

Review: Postcolonial Discourses in Italy

Reviewed Work(s): Somalitalia and Aulò! Aulò! Aulò! by Simone Brioni, Kaha Mohamed Aden and Ribka Sibhatu

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Multimedia Review

### Postcolonial Discourses in Italy

Simone Brioni, with Kaha Mohamed Aden and Ribka Sibhatu, *Somalitalia* and *Aulò! Aulò! Aulò!* Rome, Kimerafilm, 2012.<sup>i</sup>

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*The memory and awareness of a long colonial past are central to postcolonial European identity—and Italy is no exception to this rule. Yet contemporary Italy seems to have forgotten its own colonial history in Africa and this is precisely the issue addressed by Simone Brioni in two interesting multimedia publications, Somalitalia and Aulò! Aulò! Aulò! (Rome, Kimerafilm, 2012).*

The memory and awareness of a long colonial past are central to postcolonial European identity—and Italy is no exception to this rule. Yet contemporary Italy seems to have forgotten its own colonial history in Africa that ended abruptly with military defeat in the early 1940s and (in the national perception) was swept away together with the massive and encumbering presence of fascism. The lingering persistence of such past and, at the same time, the lack of an adequate knowledge and revision of the Italian role in colonialism is one of the issues engendering an uneasy and problematic present in republican, post fascist Italy. And this is precisely the issue addressed by Simone Brioni in two interesting multimedia publications, *Somalitalia* and *Aulò! Aulò! Aulò!* (Rome, Kimerafilm, 2012). The two booklets are in fact precious caskets where useful commentaries and historical assessments frame and introduce two excellent documentaries on DVD—the autobiographies of two postcolonial subjects, Kaha and Ribka. The two women are Italian citizens who were born and raised in former Italian colonies—Kaha Mohamed Aden in Somalia and Ribka Sibhatu in Eritrea—and then migrated to

Italy as political refugees. They live, respectively, in Pavia (northern Italy) and Rome (the capital, heavily imprinted with colonial marks)—two towns that act as backdrops to their oral narratives of home and exile, uprooting, dislocation and relocation. Their voices often break into song and poetry, or linger on nostalgia and even sorrow. The documentaries are the result of teamwork by Simone Brioni, Graziano Chiscuzzu and Ermanno Guida.

In Kaha's autobiography, 'The Fourth Road to Mogadishu', the view of ancient Pavia crossed by the peaceful Ticino river alternates with images of Mogadishu, the city of love and childhood, described as a multi-layered structure including four main roads stretching along the Indian Ocean and its white beaches. The far removed past of the white and elegant Islamic city (first road) stands in Kaha's mnesic eye next to the colonial town (second road) and the new socialist Mogadishu born out of independence (third road)—while the fourth road is a dark path full of ruins and danger, created by the warlords who still rule and threaten the country. Mogadishu, like Pavia, has many pasts and many histories—and so does Kaha, who feels both Italian and Somali and enjoys the beauty of both her languages of the heart in writing fiction in Italian.

Ribka's narration, 'Poems of Nostalgia, Exile and Love', is a powerful assertion of identity, for while remembering her native Eritrea and longing for it, she insists she wants to be considered 'a true Roman'. Here the background sights of imperial Rome are offered along with the traces of colonial events inscribed on the streets and squares of the modern capital erected on the banks of the 'blond Tiber', while Ribka comments with her 'aulô'—a classical style of poetry from the Horn of Africa—and warns that some of those celebrated as heroes were in fact invaders and colonizers. The names of far away places that have entered Italian language and assumed local idiomatic connotations—such as 'Ambaradam' or 'AmbaAlagi'—are re-positioned into their original, geographic meanings. Her multiple memory and identity engender a deeper insight into reality, and unmask the lies of an unredeemed history.

Both Kaha and Ribka smile and sing when they remember their homes, and often mention the aromas and perfumes of Puntland, as that part of Africa was called. Listeners are suavely persuaded of the pervasive presence of a smell of coffee and incense. The act of writing fiction (Kaha) or poetry (Ribka) has a relevant role in their individual lives, for it allows them to blend their multiple identities into one personality and at the same time state their hold on the ground they are now standing on. It is an Italian soil marked by a multiplicity of histories not all of which are subsumed in the cultural consciousness of the nation. For these reasons, and for the beauty of their presence, their postcolonial voices spinning an ironic tale reminiscent of unforgettable empires come as a blessing for contemporary Italy.

From 1990 onwards, there has been a harvest of writings in Italian coming from immigrants of African origin and ushered in by autobiographical texts initially written with the help and support of Italian authors. (From this viewpoint, Simone Brioni's publications still belong to this early stream of cultural expressions). The condition of the African-Italian immigrants (such as Kaha and Ribka) is remarkably different from postcolonial African writers in English, French or Portuguese, that is, in languages they had practised even before emigrating to Europe or elsewhere in the West, for European imperial presence usually imposed its own language and literary traditions on its colonial subjects and helped preserve them after the end (or fall) of empires. Italy's colonial history was too brief and its national identity still too shaky for such patterns to be adopted. Moreover, since the end of the Italian colonial empire coincided with a lost world war and a general upheaval of postfascism, no attention nor energy were devoted to keeping up an Italian cultural presence in former colonies. Somalia, Eritrea and Libya—and of course most of all Ethiopia—are evident examples of this. Thus, African migrants who started to arrive in Italy in the 1980s only seldom had background knowledge of the Italian language, and certainly no knowledge of Italian literature. They learned the new language orally, and were never shaped or influenced by the long and important Italian literary tradition.

Kaha and Ribka pour their fluent Italian into their own previously African mould, and what comes out of it is a highly hybrid, African-Italian, result. Ribka's 'aulò' and Kaha's short stories are examples of this situation and draw a landscape that is unique in postcolonial Europe.

One of the side-effects of this phenomenon is, that the written production of these new writers of African origin was not considered as literary and therefore basically ignored by Italian literary criticism. Attention and analysis have rather come from the field of cultural and postcolonial studies, where the debate on the canon has managed to reduce diffidence and prejudice. Again, Brioni's works confirm that a culturalist approach is particularly fruitful and is also likely to contribute positively to a general political and historical re-reading of Italian colonial history.

In the introductory section of the documentary on Ribka Sibathu, Brioni interviews at random a number of ordinary Italians basking in the sun on a beach near Rome, none of whom seems to know even where Eritrea is positioned geographically—striking evidence of the fact that Eritrea does not enter the memory and awareness of contemporary Italians. The national forgetfulness of colonial history characterizes many, if not all, aspects of the Italian scenery. Let us take museums—institutions that are so relevant in the Italian cultural landscape. There are no traces of Italian colonial history in Italian museums, even when they exhibit African artifacts. And many important materials coming from the colonial presence in Africa are

still hidden in storage, while they could be very useful instruments of education and knowledge for generations of Italians.

The position of these two 'new Italians', Ribka and Kaha, firmly grounded in Italian soil and yet actively reminiscent of their African 'imaginaire', could contribute to a wide and deep revision of the approach to history and a new awareness of what it means to be a contemporary Italian.

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## Notes

Simone Brioni notes: Our documentaries have been screened in festivals, cultural institutions and universities (including Oxford, Roma-La Sapienza, Warwick, Pavia, Padova, UCL, Saint Joseph-Philadelphia, Open University Birmingham, ICI-Berlin, Leicester). *La quarta via* was awarded the Libero Bizzarri prize, an important documentary prize in Italy in the category media and education in 2010. Moreover, the documentaries have been included in the programs of Italian courses at Boulder-Colorado, La Sapienza-Rome and Warwick. Some students from the universities of Bologna, Monash, Jagellonica-Krakov and Santiago wrote their masters thesis on the documentaries.

## References

Ribka Sibhatu. *Aulò! Aulò! Aulò! Poesie di nostalgia, d'esilio e d'amore / Aulò! Aulò! Aulò! Poems of Nostalgia, Exile and Love*, introduction by Graziella Parati, trans. by André Naffis-Sahely, with the documentary *Aulò: Roma postcoloniale* (ITA, English Subtitles, 2012, 48'), dir. by Simone Brioni, Ermanno Guida, and Graziano Chiscuzzu, written by Simone Brioni and Ribka Sibhatu (Roma: Kimerafilm, 2012).

*Somalitalia: Quattro vie per Mogadiscio/ Somalitalia: Four Roads to Mogadishu*, trans. by Alberto Carpi, with the documentary *La quarta via: Mogadiscio, Italia* (ITA, English Subtitles, 2012, 38'), dir. by Simone Brioni, Ermanno Guida, and Graziano Chiscuzzu, written by Simone Brioni and Kaha Mohamed Aden, and the documentary *Per un discorso post-coloniale italiano. Parole chiave* (ITA, 2012, 50'), dir. by Simone Brioni, (Roma: Kimerafilm, 2012).