On the Shaping of the Italian Identity of the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century. Travel and Anthropological Notes.¹

Fabiana Dimpflmeier

During the second half of the nineteenth century, shortly after the reunification of Italy, immediately before the beginning of the Italian colonial settlement along the eastern coast of Africa, the navy vessel Pirocorvetta Magenta was the first to circumnavigate the globe. This was the beginning of a period of Italian presence on the international seas geared to building diplomatic contacts, helping to find countrymen and Italian explorers missing in different parts of the world, and looking for potential colonies. For the first time after the Maritime Republics, and after a long period of terrestrial enclosure, Italy started to project again her dreams on the sea, slowly igniting the possibility of building a maritime power on the Mediterranean Sea that could support her new presence in the European and international contest. A particular ‘sea mystic’ that silently influenced the empowerment of the Italian Navy, playing a strategic part in the Italian nation building process and early intermingling with Italian colonial ambitions.²

This mytho-symbolic corpus of new ideas and images characterized by a strong emotional emphasis can be found in the literary and publicist production of the period – even though it had emphasis and richness that was far from that of England and France, but with peculiarity and efforts strong enough to allow us to talk about an Italian awakening.³ Indeed, first translated and then published in local form and character, travel and maritime literature was nurtured in Italy by the growing geographical movement, which was leading nations to take an interest in the last outposts of the world not yet explored by man, and was interwoven within the Italian peninsula with the country’s first appearance on the international scene, both in the Mediterranean and on the oceans.⁴

In fact during the Royal Navy voyages, amounting to eleven circumnavigations of the globe and twenty-one oceanic campaigns from 1866 to 1890, Italian naval officers had the chance to come into contact directly and for the first time with the most diverse populations: from the Japanese to

¹ This article refers for contents and theoretical assumptions to my PhD dissertation, in progress of publication.
² Ginacarlo Monina, La Grande Italia marittima. La propaganda navalistica e la lega navale italiana 1866-1918, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino 2008.
the Chinese, from the aborigines of Tierra del Fuego and Patagonia to the inhabitants of Papua-New Guinea.

Their travel notes and diaries, partly available on the Rivista Marittima, the official journal of the Italian Royal Navy, or published as independent volumes can be considered travel narratives influenced by the new Italian politics of navalism, which was focusing on building a strong and powerful image of the Navy on the seas and of Italy as a civilized nation. Due to their comments and annotations, in particular, we have an idea of how they used to picture ‘the Others’ to build a positive self image of a nation at the top of the scale of civilization.

Actually, following analysis and research into travel notes we can learn not only about other populations but in particular about the way of looking at them. Furthermore, it is possible to extract and interpret the *topoi* of speech between Italians and ‘Others’ and to understand, by contrast, how much they tell us about the Italian identity, Italian-ness, and how it was being developed shortly after the unification, in relation to other nations and to the increasing spread of a strong colonial idea.

During the ‘culturalist’ turn on the reflections on the concept of nation and nationalism of the 1990s a new generation of scholars, Stuart Hall, Michael Billig, Nira Yuval-Davis and Etienne Balibar, re-examined the process of definition of a modern nation from different points of view, by looking at the different dimensions and functions of the border in nation building and in the grounding of identity and belonging. From this point of view the notion of border has a material side, concrete and foundational, linked to a territorial limit and a symbolic perimeter, in which foreigners - the others, the ones belonging to different nations, neighbors, enemies or those thought of as ‘non- nationals’ (people without a history or under a colonial regime), are joined by other internal extraneous and excluded groups, such as women, subaltern classes, ethnic and religious minorities, immigrants and so on.

Post-colonial research in particular has underlined the importance of the role played by non-European images in the self-representations of civilized populations and their respective nationalisms. The reflections developed by Edward Said on ‘Orientalism’ are interesting as an extension of the Foucaultian notion of discourse applied to the socio-cultural relationships between the West and others, which connects the production of knowledge to the exertion of power and calls into question the same western representations. As Abdul Janmohamed clearly states, most of the literature concerning the cultural encounter, instead of picturing the space outside ‘civilization’ and exploring the Otherness’s particulars, ends by reaffirming its own ethnocentric premises simply codifying and preserving its own mental structures.

From this point of view imperialism is a meta-discourse that affects every practice and representation of the period that cannot be analyzed one apart from another. At the same time, western identity and modernity can only be understood in relation to the construction of an exotic, primitive, savage or barbarian other.

In view of this, a post-colonial re-reading of the diaries and travel notes could become a privileged way to search for the imaginary transfigurations of identity conflicts, focusing on the central role of the image of otherness in the representation of the Italian nation, whose uniqueness,
owing to the contrast between irredentism and colonialism at the beginning of the national experience and in the critical moment of the first construction of a colonial consensus, make this case study particularly interesting.

An interest, in representation ‘by contrast’, developed in Italy very late for historical, cultural and political reasons, and that even today has still not found a foothold, except with some scholars like Alberto Burgio e Michele Nani, who, over the past fifteen years, have partly developed the research in cultural history begun by Giulio Bollati, Silvio Lanaro e Alberto Mario Banti. A delay connected with the peculiar resistance in the study of Italian nationalism, which has been characterized by the focus on distinguishing the liberal nation of the nineteenth century from later nationalistic degenerations and underlining the pacifist and open character of Italians and their patriotism. Furthermore, there has often been a direct political and contemporary influence on the studies of the nation, and a continuous obsession for what Gozzini calls ‘identità introvabile’, which led historians to underline Italian identity deficit and its causes.

At the time of the unification a ‘colonial discourse’ already existed in Italy, largely shared with the rest of Europe and persisting even without colonies, both in higher and popular cultures. In this milieu, travel accounts written by navy officers and doctors show us a series of images that allow not only to observe different representations and ways of controlling otherness, but also the opportunity to verify the process of re-functionalization of these images (largely pre-existing) in the international maritime environment in the period preceding the conquest of the first Italian colony and in strict connection with the building process of the Italian nation.

The account analyzed – on the inhabitants of Terra del Fuego, Papuans, Tahitians and Africans – show old ways of representing natives interwoven with new knowledge, both carrying different systems of describing and comprehending otherness, such as cannibalism, science, pity, civilization, classicism, exoticism, laughter. Seen as a whole, these representations are built on very precise dichotomic opposites, from which emerges the image of an advanced, civil, modern and colonial Italian-ness. Nature/culture, noise/verb, savage/civilized, child/adult, stupid/intelligent, a-moral/moral, superstitious/religious, lascivious/temperate, idle/working, thief/honest, naked/dressed, dirty/clean, warrior/soldier, need/gift are the commoner antinomies.

Before the general overlapping of naval politics with the expansionistic Italian interest for Africa, it was the Royal Navy, even though with ups and downs, which conducted an active action whose aim was to promote Italy internationally, combining sea presence, identity and national power. The travel accounts analyzed can be considered a part of a more general colonial discourse influenced by the dynamics of recovery of the inheritance of the military values of the Risorgimento

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– i.e. by all the different efforts to revaluate and reinforce the Italian image during the 1870s and 1880s, including the publication of travel accounts themselves.

The images analyzed, even though not univocal, reflect the process of legitimating the Italian colonizer’s role, who tries to define himself by contrast finding and enhancing those characteristics that can make him a ‘good colonialist’. Shaping an ideological limes, the pre-existing images are re-functionalized to build Italian civility, showing that Italy felt ready to share the white man’s burden.