

CHAPTER 2

The capture and sale of tuna and swordfish in Sicily: ergological dimension and expressive practices

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My presentation outlines some aspects of tuna fishing, a common heritage of various Mediterranean societies, which in the work songs of the Sicilian side attest to contacts and exchanges between communities in Southern Italy, Sardinia, Spain, and Mediterranean Africa. I shall also illustrate the role of shouted calls in the “hunt” for swordfish, which was practised according to traditional methods until the early 1960s, as defined by the specific geography of the Strait of Messina. Finally, attention will be paid to the sales systems for tuna and swordfish, which are also characterised by “musical” practices of oral tradition.

At the end of the 18th century there were almost seventy *tonnare* (tuna traps) in Sicily and about twenty of them were still active until after the Second World War. A few years ago, the last two surviving *tonnare* tuna traps – in Bonagia and on the island of Favignana (both in the province of Trapani) – ceased to operate and since then the *mattanze* (slaughters), which since ancient times had coloured the waters of the Mediterranean every spring, have been consigned to history. Not unlike what happened in other traditional trades, tuna fishing was a highly ritualised ergological system, in which the songs, aside from setting a rhythm to the work, had a propitiatory and thanksgiving value for the abundance of the catch. The *cialomi* – from the Greek *kéleusma* (the cry, the overseer’s shout to the rowers; Latin *celeusma*, which becomes *celeuma* and then *cialoma* in Sicilian) – always have a call-and-response structure: the call of the soloists (*cialumaturi*), stating the narrative part of the song, is countered by the formulaic unison response of the rest of the crew as they make the effort to pull. The purpose of the was to coordinate collective work during the various operations involved in the tuna fishing, namely: transporting the nets from the factory to the vessels; arranging the surface cables and anchors for positioning the nets in the designated area of the sea; lifting the heavy net at the climax of the *mattanza* (slaughter); dismantling and packing away the fishing equipment; and finally hauling the boats and barges ashore.

In Favignana, the *cialoma* performed during the *mattanza* was divided into two parts associated with the different rhythms that marked the lifting of the heavy close-mesh net (*coppu*) enclosing the “chamber of death”. During this delicate moment the content of the songs was mainly of a devotional nature (Christ, the Virgin and St Christopher are mentioned). At the beginning, when the rhythm of the pulls was slower, *Aiamola* was sung:

Solo: *E aiamola e vvai avanti.*
Chorus: *Aiamola aiamola!*
Solo: *E aiamola aiamola.*
Chorus: *Aiamola aiamola!*
Solo: *Ggesu Cristu cu lli santi.*
Chorus: *Aiamola aiamola!*
 E aiamola aiamola.
 Aiamola aiamola!
 E lli santu Sarvaturi.

Aiamola aiamola!
E aiamola aiamola.
Aiamola aiamola!
E ccriastu luna e ssuli.
Aiamola aiamola!
E aiamola aiamola.
Aiamola aiamola!
E ccriastu tanta ggenti.
Aiamola aiamola!
Vèrgini santa parturienti.
Aiamola aiamola! [...]

As the net began to emerge, the rhythm had to be marked by tighter jerks and at this point *Gnanzòu* was sung, according to the following pattern:

Solo: *Aè asumma o corpu!*
 Chorus: *Gnanzòu!*
 Solo: *nzòu zza*
Gnanzòu!
San Cristofaru,
Gnanzòu!
nzòu zza
Gnanzòu!
granni e ggrossu,
Gnanzòu!
nzòu zza
Gnanzòu!
nzòu purtava
Gnanzòu!
nzòu zza
Gnanzòu!
Ggesu addossu.

Thanks to a documentary produced by RAI (Italian National Television) filmed in Favignana in 1958 (*Isola di Favignana: ripresa diretta da una tonnara*, duration 36' 36", directed by Carlo Alberto Chiesa), we can see exactly how the singing associated with the lifting of the net during the *mattanza* took place. The *tonnaroti*, while singing *Aiamola*, perform a precise movement of fluid alternation between their two hands, which "slide" over the net, which is gathered without any real group synchronisation (see in particular the images from 17' 19" to 17' 42"). At 18' 00", they begin to sing *Gnanzòu*, and here the pulling movement is based on closer pulls performed synchronously by all the fishermen with their hands tending to be parallel. The song accompanies the action for almost seven minutes (precisely 6' 40"), and is therefore the most complete example in the existing documentation.

Unfortunately, there are no audio or video recordings of the songs used during the preparation of the tuna fishery and the storage of fishing equipment. Therefore, we do not have precise information about the functional dynamics associated with singing in particular circumstances, such as the operation of the winch.

However, we do have a large number of songs performed outside the working context, which show decidedly different content from the *cialoma* cited above, in which erotic and satirical themes prevail, such as the following, which speaks of the beauty of a young girl named Lina, offered as a bride to the fishermen:

(Solo) *Lina Lina*
(Chorus) *Lina Lina*
(Solo) *E Lina Lina*
(Chorus) *Lina Lina*
(Solo) *Viditi ch'è simpatica*
(Chorus) *A signurina*
(Solo) *Viditi ch'è simpatica*
(Chorus) *A signurina*

Lina Lina...
Chi bbeddi occhi teni
A signurina
Chi bbeddi occhi...

Lina Lina...
Chi bbedu nasu teni
A signurina
Chi bbedu nasu...

Lina Lina...
Chi bbeda vucca teni
A signurina

Lina Lina...
Ièmula a mmaritari
A signurina
Chi bbeda vucca...

Lina Lina...
Videmu a cu cci damu
A signurina
Lina Lina...
Cci damu ô signurinu
A signurina

In Palermo, the term *abbanniatina* refers to the vocal call used to advertise goods or offer services. In this case, however, the *abbanniatina* had a dual function: the sound acted both as a call for sales and as rhythmic support for the transport of the fish on the shoulders of the porters on their way to the fishmongers. The musicologist Alberto Favara offers a detailed description that highlights the ritual sense of an action symbolically projected to celebrate abundance: “sweet and cheap meat” garnished with bunches of carnations, carried in a procession to the sound of drums to the market stalls and shops.

I was able to observe the practice closest to this kind of *abbanniatina* in Salemi. The large fish, still whole, was hanging from a pole and the swaying caused by the wind suggested the image of a “living” flesh with an intense “cherry” colour:

*Taliàtila ch'è bbiva, surra e ttunnina, surra e ttunnina!
 E llu culuri di la cirasa àvi, ch'è bbiva!
 Surra e ttunnina!
 E llu ventu mi l'annaca e llu sulì mi l'asciuca, ch'è bbiva!
 Surra e ttunnina!
 E ttu manciasti surra e iò tunnina,
 semu alla para fin 'a ddumani matina!
 Surra e ttunnina!*

“Look at it, it’s alive, *surra* [belly of the fish that is also sold salted or dried] and tuna! / And it’s the colour of a cherry, it’s alive! / And the wind rocks it and the sun dries it, it’s alive! / And you get *surra* and I get tuna, we’re even until tomorrow morning! / *Surra* and tuna!”

Until the 1950s, swordfish fishing in the Strait of Messina was still carried out according to methods handed down from ancient times. On the Sicilian side of the Strait of Messina, from the Ringo Riviera to Cape Peloro, various fishing groups operated within previously assigned sectors (*posti di*), which had a variable range of action between four and five hundred metres. Observation boats (*filue*) were anchored within these areas. These boats had a tall mast from which a lookout (*ntinneri*) would keep watch. When the lookout spotted the fish from the *filua*’s mast, he would indicate its position to the rowers (*ciurma*) manoeuvring the *luntru*, a very fast boat also equipped with a lookout mast, by means of vocal calls accompanied by extended arm gestures. As soon as the fish became visible from the *luntru*, the task of guiding the pursuit was taken over by a second lookout (*faleri, falirotu, farirotu*). This person led the final phase of the operation, encouraging the rowers and directing their manoeuvres until the harpooner, standing at the stern, was in a position to throw the harpoon (*ferru*) and strike the prey.

The formulae used by the *ntinneri* contain the fundamental directional coordinates: *va susu* (from the Latin *susum*, go up, i.e. in a northerly direction, towards capo Peloro), *va iusu* (from the late Latin *iusum*, go down, i.e. in a southerly direction, towards the city centre of Messina), *va fora* (go out, i.e. offshore, towards the Calabrian coast), *va n-terra* (go ashore, towards the Sicilian coast). Once the position of the fish had been indicated, further signals communicated its movements (*dirittu avanti ccostà cchiù n-terra*: forward towards the coast) and urged the crew of the *luntru* to row. The expressions used by the *faleri*, who had to guide the crucial phase of fishing, were different from those of the *ntinneri*. Here the incitements to rowing prevailed, such as for example *Tuttu paru fotti i rimi* (“Push hard on the oars”), and the orders to reach and hit the prey. When the moment to throw the harpoon approached, the warning *Ncìmiti l'asta* (“Prepare the harpoon”) was given to the *lanzaturi*. If the moment for the throw was not yet considered favourable, they would shout *Non è ura* (“It’s not time”) and, vice versa, with the cry *Ora è ura* (“It’s time”) they would order the *lanzaturi* to throw the spear. A successful throw was accompanied by the acclamation of thanks *Binidittu!*

The swordfish could also be caught using a long gillnet called a *palamitara*. This fishing method is referred to in this advertisement for a fishmonger in Messina (*bbanniata*):

*Pescespado, pescespado!
 Dâ palamitara, ch'è bbellu!
 Dâ palamitara, ch'è bbellu!
 A palamitara u pigghiau, ch'è bbellu!
 Pigghiativ'u piscispada dâ palamitara, ch'è bbellu!
 Dâ palamitara, ch'è bbellu!
 – Tàgghia Rosa! –*

“Swordfish! / From the *palamitara*, when it’s beautiful! / The *palamitara* has caught it, how beautiful it is! / Get the swordfish from the *palamitara*, how beautiful it is! / Cut it up, Rosa!”