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*Singing Black Pride in the Renaissance.
Agency and communitarian feelings of enslaved
people, from poetry and theatre to the song
cycle of 'canzoni moresche' (16th century)*

Abstract

Cultural history often emphasizes the notion of agency when considering African slavery in America. In sociocognitive theory, “agency” describes individual conduct within its social context, involving dynamic interactions, active thinking, and consequent action. For enslaved people from Africa, agency was a prerequisite for defending one’s dignity and expressing one’s claims. This paper aims to reconstruct indirect yet illustrative accounts of “black slaves”’ agency, not in America but in early modern Europe, researching poetry and theatre of that time, and showing how this agency expanded locally, as exemplified in a 16th-century song cycle from Naples, the so-called “canzoni moresche” (“black songs”). About 1470, in Florence, Alessandro Braccesi created the character of an African domestic servant proudly expressing her agency. Although ignored in studies of the African diaspora, Braccesi’s sonnet stands as a prototype for analogous situations in Iberian comedies, first in Portugal (where the slave’s protests are addressed to their masters) and then in Spain (where the slave’s attack on the white maid is supported by her mistress’s solidarity). In 16th-century Naples, where the song cycle of ‘canzoni moresche’ was composed in the early ’40s, these kinds of claims went even further. A repertoire scarcely studied in depth and often misinterpreted, the ‘moresche’ songs were sung partly in Kanuri, the African language spoken in the Bornu

empire and surrounding areas from where African persons were deported to Naples. «Burnoguallà!» (variant: «Bernagua[l]là!»), an exclamation of ethnic pride, is often uttered by Giorgio, the story's protagonist: partly in Kanuri, partly in Arabic, it fiercely declares his Bornu provenance. The interjection “Guallà!” (‘I swear in Allah’) is especially significant, as well as the songs’ lyrics in general, in revealing inter-ethnic and transcultural social dynamics among Africans in Naples, confirming or enriching other written sources; while syncopated melodies and metric modulations show the curiosity of Italian composers for African music, and their efforts to imitate it.

Keywords: *Canzoni moresche; African diaspora; African languages; Renaissance music; Iberian theatre; “literatura de cordel”*

1. “African slaves” in Renaissance Naples

The notion of agency is often employed in studies concerning the cultural history of African slavery in the Americas. In the last five or six decades, the term has enjoyed wide currency in historical, social, anthropological, and cognitive sciences, as well as in political discourse. It designates individual behavior related to social contexts, ways of affecting reality, dynamic interactions, and, more generally, the ability to think and act accordingly. Africans’ agency has been defined by the activist and scholar Maulana Karenga as «thinking, acting, producing, creating, building, talking, and solving problems in their peculiar way»¹. For “African slaves” in the Western world,

¹ KARENGA 2002: 4. Walter Johnson has criticized the use of the term since the '60s by the New Social History. in the analysis of African slavery in America, for its frequent abstractness and unspecificity, especially «in relation to action». Johnson proposes to revising the notion through a set of questions concerning the black enslaved people’s agency in «forming social solidarities [...] at the scale of everyday life», talking to one another about

agency always was a prerequisite for defending one's dignity and expressing one's claims. It could be even more: a propulsive force in expressing identitarian consciousness and black pride.

Agency, subjectivity, and self-consciousness of African enslaved people were already represented during the Renaissance, through vocal music and the theatre, especially in Portugal, Spain, and southern Italy. In 16th-century Naples, an entire song cycle of so-called "Canzoni moresche" (i.e., "black songs") was set in the early '40s² by anonymous composers³ in order to represent the personal lives, feelings, and claims of the black Africans in town. This repertoire has been scarcely studied in depth and often misinterpreted because the lyrics' language appeared almost incomprehensible in many passages. Modern scholars have long ignored that the "moresche" songs were partly sung in Kanuri⁴, the Nilo-Saharan language spoken in the

slavery and resistance, and deciding «which of their fellows they could trust and which they could not» (JOHNSON 2003: 117-118). In the literary repertoires that we consider in the present paper, the characters in Canzoni moresche's lyrics (more than those in Iberian theatre) exemplify these modalities of agency in their personal lives.

² SALVATORE 2021b: 412-414.

³ Those anonymous polyphonic songs for three voices were issued for the first time in the *Secondo libro delle Muse a tre voci: canzoni moresche di diversi aut. novamente raccolte, et poste in luce* published in Rome in 1555 by the French music publisher Antonio Barrè. Most of them were later arranged for larger sets of voices by various composers, notably Orlando di Lasso (Roland de Lassus). However, a philological analysis of their lyrics demonstrates that they were composed between 1540 and 1545 (SALVATORE 2021b).

⁴ My discovery was communicated for the first time on June 15, 2011 at the international conference *Facing Africa – Cultural Effects of African*

Bornu empire (located around the shores of lake Chad) and surrounding areas, from where most African in Naples were deported⁵.

In moresche's lyrics, *Allala pia calia!* (properly “Alla lafia calia”) is what the Africans deported in Naples sang to each other, a greeting uttered partly in Arabic, partly in Kanuri, where *álla*, followed by *lafia*, mentions the god of Islam in wishing for health, and *calia* corresponds to the Kanuri word for “black slave.” In the moresca song whose incipit is «Allala pia calia», this greeting is followed by the line «siamo Bernagualà» where the

first word is in Italian (“we are...”), the second another combination of Arabic and Kanuri. *Bernagualà* represents an idiomatic exclamation of ethnic pride, often uttered by Giorgio, the African lutenist and protagonist of the story narrated in the Neapolitan song cycle. With its alternate spelling, “Burnogualà,” the motto is s an emphatic way of declaring one's provenance from the Islamic empire of Bornu, also spelled “Burno”⁶, and the interjection “Guallà!” (*wa-llá*, i.e., “I swear in

Diaspora: Ancient and Early Modern Europe (Lecce, University of Salento), and then in SALVATORE 2012.

⁵ As attested by the *Libro primo de' battesimi della cattedrale di Napoli* (BOCCADAMO 2021a: 147-156; BOCCADAMO 2021b; SALVATORE 2021c).

⁶ “Bornu” and “Burno” alternate in the original manuscript in Italian of *Cosmographia de l’Affrica (Della descrizione dell’Africa et delle cose notabili che ivi sono)* by the Spanish-Berber geographer and explorer Leone l’Africano (Giovanni Leone dei Medici), while “Borno” and “Barno” are used in the matching passages in its French edition of 1556 (quoted in URVOY 1949: 68). The name of the empire comes from *Baran* (or *Baram*), the plural forms of *bar*, “man” (or “warrior” in a few Saharan languages)

Allah”) reinforces the statement. Combining Arabic and Kanuri, it means: «I am from Bornu, by God!». Given the presence in Naples of a large black community comprised of Christian-converted and Muslim-observant subjects, with established behavioral codes and solid communitarian bonds⁷, the interjection and the previous greeting are linguistically and historically relevant.

The narration in the song cycle also highlights ethnic rivalries, especially between Muslims (or former Muslims) and heathen tribes. Nevertheless, history teaches that all enslaved black people in the Western world (or former “slaves” turned freedmen) found solidarity, albeit coming from different regions, belonging to different ethnic groups, practicing different religions⁸. A similar situation happened in early modern Naples, according to the archival documents collected and studied by Giuliana Boccadamo. However, our information increases thanks to the narration in the *moresche*. These songs suggest that in Naples, as in the Americas, the slaves’ community was bound by established behavioral codes, solid feelings of mutual solidarity, and inter-ethnic personal relationships. In Naples, most of them came from the areas surrounding the Bornu empire, which usually sold as slaves its prisoners of war, taken during the frequent regional conflicts,

(PALMER 1936: 6). Different vocalizations, as is known, are common in Arabian dialects.

⁷ BOCCADAMO 2010: 12-13, 51.

⁸ Most studies about the ethnicities of the Africans deported in the Western world during the slave trade only consider the trade to the Americas: the most comprehensive is HALL 2005. For their areas of origin see LOVEJOY 2000. A recent history of the trade relations between Europe and Western Africa, analytically divided into thematic areas, is GREEN 2019.

and belonging to different ethnic groups. However, some enslaved Africans came from the empire itself. Sometimes the Berber merchants who traveled the Sahara desert, feeding the Mediterranean and Eastern trade, captured and sold Bornu citizens illegally, as various historical sources attest⁹. Consequently, in the *moresche*'s narration, the pride of coming from a powerful African empire mingles with a new inter-ethnic solidarity developed on the southern Italian soil.

In a song cycle supposed to be humorous, it is surprising to find such a detailed depiction of a community of enslaved Africans so rich in social and anthropological content, during the Renaissance. The characters in the story are all black, and their utterances are partly in the Neapolitan dialect, distorted in a sort of pidgin, partly in an actual African language, the Kanuri, still spoken today by millions of persons in areas once belonging to the ancient empire¹⁰. The song lyrics frequently express loud and passionate calls to the black people in town; the black community supports and advises the protagonist. Talking Kanuri, *moresche*'s characters hail each other, summon the blacks in the neighborhood, reference song and dance as traditional ways to celebrate and communicate¹¹, and utter idiomatic expressions of racial pride. Accordingly, the through-composed music of *Canzoni moresche* features dizzying

⁹ See SALVATORE 2021a: 205-207.

¹⁰ For Kanuri language and its diffusion, see CYFFER 2021. Two important dictionaries are CYFFER/HUTCHISON 1990 and CYFFER 1994. For the Kanuri people: COHEN 1967. For a discussion of the Kanuri occurrences in the *Canzoni moresche*, see SALVATORE 2012; SALVATORE 2016; SALVATORE 2021a: 173-183, 192-202, and *passim*; SALVATORE 2022b: 369-381, 392-402, and *passim*.

¹¹ SALVATORE 2016.

sequences of melodic patterns, rich in syncopation and metric modulations, all to feign African music's rhythmic and metric complexity.

2. *Black subjectivity and cultural consciousness in Portugal, Spain, and Italy*

In early modern Europe, representations of African agency debuted in Portugal and Italy during the third quarter of the 15th century. The Portuguese prototype is a short poem titled *Por breve de huma mourisca rratorta que mandou fazer a senhora prinçeza, quando esposou*, written by Fernão da Silveira (a *coudel mor*, or cavalry captain, well-connected to the Portuguese court) to celebrate the betrothal of a princess. In its sixteen lines, all in *fala de preto* (the African way of approximating the Portuguese language), the speaker -- or singer: the poem was part of a famous *Cancioneiro*¹² -- is the king of Sierra Leone. He is visiting the European court in Évora, followed by a massive contingent of his people, that he summons to dance. The king claims his right and requirement of dancing his land's dances to celebrate the betroth: «Nam saber quy balhar terra vossa / balhar que saber como nossa terra»¹³. In the poem's title, the dance is labeled as a *mourisca* and defined "rratorta," alluding to the twisting and twirling postures, steps, and motions of African dance, far apart from the conventions and ethics of European dance styles of the time, both "high" and "low." In addition to being the first relevant discussion of African dance in Europe, the short poem is also a testimony of

¹² DE RESENDE 1516.

¹³ The first of the two lines has been interpreted as «I don't know what to dance here, in your land» (TEYSSIER 1959: 228-229; NARO 1978: 344), but «I cannot dance your dances» seems a more plausible rendering.

black consciousness, respect, and pride for African traditions and of the representational interest that all that aroused. Garcia de Resende, the compiler of the *Cancioneiro* including the poem, also reported the related, spectacular performance where two hundred dancers and extras in blackface, wearing bracelets and anklets scattered with African bells, followed the Portuguese actor impersonating the African king¹⁴. It was the first large (and loud) European representation and embodiment of a traditional African attitude.

Meanwhile, in Italy – around 1470, or a few years before¹⁵ – the Florentine humanist and poet Alessandro Braccesi wrote a jesting sonnet entitled *Marta, vien su* (“Come on up, Martha”). Here the African servant Marta complains about having too much work to do, presses her fundamental right to a lunch break, and stands up to the white household maid who insists on enforcing their mistress’s orders. It ends up with the black girl insulting, accusing, and threatening the white maid. Although ignored in studies on the African diaspora, this sonnet stands as a prototype for analogous situations in Iberian comedies. In early Portuguese theatre, enslaved people address protests to their masters¹⁶; later, in Spain, the black girl’s attack on the white servant is sometimes supported by her mistress’s

¹⁴ RESENDE 1545, quoted in JONES 2019: 86-87.

¹⁵ Braccesi’s manuscripted collection of sonnets is datable around 1472, and plausibly contained early poems from the late ’60s to 1471 (the poet was born in 1445). See ZACCARELLO 2008: 213 n. 44.

¹⁶ An early example is the *auto* (one-act play) by Anrique da Mota *O Pranto do Clérigo* (also known as *Dialogo entre un clérigo y su criada negra* or *D’Anrique da Mota a um Créligo sobre uma pipa de vinho que se le fue por el suelo y lo lamentaba de ésta manera*), dated between 1495 and 1514 (RESENDE 1516; NARO 1978: 344-345).

solidarity¹⁷. Black males also defended their dignity in numerous comedies, challenging their masters' pretensions and abuses of power to claim for themselves the same social rights of white people, sometimes on their own, at times expressed by black enslaved couples in love or, in other instances, by ambitious blacks audaciously ridiculing the color white as a racial symbol¹⁸.

We have another relevant example in Spanish *literatura de cordel*. Rodrigo de Reinosa produced his *coplas* (to be sung on the melodies of popular tunes) between 1470 and 1524. *Gelofe, Mandinga*, probably belonging to Reinosa's latest production, has the same quick dialogue structure of a short *entremés*, or of a picturesque *paso* drawn out from a theatrical play, and was sung to the melody of the song *La niña quando bailéis*¹⁹. Its eleven stanzas in octaves dramatize the dialogue between two African characters, a man and a young woman, Jorge and Comba: an all-black narrative that anticipates, on a smaller scale, the one developed in the Neapolitan cycle of Canzoni moresche. The poem is a satire of ethnic rivalries between Africans. Jorge is a conceited Mandinga pretending to be a sophisticated Wolof, Comba a Guinean, blacker than him and with a snub nose and large lips. However, Comba knows how to defend her dignity and subjectivity, tackling Jorge head-on and menacing him. Here Reinosa is transposing the early European depictions of black persons' agency in an all-black context, anticipating one of the features in Canzoni moresche's plot. At the same time, he confirms the European attention toward the

¹⁷ Lope de Rueda, *Los engaños* (written in 1538), scenes 2-5.

¹⁸ Two relevant examples are AGUADO 1602 and CLARAMONTE 1612.

¹⁹ Reinosa's text is reproduced, edited and commented in PUERTO MORO 2010: 168-177.

same form of African agency already shown in Braccesi's female slave Marta confronting her white colleague.

From the beginning of the dialogic poem, Jorge and Cumba glorify each one's ethnic origin and traditions and denigrate the interlocutor's, accusing each other of disgusting eating habits and showing coloristic bias. As suggested by her heathenish name (neither Christian nor Islamic), Comba comes from an animist cultural context, considered inferior and "primitive" by people like Jorge. Presenting himself as a Wolof, he implicitly declares to be part of a noble and refined Muslim empire. Nevertheless, she exhibits a more advanced African cultural consciousness than his opponent, declaring to be proud and nostalgic of the sweet chants of his country, mentioning the *undul* e the *mangana* (the latter also known as a dance). Instead, Jorge boasts of his skill in dancing the *guineo*, a conventional name given to a quick, lively, and syncretistic Afro-European dance²⁰, with lascivious overtones, coherent with his aggressive and failed attempt to seduce the girl.

3. *The collective identity of Afro-Neapolitans*

The Neapolitan Canzoni moresche will resume all these narrative cues, yet through characters (primarily males) expressing a much more advanced African consciousness. The moresche stage a complex and nuanced representation of a collective and transregional identity of the sub-Saharan people deported in Europe. The black Gnawas of the Maghreb can offer a parallel example in African history, being formerly enslaved people coming from different regions and ethnic groups of

²⁰ «Una cierta danza de movimientos prestos y apresurados: pudo ser fuese traída de Guinea y que la danzasen primero los negros» (*scil.*: also the white European people danced it; COVARRUBIAS 1611: s.v.).

Western sub-Saharan Africa, from Senegal to Chad and from Mali to Nigeria, as discussed by Chouki el Hamel²¹. Their denomination, attested since the 12th century, means nothing but “The Black People,” sharing the same etymology as the toponym of ‘Guinea’ that designated a large part of Western Africa at the time.

After their Emancipation, African Americans also committed themselves to develop a collective identity based on their past condition of transregional deportees. They built a new culture based, among other features, on their use of “black English” and the eventual adhesion to a “Black Islam,” shifting their myth of one common native land by showing solidarity with Africa’s liberation struggle. They also created musical and choreutic syncretisms, mingling their distinguished oral traditions with Western written and performing conventions. Analogously, since the Renaissance, a bunch of expressions uttered by the characters in the *Canzoni moresche* cycle makes frequent references to «gente negra,» in Italian, meaning “black people,” or to «celum calia,» in Kanuri, meaning “black slaves.” Kanuri alternates with Italian (or Neapolitan) to give the broadest definition possible. Two expressions in Italian (albeit humorously distorted by the Afro-Neapolitan pidgin) effectively attest to their inter-regional variety: «tutta negra,» i.e., “all blacks,” and «genta negra longh’e corta,» which means “black people of all physiognomies,” regarding the varying anthropometry in sub-Saharan and equatorial Africa.

In the song cycle narrative, the protagonist Giorgio also plans to organize a great wedding party based on their traditional African songs and dances to revel all day and night if he only succeeds in winning Lucia’s love. The expression «tutta negra»

²¹ HAMEL 2008.

extends the invitation to all Africans in Naples. On its part, the black community supports and advises the protagonist in his romantic effort. The use of uncommon languages is favorite in these intercommunal communications. One conspiratorial scene in *Allala pia calia* depicts Giorgio and his black gang communicating in code so as not to be understood by any overseer. For the rest, most verbal exchanges between him and his community are expressed in Kanuri: a *unicum* in European literature, theatre, and vocal music.

For a long time, historians of African languages in Europe located the first known pieces of evidence of written Kanuri in the ones found in scattered manuscripts by European merchants and travelers dating around the late 18th-early 19th century. The moresche's scores offer earlier traces of this language in written form. The characters in the song cycle use it, sometimes interspersed by an Afro-Neapolitan pidgin, to communicate with their community and sing inter-regional black pride in the Renaissance. Albeit written by European observers of the personal and collective life of African "slaves" and freedmen, as in the Iberian theatre, the Canzoni moresche are a testimony of their agency. Moreover, by their exclusive use of Kanuri language, these songs are one of the most powerful cultural effects of the African diaspora. Through this Neapolitan repertoire, a whole microcosm of African traditions, languages, customs, and feelings -- and possibly also shreds of original melodies and rhythms -- aroused curiosity and interest and was valued worthy of being represented in southern Italy during the Renaissance.

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