Archeology of Language: Sicilian 'Beddu' and Arabic 'Badu'

Tom Verso (August 30, 2010)



'Forgetabout' Verdi in Milan's La Scala; more appropriate for southern-Italian Americans would be Michela Musolino's "L'Evento in Memoria di Pino Veneziano" in Selinunte, Sicily. Southern-Italian Americans confuse the current northern-Italian culture meme (cultivated in public schools, Italian language courses and tourist industry) with their own southern-ancestral history and culture.

Preface
Archeologists reconstruct the characteristics of past societies based on such things as 'pot-shards' and other material remnants of those societies. Similarly, contemporary languages contain linguistic remnants (words, phrases, sounds, etc.) used in the languages of past societies. These 'linguist-shards' so to speak provide information about the past societies from which they're derive.
The purpose of this essay is to consider the Sicilian word 'beddu-a' as such a 'linguist-shard' providing evidence of:
1) Sicily's past Arab culture
2) The different historic forces affecting the respective cultures of the Italian south and northern- Italy.
"You say 'bella' and I say 'bedda' - Let's call the whole thing off" (George and Ira Gershwin 1937 - modified)
On March 10, 1993, I posted the following query on H-Italy.org:
"I find the word beddu-a (pretty) listed in Privitera's Beginner's Sicilian language book; but I do not find it in Tuscan dialect (aka Italian) books and dictionariesIs beddu-a etymologically derived from the Arabic word 'badu' which means 'people of the desert' (Anglicized form: bedouin)?"

II. Connotative difference

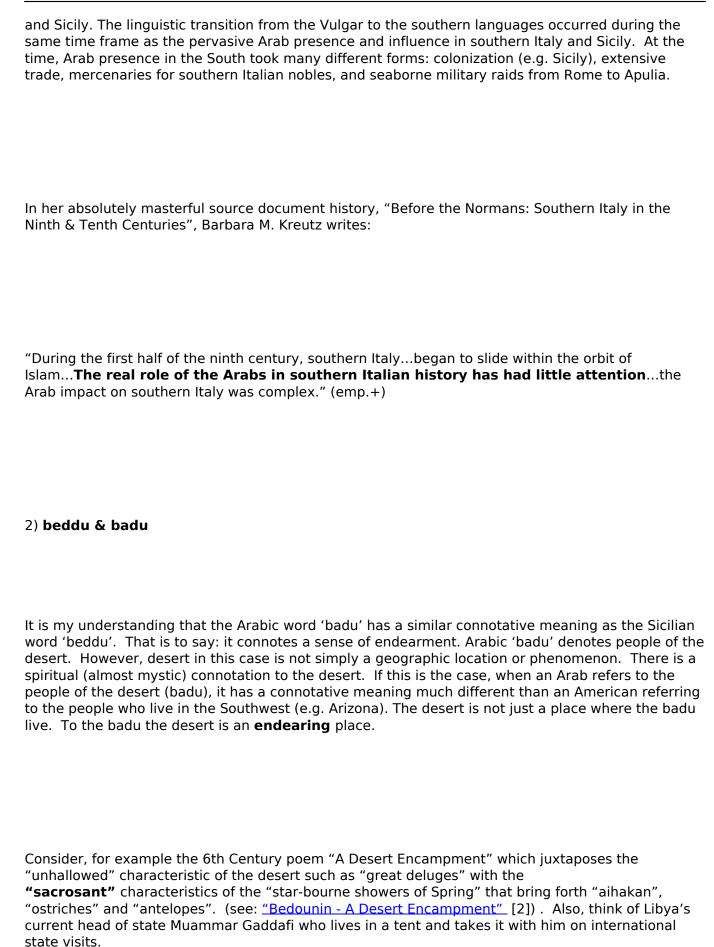
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1) Vincent Peloso thought there was a more significant difference between the two words than simply spelling. He noted the connotative difference of endearment - between 'beddu' and 'bello'. He wrote:
"as a childhood Sicilian speaker, one in who's home Sicilian was the first languageas I understood it, and subsequently was told by English-speaking relatives, the word was an endearment in Sicilian dialect, as in: beddu miu (my dear, my beloved). I recall find it in a Sicilian-Italian dictionary located in the Library of Congress but I do not have the citation at hand. I could not say what its derivation is. (Peloso 3/10/93)
2) Subsequently, I concurred with Peloso's connotative difference of endearment , writing:
"The bedda = bella notion, implied by Lawton and Cammett, seems to be based on the lexicon or denotative meanings of the words. In that sense, they are equivalent (beautiful/pretty = beautiful/pretty)."
However, Mr. Peloso brought out the connotative meaning of endearment . Based on my experience living in a Sicily-American urban village, I perfectly agree with him. It seems to me, bella is an aesthetics word denoting an abstract sense of beauty as in the cathedral is beautiful (bella). Bedda is not abstract. It connotes a very strongly felt emotion.
When a grandmother greets her granddaughter with bedda, she is not communicating anything remotely like the man who says the women is bella. Also, can the Sicilian peasant women's laminating wail Bedda Matri be changed to Bella Matri without a significant change in meaning?

Not in my neighborhood! (Verso 3/12/93)
3) Recently (amazingly, over seven years later), I received an e-mail from 'Pat' who also provided examples of bedda's connotative meaning of endearment . He wrote:
"in the messinese of my grandmother beddu is for people and bellu is for things as in "A casa e' bella" but "A matri e bedda".
III. Similarities between the Sicilian language and Arabic
John Harding provided a cogent example of the general similarities between Sicilian and Arabic suggesting that bedda has Arabic roots and not just a variation in the spelling of bella. He wrote (note especially 'bedduzza'):
"My ex-wife speaks Sicilian fluently. We lived for a while in Saudi Arabia, where I taught at King Fahd University. The first time we were visited by one of the university's gardeners, I found to my dismay that he spoke only Arabic. I couldn't understand a word he said. My Sicilian-speaking wife, standing with me said, all of a sudden, "I can understand this guy!" With her Sicilian, she was also able to understand an elderly Saudi lady who paid us visits again the Saudi lady spoke only Arabic. Common words like faloos (money), ginna (heaven), tavola (table) were the same in both languages. The Sicilian town of Marsala, famous for its wine, is the Port of Ali (mars ali). Bedduzza mia (my beauty) could understand Arabic . By the way the "dd" is pronounced as a VERY hard "d," in Sicilian and not as a "th." (Harding 3/11/03)
The 'archeology' of the Sicilian language

1) Historic Roots of Sicilian 'dd'
To my mind, the spelling explanations for the difference between 'bedda' and
'bella', limited to the 'denotative' definition and ignoring the 'connotative' meaning, are incomplete explanations. The complete meaning and understanding of any word in any language entails both the denotation and connotation.
Moreover, the 'spelling explanations' do not lend themselves to finding the 'cause' of the differences between the Sicilian language and Tuscan/Italian. Whereas the connotative mean of 'bedda' discussed above points to a suggestion about the origin of the word and implies more generally the vast differences between the histories and cultures of northern-Italy and the South.
Language is a social variable. It changes (varies) over time and those changes (variations) are caused by, or correlated with, other social variables (e.g. migration, etc.). The social scientific historical question is:
Why is there a difference between the Sicilian language and northern dialects exemplified by bella and badda; i.e. what is the cause of the differences between them.
In the above mentioned e-mail, 'Pat' also brought out a very interesting historic aspect of the 'dd' 'll' difference. He writes:





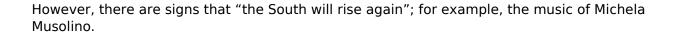
My **theory** is that an **endearing** concept of the desert connoted in the Arabic word badu was introduced into the Sicilian language as beddu circa 1,000 AD. This is to say; the Sicilian word 'beddu' is a 'linguist-shard' from the period when Arab culture was having a major impact on the people and culture of southern Italy and Sicily.

Conclusion

More importantly, the difference between bedda and bella is indicative of a much more general differentiation of the histories and cultures of northern and southern Italy. Unlike the North, the South especially Sicily as noted by Prof. Kreutz came under intense Arab influence between the first and second millennium; an influence that is manifested today in the language, food, architecture, music, facial features, etc. of Sicily. Consider for example the music and countenance of Michela Musolino, both Arabic through and through.

Americans of southern Italian and Sicilian descent, it seems to me, are largely uninformed about their ancient past and how that past is still present in their culture. They are becoming confused about what it means to be an American of southern-Italian descent. Increasingly, under the influence of mass media, public school education, college Italian language course, the Italian tourist industry, etc., they are coming to identify with the history and culture of the northern Renaissance.

To my mind this is not simply poor education. It is a tragedy because the history of southern Italy and Sicily incorporates the history of the whole Mediterranean ancient world: Egyptian, Mycenaean, Phoenician, Classical Greek, Romans, Orthodox Greek, Arabs, etc. Whereas northern Italian history only goes back as far as the nomadic invaders (aka barbarians) from the Eurasian Steppes who overran the vestiges of the collapsing Western Roman Empire in northern-Italy.





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