

REVISITING THE ETYMOLOGY OF ZANNI

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It has long been maintained that the etymology of *zani*, *zanni* – the servant or buffoon of the *commedia dell'arte* – is a northern Italian variant of the proper noun Giovanni, or its shortened form, Gianni. In Tommaseo and Bellini's *Dizionario della lingua italiana*, published in Turin between 1865 and 1879, it is stated that the term is “voce bergamasca, accorciata dall'intero nome Giovanni, che rappresenta un Servo semplice e goffo bergamasco.”¹ Tommaseo and Bellini's explanation of the origin of the term is basically what is found in modern etymological dictionaries, such as Battisti and Alessio's *Dizionario etimologico italiano* (DEI) and Cortelazzo and Zolli's *Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana* (DELI). The earliest attestation of the term appears to be the 15th century, according to Battisti and Alessio, but a precise reference is not given. 16th century attestations of *zani* / *zanni* corresponding to the servant character of the *commedia dell'arte*, of course, abound. There is no doubt that the term *zani* was widely used in the 16th century in Italy to designate the servant character of the *commedia dell'arte*; and it is during the 16th century that the term spread outside of Italy: it is found in French, for example, as *zani* from 1550, and in English, as *zany*, later in the century (Migliorini 1983: 426). In the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the noun *zany* (with various spellings), which preceded the use of term as

¹ Cited in M. Cortelazzo and P. Zolli, *Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana* (DELI), Bologna: Zanichelli, 1992 (1980): 1463.

an adjective (still in use), is attributed unequivocally to Italian *zani*, although it is unclear whether the term entered English directly from Italian or through French. According to the OED, it is attested in 1571 in Edwards' *Damon and Pithias*² and in 1588 in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*.³

Some linguists, it seems, have not been entirely convinced of the notion that *zanni* is a northern Italian variant of Giovanni, for there have been attempts to provide alternate etymologies, and etymologies that predate the use of the term in the period of the *commedia dell'arte*. Such attempts have been few, however, and have generally not met with much success. An early theory suggested that the term could be connected with Latin *Sannio* or *Sanniones* of the *atellane*, the primitive popular theatre of Oscan origin; this etymology has generally been rejected (Migliorini 1927: 226). Lazzerini (1982) proposed that *zanj* was a cross between Giovanni and Dianus, the masculine counterpart to Diana, who had come to have demonic properties among Christianized peoples in the Romance territory. This theory, too, seems not to have been widely embraced. So we are left with the traditional etymology cited above, that *zanni* is merely a northern Italian variant of Gianni. In fact, Cortelazzo and Zolli state: "il problema dell'origine remota resta...aperto" (DELI, 1463).

It is in light of this that I would like to propose a history of the term *zanni* that goes beyond the time and space of the longstanding etymology; that is, beyond northern Italy and the 16th century. It is possible that Italian *zani* / *zanni* stems from medieval Arabic *zanj*, and that a subsequent reinterpretation of the term as a variant of Giovanni / Gianni (in the 1500s) has led to its connection to the proper noun.

² According to the OED, in *Damon and Pithias* we are dealing with the French term.

³ In *Love's Labour's Lost*, *zany* is found in the following passage (italics mine): "Some carry-tale, some please-man, some slight *zany*, / Some mumble-news, some trencher-knight, some Dick, / That smiles his cheek in years, and knows the trick / To make my lady laugh..." (v.ii.463).

There are several reasons which support considering such an etymology. First, the Arabic term, which will be explained shortly, predates the Italian term by about seven or eight hundred years, and is found throughout Medieval texts in Arabic. Second, given the trade contacts between Arabs and western Europeans in the Middle Ages, and given the physical presence of Arabs in Romance territory in the same period, and the number of Arabic loanwords borrowed in the Romance languages during this period, it is certainly plausible that this term too was borrowed from Arabic. Third, it is possible to draw a semantic link between the terms in question. Finally, the term *zanj*, in its Arabic meaning, seems not unknown in Romance territory.

The early Zanni

Before discussing to whom the Arabic term *zanj* refers, some points about the *zanni* of the *commedia dell'arte* ought to be clarified. First, although *zanni* becomes in the later *commedia dell'arte* a generic term for “comic servant” or “clown,” it is clear that *Zanni* refers to a specific character type in the early *commedia dell'arte*, and that he may appear alongside Arlecchino or Trivellino, but he remains distinct from those characters (Nicoll, 1963: 67). Nicoll (1963: 82ff.) provides ample evidence of this. In the early *commedia dell'arte* *zanni* was simply the typical servant's name; we either find *Zanni*, on its own, or the shortened form *Zan* before another name, such as *Zan Polo*, *Zan Capella*, and that none of these double names ever contain the name of one of the more popular and “later individually designated servants” such as *Arlecchino* or *Pedrolino*. Moreover, in early prints a clear distinction is made between *Arlecchino* who dresses tightly and in patches, and *Zany*, who is generally loosely dressed. It has even been suggested that very early on, *Zanni* may have appeared on his own, without another servant companion, although most of the scenari reveal the presence of two servant characters. What we know of the early *Zanni* is that he wore loose, baggy clothing and a wide hat, rather than

the small caps associated with other comic servants; Zanni's most common role is that of the "rough and uncouth" servant; sometimes he is a porter or a ploughman (Nicoll 1963: 83).

Second, the connection with Bergamasco deserves further consideration. It seems quite common in the first decades of the 1500s to find references to *Zane servitor bergamasco*. Pandolfi (1988: 158f.) informs us of the sociocultural factors that contributed to the development of the Zanni character. Poverty and unemployment had forced the mountain dwellers around Bergamo to seek a better life in larger urban centres, where they took on labour-intensive jobs and jobs of low social standing, to survive. Most often, it appears that they became porters in Venice or Genoa. It is the Venetians and others who make fun of the newly arrived Bergamaschi and of their way of speaking. Thus, rather than the term having origins in the Bergamo speech variety, it seems that it was simply what was used by Venetians, and likely also by Genoese, to refer to those from Bergamo.

The Zanj of Medieval Arab texts

The Zanj are mentioned by numerous Medieval Arab historians and geographers; what they tell us can be subdivided, as one scholar, Popovic (1999), has done, into two main categories: information on the Zanj at home, in East Africa, and information on the Zanj in the Islamic world. There are many references among Medieval writers to the land of Zanj and the sea of the Zanj; as scholars note, the references are imprecise, and stem from rough estimates based on the duration of travel (Devic in Popovic 1999: 16); what we can say with certainty is that the term Zanj is used to refer to East Africans, from coastal areas with whom Arab travellers would have come into contact along the trade routes of the Indian Ocean. The 10th century author Al-Mas'udi (c. 915-945), who himself travelled along East African waters,⁴ writes

⁴ Al-Mas'udi had been to Persia, India and China and back "via East African waters to Oman" (Freeman-Grenville 1962: 14).

of East Africa, particularly the island of Kanbalu in the Zanj sea (which scholars believe to be Ras Mkumbuu in Pemba). He speaks of the dangers of the Zanj sea, of the abundant amber, leopard skins, of the use of oxen, the trade of ivory; he speaks of the people and their customs, and state that the people have “an elegant language and men who preach in it” (in Freeman-Grenville 1962: 16; cf. Iliffe 1995: 54).⁵ Al-Idrisi (1100-66) compiled a geographical work in the first half of the 12th century, entitled the *Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fi Ikhtiraq al-Afaq* (*The book of travels of one who cannot travel himself*), in which he speaks of Malindi, a town of the Zanj, where the inhabitants hunt and fish, use and trade iron; he also speaks of an island off the Zanj coast where the inhabitants are very dark in colour (in Freeman-Grenville 1962: 19-20). Al-Idrisi’s work is also known as *al-Kitab al-Rujari*, or *Book of Roger*, since it was written under the patronage of Roger II; although a Spanish Arab by birth, Al-Idrisi spent most of his life in Sicily under Norman patronage, first at the court of Roger II, later at the court of William I. Abu al-Fida (1273-1331), a soldier and governor, also discusses Malindi, a town of the Zanj, where the King of the Zanj lives (Freeman-Grenville 1962: 23-24). Perhaps the most well known of the Muslim travellers of the Middle Ages is Ibn Battuta (1304-1377), who did visit, among other places, East and West Africa and is the “only Muslim traveller of the Middle Ages to give eyewitness descriptions of the coastal towns” (Freeman-Grenville 1962: 27). Battuta states that after spending time with the Sultan of Mogadishu, he set sail for Kilwa, which he identifies as the “principal town on the coast, the greater part of whose inhabitants are Zanj of very [dark] complexion” (Freeman-Grenville 1962: 31); the Sultan of Kilwa, a Muslim, he continues, frequently makes raids into the Zanj country and steals goods, a portion of which he reserves for his kinsmen from Iraq and other countries when they visit him. Popovic (1999: 16-19) has

⁵ Portions of Al-Mas’udi’s *Muruj al-Dhahab wa Ma’adin al-Jawhar* are contained in Freeman-Grenville 1962: 14-17.

collected and analyzed what Arab writers say of the characteristics of the Zanj at home: one finds both positive comments, such as al-Mas'udi's praise for the language of the Zanj, and extremely negative comments, particularly concerning the behaviour, intelligence and customs of the Zanj.

The Zanj in the Islamic world

More relevant for our purposes is the role of the Zanj in the Middle East. In the writings of Ibn Shahriyar of Ramhormuz, a Persian Gulf sailor, writing in the middle of 10th century, we find not only an early reference to the Zanj coast, but to the Arab use of Zanj as labour. Scholars caution us that Shahriyar's tales are likely partially legendary, but that they are not complete fiction. One of the adventures he recounts is that of a captain and his sailors landing, on account of a storm, on the Zanj coast, and of being welcomed by a benevolent king, being allowed to trade freely among the king's people; yet, before setting sail, the captain and his sailors captured the king and seven of his companions, which they later sold in "their" land (Oman) as slaves (Freeman-Grenville 1962: 9-13). Scholars are hesitant to attach a precise date to the arrival of the Zanj as slaves in the Islamic world; one scholar states that what we know for sure is only that they were black East Africans (Lewis in Popovic 1999: 20).

What is known about the life of the Zanj in the Middle East? Historical sources inform us that there was a concentration of Zanj in and around Basra, where they were grouped in camps, and worked as labourers (*kassâhîn*) to prepare the land of lower Mesopotamia, by removing the crust of natron (*sebâkh*) from the land's surface (Popovic 1999: 23). The social conditions were appalling; Popovic (1999: 20) notes that the Zanj lived in a "condition of absolute physical and moral destitution." The social conditions led to uprisings in 689-690, 694 and 749-50, which historians mention, but for which scant details are provided (Popovic 1999: 22f.); conditions could not have improved, for

the Zanj organized themselves and mounted a rebellion against their rulers, in what is known as the revolt of the slaves of Basra, or the revolt of the Zanj, which lasted 14 years: 869-883.

As stated, many medieval Arab authors mention the Zanj and, in particular, the revolt of the Zanj in Iraq, in the 9th century. The most important sources are Arab historians such as Al-Mas'udi, Ibn Al-Athir, and Al-Tabari; information is also available in the works of Arab geographers, such as Ibn Rustah and al-Muqaddasi, and of Arab poets (cf. Popovic 1999: 6-7). Scholars also know of other works containing information on the Zanj which, unfortunately, have not survived (Popovic 1999: 144-45). As Popovic (1999: 20f.) notes, few of these texts are favourable to the Zanj: "...the Zanj were highly valued as rural labour; on the other hand, they were considered to have many flaws. According to a common proverb: "The hungry Zanj steals; the sated Zanj rapes"; the Zanj was, as we would say today, stereotyped: he is stupid; he is cheerful for no apparent reason; he is a thief; he does not speak Arabic; he has no memory; he is the cheapest slave in the market..."

Arab presence in Medieval Europe

Arab influence on Medieval Europe is well known. The spread of Arab culture through western Europe in the Middle Ages is the result both of the physical "political presence" of Arabs in Spain and Sicily, and of trade contacts (Watt 1972: 29).⁶

The Arab presence in Spain lasted roughly seven hundred years. It began in the early 8th century with the capture of Toledo (711) and ended with the fall of Granada in the late 1400s. Within a few years of the capture of Toledo (711), Arabs occupied several main towns in Spain, and under the Umayyad dynasty, based in Cordova, achieved

⁶ The historical information concerning Arabs in Spain and Sicily is based largely on Watt 1972 and Ahmad 1975.

some unity in Iberian territory, until the early 11th century (c. 1030). After the fall of the Umayyad dynasty, the Almoravids, a Berber dynasty, thwarted Christian advances, and ruled Islamic Spain, from the late 11th cent. to the mid 12th century (c.1090-1145). The Almoravids were succeeded by another Berber dynasty, the Almohads, who ruled Spain into the first decades of the 13th century (1223); the Christians captured Cordova in 1236 and Seville in 1248, and a few years later Granada was the only Islamic state in Spain.

A significant Islamic presence in Sicily is registered in the early 9th century, when the Aghlabid family, rulers of the province of Ifriqiyya in Tunisia (for the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad), invaded the island, capturing Palermo in 831, Messina in 843, Syracuse in 878, and all of Sicily by 902. The Arab domination of Sicily continued through the 10th century, first under the Fatimids and later under the semi-independent dynasty of the Kalbiters, who ruled the island for almost a century, until its occupation by the Normans in the latter half of the 11th century (1060-91). Arabs had also made advances on the southern Italian mainland and temporarily occupied Bari and Brindisi in the 9th century.

In Sicily, Arab cultural influences did not stop with the Norman occupation. We need only think of the previously-mentioned work by Al-Idrisi, the *Book of Roger*, produced under the patronage of Roger II (cf. Pellegrini 1972: 19). Moreover, scholars know of a document from the year 1242, from Agrigento, entirely in Arabic, with a Latin translation (cf. Pellegrini 1972: 20).

Trade between western Europe and the Islamic world developed after the 8th century; in the 9th century Arab fleets were found throughout most of the Mediterranean, and Arab pirates had bases in Sardinia and Corsica until the 11th century. The volume of trade between Arabs and western Europeans began to increase in the 10th century. Amalfi and Venice found routes across the Mediterranean to Tunisia and to Egypt and Syria, and they were soon followed by Pisa and Genoa. Italian merchants carried raw materials across the

Mediterranean into the Islamic world – although Islamic governments placed restrictions on their movements – and returned with consumer goods (Watt 1972: 17-19).

There were direct contacts between Arabs and merchants from Pisa, Genoa and Venice. Commercial contacts between the Arabs and merchants from Pisa began in the 11th century, when the Pisans established their own trading posts in the Arab world, and there is early documentary evidence (*Diplomi arabi*) of trade agreements (Pellegrini 1972: 408-09). The Arabs also had economic interests in Pisa, and evidently spent lengthy periods of time there, where many converted to Christianity. There is also evidence that a number of Pisans had a working knowledge of Arabic; and that some of them, such as Stefano da Pisa, knew Arabic well enough to translate works of medicine and mathematics into Latin (Pellegrini 1972: 409-11). Venetian merchants are known to have been in Egypt as early as 828; and again there are early documents – from the 10th century – attesting to the presence of Venetians in Arab territory for the purpose of transporting goods; besides Egypt, they are known to have been in Syria, Libya and Tunisia. For Genoa, too, there is documentary evidence of trade agreements, and we know that the Genoese were trading in the Levant and the Maghreb as early as the 11th century.

It is well known that many Arabic terms entered the Romance territory in the Middle Ages through learned channels, subsequent to the translation of Arab philosophical and scientific works into Latin. Numerous terms are the result of trade and Arab presence in Romance territory. There is no doubt that Arabic exerted the greatest influence on the lexicon of Spanish and Portuguese, transmitted principally through the Romance-speaking Mozárabes (Hall 1974: 94). The semantic variety of Arabic loanwords indicates that contact was not just “official” in nature, but that there must have been close social ties as well (Hall 1974: 95). Arabic terms are found not only in the area of government and administration (such as Sp. *alcáide* “mayor” < al-ka:di:/ “the judge”), and in toponymy, but also in words pertaining to

everyday life (such as *alquilér* “rent” < Ar. / al - hira / “the rent”; *ajórca* “bracelet” < Ar. / aš - šorka /, *algodón* “cotton” < Ar. / al-qutn/ “cotton”, *arcaduz* “bucket”, *arróz* “rice”, *azucar* “sugar”).⁷ Arabic influence on Sicilian, and in other southern Italian varieties, was not as extensive as in Ibero-Romance, but was significant nonetheless. In Sicilian we find terms referring to professions and titles (*ráisi* “capo dei pescatori” < ra’is “capo”; *sciurta* “guardia della città” < šurta), words referring to weights, monetary terms, agriculture; domestic items (*mafarata* “type of bowl” < marfada; *tabbuna* “terracotta container” < t_b_na);⁸ words referring to articles of clothing; botanical terms, terms for types of food, geographical terms. Arabic terms contained in Medieval documents from Pisa, Genoa and Venice tend to cover predictable semantic fields: administrative vocabulary and terminology related to commerce – tariffs, measurements and weights, products from the East and from Africa (cf. Pellegrini 1972). And, as Pellegrini (1972: 582) laments, it is not an easy task identifying the route of entry of an Arabic loanword: “Non è poi agevole poter stabilire con certezza se un orientalismo...nella lingua sia stato assunto attraverso Genova, Pisa o Venezia poiché un certo numero di parole esotiche, identiche o assai simili, circolavano con eguale intensità tra i mercanti delle nostre città marinare e con minime varianti fonetiche.”

Arabic *zanj* and Italian *zanni*

Given the lexical influence of Arabic on the Romance languages in the Middle Ages, and given the degree of contact between Arabs and Italian merchants, I believe it worthwhile to consider the possibility that Italians had heard of the Arabic term *zanj*, from which a semantic shift to the meaning of “servant” developed. We must remember that in the

⁷ Examples are from Hall 1974.

⁸ Examples are from Pellegrini 1972.

Medieval Arab world the Zanj generally occupied among the lowest social ranks, and were in many cases the victims of oppression; and many Arab authors were negative in their descriptions of the Zanj. The semantic connection between the Zanj and zani / zanni would be predominantly one of social rank. Is it possible that a term which originally referred to East African slaves in the Islamic world, over centuries came to mean a servant or a person of low social standing? Semantic broadening of this type is certainly not unheard of; one need only think of *Slav* as the etymology for *slave* in the European languages, based on the Medieval trade of pagan Slavs as slaves. It must also be borne in mind that some of the Arab writers who discussed the Zanj were writing in Romance territory: for example, Al-Idrisi in Sicily, and Ibn Hazm in Spain.

Another avenue worth exploring is that of the *Arabian Nights*. According to Popovic (1999: 30 n.16) the Zanj are mentioned in two of the popular tales, as cannibals in one story (night 301) and servants in the other (night 765). Although a western European translation of the tales – Galland’s translation – doesn’t appear until the early 18th century, it is possible, but difficult to prove, that knowledge of these tales was transmitted orally. The *Arabian Nights* have such a complex history, that it is extremely difficult to trace their Eastern history, and even more so the possible circulation of stories in Europe (cf. Irwin 1994: 48ff.). As Irwin (1994: 97) explains: “So much material which is common to the Nights has been found in collections of stories put together in Europe in the centuries prior to Galland’s translation that it has led some scholars to speculate that the Nights did circulate in Europe in an earlier translation – perhaps a translation into Latin made in Spain in...the twelfth century. However, no such translation has been found, and there is no reference to such a translation ever having been commissioned.” Irwin (1994: 97-98) continues, stating that while “...European versions of stories which formed part of the early core of the Nights...are [quite rare]...there is certainly evidence of later stories

being “recycled in Latin” or one or other of Europe’s vernacular languages.”

What do we know about the Arabic word *Zanj*? According to scholars it is likely not Arabic in origin, and there are various theories concerning its origin. Theories concerning the etymology of *zanj* are summarized by Popovic (1999: 15): one scholar maintains it is of Ethiopian origin, pointing to the verb *zanega* meaning “to prattle” or “to stammer;” some scholars maintain it is of Persian origin, citing *Zang*, *Zangi*, and see it as the word at the root of *Zanzibar*; others yet propose that the term is related to Greek *Zingis*, which would suggest a relationship with *zingaro*. In fact, a seventeenth-century French lexicographer (d’Herbelot, cited in Popovic 1999: 30) suggested a relationship between the etymology of *Zanzibar* and *zingaro*, but this is not a connection one encounters in the works of Italian lexicographers. It is interesting to note that the term *zangue* (and variant *zing(ue)*), < Arabic *zinj*, is known in 16th century Portuguese as a pejorative Arabic or Persian term for black Africans, particularly Ethiopians, and is understood to be related to the term *Zanzibar* (Machado 1997: 52; 106-07). It seems here that we are clearly dealing with a term related to *Zanj*; more importantly, it is documented in the 16th century in a Romance variety.

Concluding remarks

When one revisits a longstanding etymology with the intention of questioning that etymology, it would be preferable to be armed with some “direct evidence”: an old document or two from the area in question which proves beyond any doubt that the proposed etymology should stand. I have not yet encountered such proof. It must be stated, however, that this is a study for which I am still gathering evidence, and the proposed etymology is intended as a working hypothesis. I do believe it worth considering that Italian *zani* / *zanni* could derive from medieval Arabic *zanj*.

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