', first alluded in the

[15] The exclamation «Bernagual[l]a» or his variant «Burnogualla» occurs in four moresche: *Canta Giorgia*, *Ay cason gania* and *Le le le le le calia*, in addition to *Alla lapia calia*. The variant 'Berna' for 'Burno' is widely documented in Neapolitan literature, folklore, and in bookkeeping of the slave trade. Arabic *wa-llâ*, meaning "for Allah!" (LAWRANCE 2005: 85 f. 52), transliterated as «gualla», is also used in the Spanish *coplas* by Rodrigo de Reinosa mentioned above (see PUERTO MORO 2010: 176).

moresche's repertoire one hundred years before, had become a popular Carnival dance in Naples.

Two decades before Sgruttendio's poem the catubba was already featured in *La Luciata nuova*, an anonymous poem signed with the pseudonym of 'Rovinato Pover'Huomo', meaning 'the broken man'[16]. Here the tormented love story of Giorgio and Lucia had developed into an extended musical and theatrical sketch with a happy end, where Giorgio summons his fellows to «fare catubba a usanza paisa», meaning 'dancing a catubba in our country fashion', for celebrating his imminent marriage with Lucia and the deliverance conceded by their masters. Here the allusion to 'our country' can be ambiguously related either to his African roots or to his new Neapolitan identity: another brilliant early illustration of Afro-European mentality.

The moresche songs, with the persistence from Renaissance to Baroque of the African love story that they place among the community of black slaves in Naples, deliver a treasury of cultural effects of the African diaspora, in flawless Afro-European taste. All considered -- the discovery of Kanuri occurrences in the moresche's repertoire, where the African language is freely interspersed with the Neapolitan dialect in the slaves' speech; the slaves' merging of Western courtly attitudes with the African enthusiastic passion for lively dance (emblematic even if considered just as a comical, fictitious trick); and the 'catubba' revealing itself as an authentic African

[16] ANONIMO 1628. The 'Luciate' were a popular kind of carnivalesque street show, confirming the acceptance of the African dance within the Baroque tradition of Shrovetide in Naples.

dance (or a medley of autenthic dances) embraced by the Neapolitan popular tradition -- we get a clear vision of the avant-garde role that the city of Naples had, between 16th and 17th century, in establishing some fundaments of Afro-European sensibility and culture.

The moresche repertoire conceals a whole microcosm of deep anthropologic interest and richness, suggesting how many expressions of Afro-Europeism could have rooted in Southern Europe, in ways so numerous that are hard to imagine. The exploration of similar historical repertoires (from music, theatre, or literature) should be a fundamental primary task for every research in the cultural history of African diaspora. Any process of reciprocal imitation, adaptation, pidginization, syncretism, or encounter of cultures, that we can point out in European past, is an indispensable premise to the Afro-European discourse.

APPENDIX
COMPILATION OF RELEVANT TERMS AND IDEOPHONES RELATED TO MUSIC, DANCE, AND ETHNICITY IN TWO 'MORESCA' SONGS

moresca

"LUCIA CELU"

(*Lucy the black*)

EXCERPT A1

Lucia, celù,
hai, hai biscanìa,
Tambililililili guà guà,
ciri ciri cian.

Lyrics (excerpts)	Kanuri	Meaning
CELU[M]	*tzələm* (ancient form or Northern dialect for *sələm*)	'BLACK'
HAI	*Ái*	'REALLY' (assertive)
BISCANIA	*besgéngin* (verb class A): (1) future 1 p. p. (*-niyen*), or (2) *biske* ('dance') + *-nye* ('my') + *-a* (associative)	'LET'S DANCE' or 'WITH MY DANCE'
TAMBILILILILI	-	[onomatopoeia for tambourine's sound]
GUA GUA	*wáwá* (ideophone)	a lively or thunderous sound, like pounding, stomping, or squalling
CIRI[N]	*wáwá círin* (combination of ideophones)	loud shouting or shrilling

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moresca

“LUCIA, CELU”

(*Lucy the black*)

EXCERPT A2

U, u, gricachè,
za za barazà,
tirì tirì guà guà

Lyrics (excerpts)	Kanuri	Meaning
U	*wu-* (prefix)	‘LOOK [HERE]’
GRICACHÈ	*kakkê* or *kágê* (possessive adj.) [the sound */gr/* doesn’t exist in Kanuri]	‘MY [SOMETHING]
ZA ZA	*záuzáu*	‘DRUM’ (double-skinned)
BARAZA	*bará*	a male DANCE with sticks
TIRI	*tərəm*	‘MUCH’ or ‘MANY’ (adj.)
GUA GUA	*wáwá* (ideophone)	a lively or thunderous sound, like pounding, stomping, or squalling

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moresca

"LUCIA, CELU"

(*Lucy the black*)

EXCERPT A3

Zu zu zu zu berè

tiri tiri gua gua

Lyrics (excerpts)	Kanuri	Meaning
ZU	*zúú* (ideophone)	sudden motion (or getting away)
BERE	*bərət* (ideophone)	sudden scattering
TIRI	*tərəm* (ideophone)	'MUCH' or 'MANY' (adj.)
GUA GUA	*wáwá* (ideophone)	a lively or thunderous sound, like pounding, stomping, or squalling

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moresca

"ALLA LAPIA CALIA"

(*Hail slaves!*)

EXCERPT B1

Alla lapia calia,

alla lapia calia,

siamo bernaguala

Tanbililililili, Tanbilili.

[…]

Are buscani, buscani!

Lyrics (excerpts)	Kanuri	Meaning
ALLA LAPIA	*Allah lafia* [arabic]	‘HAIL!’
CALIA	*kalea*	‘SLAVE’ or ‘SLAVES’ (the plural form is rarely inflected in informal conversation)
SIAMO	-	‘WE ARE’ (in Italian)
BERNAGUALÀ (or BURNOGUALÀ)	*wa-llâ* [arabic; ‘Berna’ or ‘Burno’ stay for ‘Bornu’ in Italian documents]	‘BORNU PEOPLE [or FROM BORNU], FOR ALLAH!’
TANBILILILILI	-	onomatopoeia for tambourine’s sound
ARE	*áre*	‘COME (HERE)!’
BUSCANI	verb *besgéngin* (see *Lucia, celu*)	‘TO DANCE’

* * *

moresca

“ALLA LAPIA CALIA”

(*Hail slaves!*)

EXCERPT B2

Cian cian

nini gua gua

ania catuba

Literature mentioning

'catub[b]a'	Author	Year	Excerpt	Character/dancer
Alla lapia calia (moresca, first published Antonio Barrè)	[unknown]	1555	'ania catuba'	'Giorgia' [i.e. the male black slave Giorgio]
La Luciata nuova	Anonymous [under the pseudonym of 'Rovinato Pover'Huomo'	1628	'fare catubba a usanza paisa' (='dancing the catubba in our country fashion')	'Zorgia' [i.e. the male black slave Giorgio]
A Cecca la catubba (from *La tiorba a taccone*)	Filippo Sgruttendio	1646	'tubba catubba, e nania nà' [refrain Accompanying the dance]	The Neapolitan poet (describing itas a traditional streetdance)

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