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RESEARCH NOTE

I Watussi

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The article reflects on the 'absent connection' between the fictional Watussi of the Italian hit song of 1963 and the real Tutsi, many of whom had fled Rwanda at that time to escape violence from the ascendant Hutu majority in the last years of Belgian rule. It considers the song's long afterlife and the stubborn persistence, decades later, of comic stereotypes of 'Africans' in Italian popular culture despite the growing number of African migrants and their children in Italian society.

Keywords: Tutsi; Rwanda; Congo; popular culture; stereotypes

One of the hit songs played on portable record players and juke boxes at Italian beach resorts in the summer of 1963 was *I Watussi*, performed by Edoardo Vianello e i Flippers (Figure 1). It had a catchy tune and it began:

Nel continente nero,
(paraponziponzipò)
alle falde del Kilimangiaro,
(paraponziponzipò)
ci sta un popolo di negri
che ha inventato tanti balli,
il più famoso è l'hully gully.

(In the black continent,
(diddy-boom-de-boom-de-boom)
on the slopes of Kilimanjaro,
(diddy-boom-de-boom-de-boom)
there is a negro people
who have invented lots of dances,
the most famous is the hully gully.)

This was followed by the refrain:

Siamo i Watussi,
siamo i Watussi,
gli altissimi negri.
Ogni tre passi,
ogni tre passi
facciamo sei metri.
Noi siamo quelli che nell'equatore

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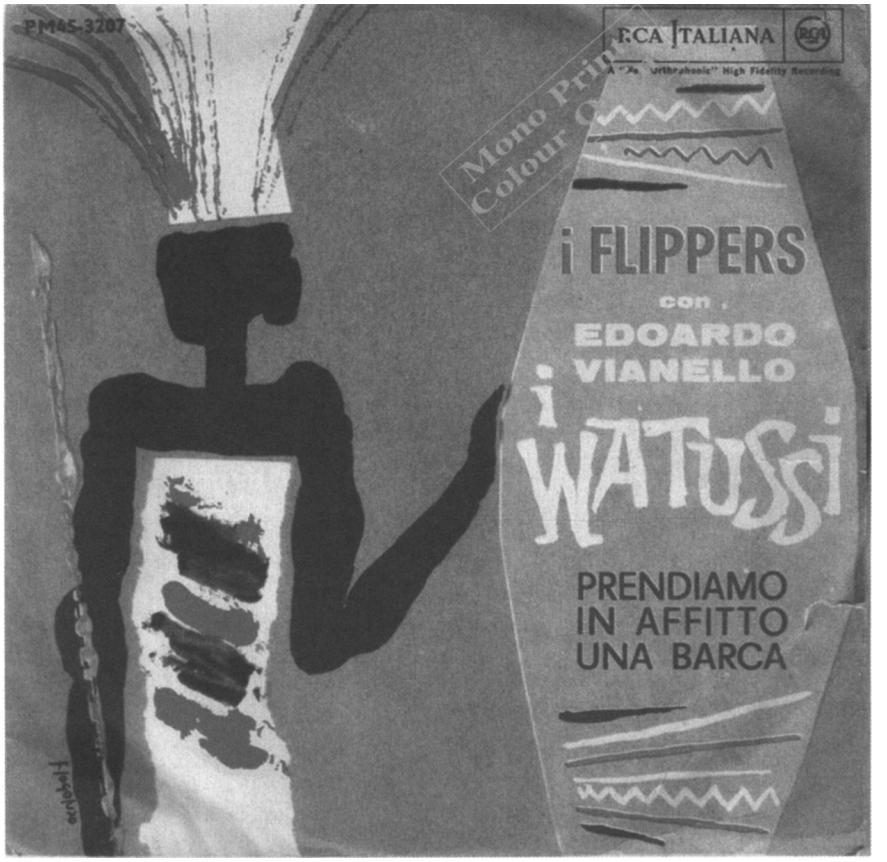

Figure 1. Paper sleeve of 45 rpm disc of *I Watussi*, RCA Italiana (1963).

vediamo per primi la luce del sole,
noi siamo i Watussi.

(We are the Watusi,
we are the Watusi,
the very tall negroes.
For every three steps,
for every three steps
we walk six yards.
We are the ones who on the Equator
see the sun rise first,
we are the Watusi.)

'Watussi', 'Watusi', 'Watutsi', 'Abatutsi' or 'Batutsi' were variant names for the Tutsi, who lived mainly in Rwanda and Burundi, two states formerly under Belgian administration that had regained their independence in 1962. At the time Vianello's song was released more than 150,000 Rwandan Tutsi, formerly the economically and politically dominant minority in the country, had fled to Uganda, Burundi, Congo and Tanzania (then called Tanganyika), to escape the violence unleashed against them in 1959–1961 by the Hutu majority, abetted by the Belgians in the last stages of their UN-mandated protectorate. In 1963, when the exiled Tutsi attempted to

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recapture Rwanda, there were in retaliation, in December, further massacres of the Tutsi who had remained behind in Rwanda (Pottier 2002, 12–16; Melvern 2006, 7–8). These were the first stages of the cycle of conflicts that would include the massacre of up to 200,000 Hutu by Tutsi in Burundi in 1972 and would culminate in the Rwandan genocide of 1994, when an estimated 800,000 people, the majority of them Tutsi, were murdered.

Tutsi people may have been slightly taller than their neighbours on average, but the idea that collectively they were of exceptional stature was the product of exaggerated claims by white travellers and images from popular culture – most notably, in the years before the song was released, MGM's 1959 film *Watusi*, based loosely on H. Rider Haggard's novel *King Solomon's Mines*, which had described the area near the mines as being inhabited by members of an unusually tall tribe (Figure 2).[1]

It is very unlikely that Carlo Rossi, who wrote the lyrics to *I Watussi*, knew any of this. He and Vianello, who wrote the music, knew the watusi as a dance, which had been recently imported, like the hully gully, into Italy from the USA, where *The Wah-Watusi*, recorded by the Orlons, had been a chart hit in 1962, and they were simply grafting onto the name a few fragments of lore about the Watusi and Africa that they had pieced together from other sources, one of which was probably the 1959 film. The phrase 'il continente nero' had been used in Italian since the late nineteenth century (for instance De Castro 1902, 529) and it may have had its origin in the translation of the title of Henry Morton Stanley's *Through the Dark Continent* (1878) as *Attraverso il continente nero* (Stanley 1879). In English 'dark continent' suggested, like the title of Stanley's other travelogue *In Darkest Africa* (Stanley 1890), 'mysterious and unknown', 'unenlightened by civilisation' and also 'inhabited by dark-skinned people', whereas the Italian phrase suggested mainly the last of these and therefore distinctly racialised the expression. Similarly, the name *Kilimanjaro* had been made familiar by *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, the film adaptation of Hemingway's short story, released in Italy by Twentieth Century-Fox in 1953. In other words, the lyrics of the song were just a set of quotations from diverse sources and the song was produced as a piece of innocent entertainment.

But this is exactly the point. It shows that 'Africa' was still, in 1962, for the Italian authors and performers of this song (who included, in the backing group i Flippers, a young Lucio Dalla) and the public who danced and sang along to it, an unreal place, a space of fantasy, where, according to an approximate geography, the Watusi lived in primitive huts on the slopes of Kilimanjaro (in fact about 500 miles east of Rwanda, in northern Tanzania, near the border with Kenya, so this was rather like saying that the inhabitants of Lombardy live on the slopes of Vesuvius) and, in an imaginary human anatomy, they were as tall as the largest animals ('Alle giraffe guardiamo negli occhi, | agli elefanti parliamo negli orecchi'; 'We look giraffes in the eye | and talk into elephants' ears'), whereas, in reality, at that time large parts of Africa were experiencing a turbulent transition from colonial to post-colonial regimes and real Tutsi had been massacred and forced to migrate.

This story can be taken forward from 1963 to the 1990s. In a research project coordinated by anthropologist Paola Tabet between 1990 and 1997 over 7000 children aged seven to 13 in 15 regions of Italy were asked by their teachers to write class essays on the subject 'If my parents were black' ('Se i miei genitori fossero neri'). In essay after essay the children wrote that if their parents were black they would not want them in the house, or they would not want them to touch them; their parents would be ugly and they would be frightened or would cry. Commenting on these products of the research, and the stereotyped representations of Africa that accompanied some of them – jungles, wild animals, skimpily dressed people, no cities, no water for washing, and so forth – Tabet remarked that 'Africa does not just spring up spontaneously in the child's

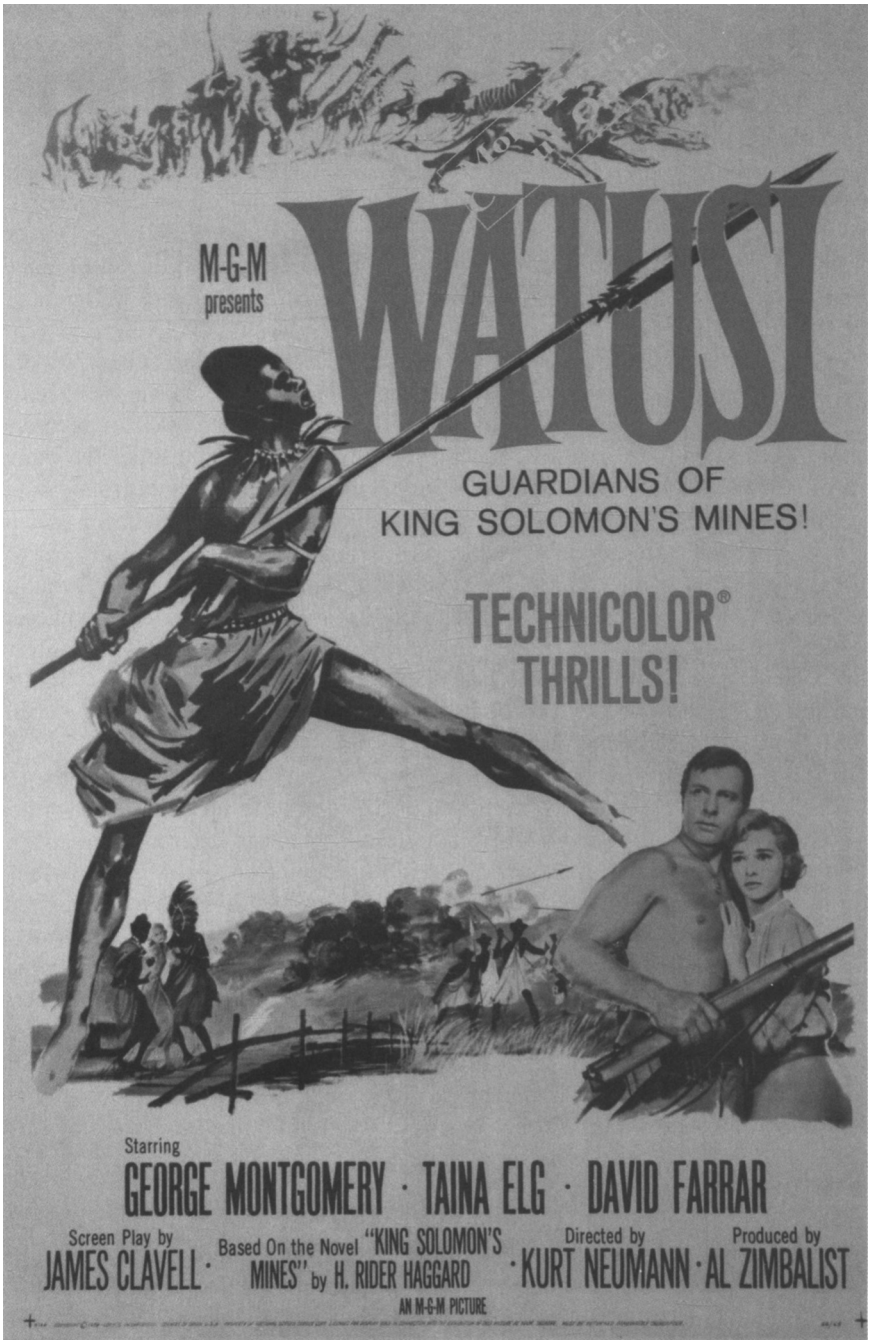

Figure 2. Publicity poster for *Watusi* (dir. Kurt Neumann, MGM, USA, 1959).

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mind'. The child's view had its distant sources in the stories from the age of exploration, 'aggravated in the years of colonial domination', as well as in racist cartoons, jokes and songs, which their parents had grown up with (like *I Watussi*), but it was also 'the result of a specific activity of ideological production and circulation of which the media are primarily responsible' (Tabet 1997, xli, xlvii).

For 15 years after its release, according to the statistics of the SIAE (Società Italiana Autori e Editori), *I Watussi* remained one of the most frequently played songs in Italy in live performances by various musicians (Micocci 2006, 33). In October 1989 Vianello performed it on Italian television's Canale 5, with white dancing girls and a studio audience clapping to the beat. As he sang about the 'popolo di negri', the first large anti-racist demonstration in Italy had just taken place following the murder by a criminal gang at Villa Literno in August of South African asylum seeker Jerry Masslo. Continentenero Travel is the name of a tour operator in Milan, active today, that organises package holidays and safari trips to Africa for Italians who can afford them. The purpose of drawing attention to this enduring tradition is not so much to censure the inhabitants of Italy, then or now, for their failure to know in detail the history of parts of the African continent, or even Italy's own colonial history, despite the tireless activity of Angelo Del Boca and a handful of other historians since the early 1960s in exposing its true nature. It is, rather, to invite critical reflection on how such stereotypes about 'Africa' have managed to persist, apparently unchallenged, in Italian popular culture as the weight of factual evidence against them increases, not least through the direct contact many Italian people now have, in workplaces, schools or in the street, with migrants from central Africa and their children.

If one wanted to be indulgent one could say that Vianello and Rossi's ignorance was excusable in 1963, when the only Africans most Italians had seen were on film or in picture books. This, after all, was the same period when the character played by Monica Vitti 'blacks up' and dances with a spear in front of photographs taken in rural Kenya (including one showing Kilimanjaro) in Antonioni's *L'eclisse* (1962), a film made when Kenya was negotiating independence from British rule. And it was just a few years before Jacopetti and Prosperi's *Africa Addio* (1966), ostensibly a factual reportage on the early postcolonial period, in reality a tendentious depiction of Africa sliding into anarchic violence after being unleashed from white governance. But in 1989, or 1994, or now, after more than three decades of mass migration to Italy from various African countries? How is it possible for similar views and depictions to survive? Can it be that popular culture, or some parts of it, is simply impervious to a changing reality? Or do some people somehow manage to straddle a widening gap between the old stereotypes and what they actually see and know through their everyday experience?

Consider a parallel case, that of another song about a former Belgian colony: *Bongo bongo bongo*. Originally recorded in 1949 by Nilla Pizzi and Luciano Benevene with backing from the Duo Fasano (but in fact an Italian cover of an American recording of 1947 with similar words),[2] its main conceit was that a native of the rural Congo turns down a white explorer's invitation to follow him back to the city, saying he is better off where he is: 'Oh bongo bongo bongo | stare bene solo al Congo'. In the intentions of the song's writers there was comic irony here turned back against the modern world, since the Congolese native rejects a 'civilisation' that consists of 'scarpe strette, saponette, treni e tassì' ('tight shoes, soap, trains and taxis' – in the American version these were 'bright lights, false teeth, doorbells, landlords'). However, the song's humorous effect for a white audience nevertheless depended, like that of *I Watussi* later, on a wholly fictitious Congo, there in order to rhyme with 'bongo', where the speaker is a 'vecchio negro' from one of many tribes gathered 'nell'equator' (in the American version 'three educated savages holler from a bamboo tree'). As impersonated by Benevene, the Congolese man speaks

Italian with a stage African pronunciation and syntax ('con questa sveglia al collo star bene qui': 'with this alarm around neck happy here').

In this case, too, one might say that 1949 was another era. The Congo was still under Belgian rule and although the nature of that rule, including the atrocities and genocide perpetrated in Leopold II's Congo Free State (1885–1908), had long been known both to scholars and to readers of newspapers, for whom the refrain 'stare bene solo al Congo' would have had an implausible ring, many Europeans' ideas about the Congo, and about other parts of Africa, were still filtered through the distorting lenses of colonial ideology and comic books, such as *Tintin au Congo*, by Belgian writer and illustrator, Hergé (Georges Remi), published in 1931. Hergé said in an interview given in the 1970s: 'All I knew about that country was what people said at the time: "Negroes are big children .... Lucky for them we are there! etc."' (Sadoul 1982, 74). But *Bongo bongo bongo*, like *I Watussi*, long outlived the colonial era. It outlived the independence struggles of the late 1950s and early '60s, the murder of Patrice Lumumba, the 30-year Mobutu dictatorship over Zaire and the two Congo wars. It outlived the urbanisation of Congo, where nearly 40% of the population now lives in cities, and the growth of Kinshasa into the second largest city in Africa. Renzo Arbore sang it on *Quelli della notte* (on RAI 2 in 1985) and more recently he has included a recording of it on his album *Tonite! Renzo Swing!* (2006). Christian De Sica also recorded it, in 1994, and performed it in a music video, in which he appears in some scenes in blackface against a painted jungle background with a ring through his nose.[3] Both these performances can be viewed on YouTube. In both Arbore's case and De Sica's the performance is done with an ironic wink to the audience, in the style of the Indiana Jones movies, as if to say 'we know this might be considered offensive but don't be so naive as to think we're taking it seriously'. Thus, what one might call the Watusi phenomenon consists of a wilful persistence of crass 'humorous' stereotypes of African people, in the face of the increasing availability of tangible evidence to the contrary, for the light entertainment of white Italian audiences.

Notes

1. Among the accounts of the supposedly exceptional stature of the Tutsi was an article in *Life* in 1938, which reported that Rwanda 'is ruled by the Watusi, aristocrats of Africa, who tower up to 8ft in height' (*Life* 1938, 45). There had been Watusi characters in MGM's 1950 adaptation of Rider Haggard's novel (1885), from which the 1959 film was a spin-off. In the original novel the fictional tribe are called Kukuana and the men are described as being over six feet tall.
2. The original song, *Civilization (Bongo bongo bongo)*, was from the Broadway musical *Angels in the Wings* and was written by Bob Hilliard (music) and Carl Sigman (lyrics) and was recorded by the Andrews Sisters with Danny Kaye. The lyrics of the Italian version were by Devilli (pseudonym of Alberto Curci).
3. The one concession the De Sica version makes to modern sensibilities is to remove the word 'negro': 'ai negri disse così' ['to the negros he said that'] in Devilli's original lyrics becomes 'disse proprio così' ['he said exactly that'] and 'il vecchio negro disse allor' ['the old negro said well then'] becomes 'il grande capo disse allor' ['the great chief said well then'].

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