

The mystery of the dance: the Semitic etymological derivation of the Maltese root \sqrt{zfn} [= \sqrt{zfn}] and its contribution to history

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Résumé. L'existence du verbe \sqrt{zfn} en maltais au sens de « danser » et son usage réduit dans les autres dialectes arabes pose la question de son origine. Cet article tente de retracer les étymons de ce verbe en le comparant aux autres langues sémitiques et aux dialectes arabes. La réponse finale est surprenante.

1. Preface

The root \sqrt{zfn} is found in some peculiar and rare examples in Classical Arabic dictionaries, but is not used presently in either Classical or Modern Arabic; its use is also restricted in some peripheral Modern Arabic dialects. It is striking that while Classical and Modern Arabic use the root $\sqrt{rq\dot{s}}$ to denote the verb 'to dance' or 'dance' as a noun¹, the Maltese language, which absorbed a huge Arabic lexica and etymons, uses the root \sqrt{zfn} [= \sqrt{zfn}], which acts paradigmatically in this language as a Semitic verb and not as a European loan verb². This root is deep-rooted in Maltese, with a wide spectrum of meanings in daily usage. In terms of dialect, Maltese is a Semitic language, some two thirds of its vocabulary

¹ Even very marginal Arabic dialects such as the Nigerian use this verb. See Alan S. Kaye, *Nigerian Arabic-English Dictionary* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1986), v.2, p. 66. See also in Jonathan Owens *Arabic as a Minority Language* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2000), pp. 221-258.

² Mikiel Anton Vassalli mentions the root in his lexicon. See Mikiel *Lexicon ta' Mikiel Anton Vassalli bi prezentazzjoni u annotamenti ta' Frans Sammut*. (Malta: Marsa Press, 2002, p. 675).

being deriving from Arabic and the rest from Sicilian-Italian, Italian, English and other Norman languages that influenced the Maltese islands over time³. Normally, Maltese is regarded as a Maghrebi Arabic dialect, or more accurately as a development of Tunisian Arabic dialect, which has much in common with other North-African Arabic dialects, such as those of Morocco, Algeria and Libya.

This article strives to solve the mystery and find the etymological origins of \sqrt{zfn} in Semitic languages and in Arabic lexicography and at the same time to plot its hypothetical route to becoming familiarized in Maltese.

2. \sqrt{zfn} in contemporary Maltese⁴

As a verb: the root \sqrt{zfn} 'to dance' is used as a transitive verb in Maltese [perfect *zifen*, imperfect *jizfen*, pp. *mizfün*]. In the first stem, the verb is used semantically with several idiomatic meanings apart from 'to dance', such as 'to cope with' or 'to fend for oneself', e.g. *jew indoqq jew nizfen* 'I can only cope with one thing at a time'; *it-tifel jitbellah u jien nizfen fin-nofs* 'my son does silly things and I have to face the music'; *l-ewwel qaluli biex nagħmel hekk u xhin inqala' l-inkwiet hallewni nizfen* 'they first told me to do that, but when I found myself in trouble they left me to fend for myself'. The second stem *zeffen* v.t. (pp. *m-*, *tizfin* v.n.) is used semantically based on the meaning of the first stem as 'to make someone dance' *ried iżeffinhom imma ma ridux* 'he wanted to make them dance, but they did not want to' or 'to involve someone in something' *meta jinqalaghlu xi haġa dejjem iżeffen lili* 'when he finds himself in trouble, he always involves me'. The fifth stem, *izzeffen* v.i. (<**tzeffen*), has three different meanings, all belonging to the same semantic field, 'to move in a lively way, quickly, up and down', e.g. *il-friegħi tas-siġar jizzeffnu mar-riħ* 'the branches of

³ See Joseph M. Brincat, *Maltese and other languages. A linguistic history of Malta* (Malta: Midsea Books., 2011), p. 407.

⁴ Joseph Aquilina, *Maltese-English Dictionary* (Malta: Midsea Books Ltd., 1990), p. 1618.

the trees dancing in the wind'; 'to indulge in dancing or restless movements', e.g. *dit-tifla tiżżeffen il-ħin kollu għad issir ballerina* 'this girl performing dancing movements will one day become a ballet dancer'; 'to be involved in a matter just capriciously or maliciously', e.g. *thallix isem il-familja jżżeffen b'dan id-delitt* 'don't let the family name be involved in this crime'.

2.1.

As a noun or verbal noun: *żfin* 'dancing' e.g. *kien hemm daqq u żfin* 'there was music and dancing'; *żifna* (pl. *~iet*) 'a dance', e.g. *la aħna fiż-żifna niżfnu* 'once we are involved we have to face the situation'; as a diminutive: *żfejna* (pl. *~iet*) 'small dance'; *żeffien* (pl. *~a*) 'dancer'; *żeffieni* (f. *~ija*; pl. *~in*) 'fond of dancing'.

2.2.

One can trace the semantic connection between the Maltese \sqrt{zfn} and \sqrt{zff} , as *iżiffja* means 'to blow (wind)', e.g. *ir-riħ qed jizziffja* 'the wind is blowing' and *żiffa* means 'a breeze', e.g. *żiffa tal-baħar* 'sea-breeze'.

3. \sqrt{zfn} in Classical and Andalusian Arabic

3.1. The Classical dictionaries

Ibn Manḏūr⁵ denotes that the word *الرَّقْنُ* (رَقْنٌ يَزْفِنُ زَفْنًا) in Classical Arabic means 'similar to dance' (شبيهه بالرقص). Hence we can understand that the author of the *Lisān al-'Arab* finds the root \sqrt{zfn} peculiar and not entirely equivalent to \sqrt{zff} . The *Lisān* refers to *الرَّقْنُ* as an homonym or sometimes *الرَّقْن* as a word that has its etymon

⁵ Muḥammad Ibn Manḏūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut: Dār 'Iḥyā' at-Turāṭ al-'Arabī, 1988), VI, p. 58.

in Oman, which has a quite different meaning: ‘an awning near the ocean which casts shadow and protects from the burning sun and the humidity of the sea’. This remark is of great importance here since Ibn Manḏūr sees the possibility of a foreign non-Arabic etymon in this word. The word’s eccentricity is emphasized again as the author of the *Lisān* turns immediately to a *Hadith* tradition of ‘Ā’isha which says *وقد وفد الحبشة فجعلوا يرقون ويلعبون* ‘a delegation of Abyssinians came and they began to dance and play’. This tradition plays a tremendous part in solving the mystery of the ancient etymon of *رقن*, since it implies that the origins of this verb are in Abyssinia; hence we do not find here the normal Arabic verb *رقص* ‘to dance’, because the way of dancing is alien and therefore the author of the *Lisān* uses the formulation ‘similar to dance’ (شبيهه بالرقص). This source refers also to the word *رقان*⁶ which means ‘a dancer’, similar to the Maltese *zeffien*. Another entry in the *Lisān* is *رجل ازقنة*: ‘a man that tends to go quickly’. This word is bound semantically to the quick movements of the dance and features also in another entry in this Classical dictionary, very close semantically: *رجل زيقن* which denotes a strong man, yet very agile in his movement.⁷

The semantic use of *رقن* appears in a tradition called *Hadith* ‘Abdallah Ibn ‘Amr which uses four words *والزفن والمزاهر والكنارات*. These are probably foreign words denoting dance and musical instruments and do not have an Arabic etymology, e.g. the word *كنارات*, which is used in Aramaic *כְּנָרָא* (and also in Hebrew⁸ *כְּנֹר*). This emphasizes that the origin of the word *رقن* is not Arabic and therefore it is not used extensively.

In another entry in his dictionary that semantically relates to ‘dance’ as a noun, namely *الحنْبَشَةُ*, Ibn Manḏūr writes that it means

⁶ See also *Tāḡ al-‘Arūs*: *رقان*: ‘one who tends to dance a lot’, e.g. *الصوفية زقانة حفانة*. ‘the Soufis are inclined to dance a lot and to eat while amusing’.

⁷ The dictionary of al-Fayrūzabādī does not give any information additional to that in *Lisān*. Ibn Manḏūr cites Ibn Ġinniyy, who says that *زرقون* is the morphological *فِيْعُول* form deriving from the word *رقن*, because *زرقون* is also a sort of a movement accompanied by a voice. In this poem, we understand *زرقون* as an infrequent adjective used in the expression *قوس زرقون*, which denotes a very swift bow used in war.

⁸ Ibn Manḏūr, in the entry *√knr*, concurs that it appears in the Bible.

البادية 'the play of the maid servants in the desert', and then goes on to interpret the word 'to play': الحنبشة المشي والتصفيق والرقص 'hanbaša means moving [literally: going] [while] clapping hands and dancing'. It is unexpected that the name of Abyssinia in Arabic, namely الحبشة, a geographic location outside Arabia, is attributed to this special way of dancing. This emphasizes the contents of the *Hadith* tradition of 'Ā'isha about the delegation of Abyssinians who came and played in a unique way, which was not apparently known among the Arabs.

Az-Zabīdī in *Tāğ al-'Arūs*⁹ refers to the same *Hadith* traditions as the *Lisān*, but he adds a few more lexical items derived from \sqrt{zfn} :

زافنة: 'a she-male that has crooked legs and looks like dancing while walking';

الزفنان: 'an equivalent word for الزفْنُ 'dance'.

We understand from Ibn Fāris' dictionary¹⁰ that \sqrt{zfn} has no Arabic etymology, and from his comments it becomes clear that الزفْنُ is actually used only very rarely: الزاء والفاء والنون ليس عندي أصلاً؛ ولا فيه ما يحتاج اليه. يقولون: الزفْنُ: الرقص. ويقولون الزيفن: الشديد. وليس هذا بشيء 'I do not have any etymon for the root \sqrt{zfn} and it is rare in use. One can say indeed that the meaning of الزفْنُ is *dance* and one can say that زيفن means *a strong [man]* but neither has an actual anchoring'. The same quotation of the two words الزفْنُ and زيفن appears in al-Ğawhari's dictionary, but he does not make the same remark that appears in *Maqāyīs al-Luġa* about these two words.

3.2. \sqrt{zfn} in Classical Arabic Poetry

There are only two different references in two verses in Classical Arabic Poetry to \sqrt{zfn} , both from relatively unknown poets. The first quotation is from 'Uqaybil Ibn Šihāb, who wrote a *Dīwān*, yet only three verses have survived to our time. He describes the warring of al-Ĥaġġāğ Ibn Yūsuf at-Ṭaqafī (661–714 AD) against the

⁹ Muḥibb ad-Dīn Muḥammad Murtaḍā az-Zabīdī, *Tāğ al-'Arūs min Ġawāhir al-Qāmūs* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1994), xviii, pp. 260–261.

¹⁰ Abū Ḥusayna Aḥmad Ibn Fāris, *Mu'ġam Maqāyīs al-Luġa* (Beirut: Dār al-Ğil, 1991), iii, p. 14.

revolt of Ibn az-Zubayr (624–692 AD) around 690 AD. This poet belonged to the Kalb tribe which came originally from Yemen and after the collapse of Ma'rib dam moved northwards to Syria (Bilād aš-Šām). He describes in one of the three verses the fierce battle, as the pro-Umayyad al-Ḥaġġāġ, angered at being prevented by Ibn az-Zubayr from performing the Ḥaġġ, bombarded Mecca, going so far as to target the Ka'bah. This verse reads

خرجنا لبيت الله نرمي ستوره
وأحجاره زفن الولائد في العرس¹¹

'We went out to the house of God {the Ka'bah} and bombarded its curtains

And its stones, as the *Zafn* of the maids at a wedding'.

From this verse we obtain a few more intimations about the meaning and etymology of *Zafn*. The bombardment of the Ka'bah is described as heavy, namely it denotes the rapid offensive. We saw in the *Lisan* some examples of the use of \sqrt{zfn} , e.g. *إزفنة* or *رجل يزفن* 'a man that tends to go quickly or very agilely in his movements'. The word *ولائد* can frequently denote 'black maids' who came usually from Abyssinia, Oman or other geographical areas on the Horn of Africa. These maids, as they are described here, would go to a wedding to dance, sing and entertain the invited guests.

The other verse, from about 1250 AD, is from the relatively unknown poet aš-Šaršarī, who died in Baghdad in 1258, probably killed by the Mongolians. He says

ولا عباساً فظاً غليظاً فلم يلم
حبوشاً على زفن ولا عاباً أنجشاً¹²

'And not even a gloomy, tough and a vulgar [person] that had not Criticized an Abyssinian for his *Zafn* and had not condemned the Abyssinian King'.

¹¹ This verse appears in the CD Rom of the Encyclopedia of Poetry.

¹² This verse appears in the CD Rom of the Encyclopedia of Poetry.

In this verse we witness a clear discrimination against the black-skinned Abyssinians whom even very common people can defame regarding their habits of *Zafn*. Here it most likely means ‘vulgar dances’ or ‘dances of vulgar people’, which are foreign to the Arabs. He does not slander the Abyssinian king, which implies that even the Abyssinian king is used to these dancing performances which are surely familiar and greatly treasured in his royal courtyard, but disregarded and disdained by even very coarse and vulgar Arabs. From here we can understand that the *Zafn* dances were merely seen as alien by the Arabs.

3.3. \sqrt{zfn} in Andalusian Arabic

Corriente¹³ points out in his dictionary of Andalusian Arabic that \sqrt{zfn} is found in entries *zafna*, *zafānatun*, *zaffānun*, all relating to the meaning ‘do dance’. He also remarks that etymologically this root is from South Arabian ‘stock’. This observation is highly significant as we will observe later in this article.

4. The etymology of \sqrt{zfn} in other modern or Post-Classical Arabic dialects

Additionally to Maltese, \sqrt{zfn} is attested in two modern Arabic dialect groups: that on the southern edge of the Arabian Peninsula and that in the western parts of the Maghrebic Arabic dialects-speaking area. Note that in various Arabic dialects, e.g. those of the Syro-Palestinian group, the basic biradical/geminated root \sqrt{zff} , which relates to ‘singing, dancing or doing dance’ at a wedding, is widely used.

¹³ F. Corriente, *A Dictionary of Andalusian Arabic* (Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1997), p. 231.

4.1. Modern Yemeni dialects

In Piamenta's dictionary¹⁴, the discussed root features in the entry زَفَّافَةٌ (pl. -ات) which means 'a woman who sings at a wedding and makes the bride dance'. This meaning of the √zff overlaps the use of the √zfn in Classical Arabic. This dictionary also refers to the expression بحر زَفَّانٍ, which means 'epithet of sea'. I do not in fact understand what Piamenta means by this definition, since in this entry زَفَّانٍ seems to be an adjective for بحر and not an epithet for 'sea'. It might denote a wavy sea here, as in this dialect the root seems to denote motion as well. This semantic meaning is also found in this dictionary in the Post-Classical Yemeni Arabic √zff 'to panic' or √zfg (< √zfq) 'to overflow, trick, have fun, joke'; there is similarity in the sense of amusement, and the equivalence of two consonants indicates a genetic kinship between the roots or a duplication of √zff, which can be regarded as the basis of √zfn.¹⁵

The Jews of Yemen have generally a dance called *zaffā* (pl. *zaffāt*), which is called also "the procession dancing". This is the main dance of the wedding.¹⁶ Very interesting is the variety of dances of the Jews of Ḥabbān in East Yemen, in which we find a type called *zaffā*, which is a slow dance in a circle: two or three women begin with this dance, and gradually other women join them. They hold each other's hand or hug each other's shoulders. They have also a dance called *zafne*, which is the main interest of

¹⁴ Moshe Piamenta, *Dictionary of Post-Classical Yemeni Arabic* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), part 1, p. 231. See also the meaning of √zff: *zuff/yizoff* 'to behave, act; to accompany; to open, unfold and honoring of a bride [ṣan'ā]' in Jeffrey Debbó, *Jemenitisches Wörterbuch (Arabisch-Deutsch-Englisch)* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1987), p. 289, p. 291. See also the same meaning of √zff as 'escort of the bride' in Hamdi A. Qafisheh, *NTC's Yemeni Arabic-English Dictionary* (Lincolnwood (Chicago), Illinois: NTC, 1999), p. 278: *zaffah* - 1. Wedding ceremony. (2. Load, cargo زَفَّةٌ ماء). *Zifāf* - Wedding ceremony. *Zaffāfahī* - [pl. -āt] one who sings at a wedding and makes the bride dance.

¹⁵ Compare √zrf "to wet, to water" in Wolf Leslau, *Ethiopic and South Arabic Contribution to the Hebrew Lexicon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958), p. 19.

¹⁶ See Haim Sa'adon, (editor). *Teymān [=Yemen]*. (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2002), p. 101.

this article. The *zafne* is a slow dance in pairs, while holding the bowl of henna. The rhythm of the dance is as follows: two steps right and left towards the inner part of the circle with a slight lifting of the hands and light bending of the knees.¹⁷

4.2. Maghrebian dialects

In the Maghrebian dialect, to which Maltese belongs, namely Modern Moroccan Arabic, we find also the use of زَفَان, but sometimes as زُفَان and sometimes as *zaffān*, with a short vowel and an *Imāla*. In Tetuan¹⁸ زُفَان means ‘the one who makes dancing’. This dictionary says that the etymology of \sqrt{zfn} is Arabic and means ‘to dance’ (رَقَصَ). However, in this dialect I found very interesting the use of the expression هَزَّ كَتَافَهُ وَلَا يَنْسَى هَزَّ كَتَافَهُ literally ‘the dancer can die but he never forgets how to move his shoulders’; the idiomatic meaning denotes a man who waylays women in the street and clings to them. Note that this expression is also used to curse somebody. Interestingly, ‘the movement of the shoulders’ signifies a special way of dancing, which will be dealt with later. The Colin dictionary¹⁹ of dialectal Moroccan Arabic defines *zaffān*²⁰ as ‘saltimbanque, baladin rural, ambulante, qui chante et danse en agitant ses amples manches’. Here the *zaffān* is a rural clown who also moves in a very peculiar and agile way, which is what \sqrt{zfn} normally denotes as we have seen.

¹⁷ See Yael Shay, “Shirā u-maḥōl ba-ḥatunā be-ḳerev nešōt Ḥabbān” [=Wedding songs and dance among the women of Ḥabbān]. In *Tehuda*, 15, 1996, p. 56.

¹⁸ ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Sayyid ‘Abd al-‘Āl, *Mu‘ḡam šamāl al-Maḡrib: Tiṭwān wa mā-ḥawlahā* (Al-Qāhira: Dār al-Kātib al-‘Arabī li-tṭibā‘a wa-nnašr, 1388 H.=1968), p.97.

¹⁹ Zakia Iraqui Sinaceur, *Le Dictionnaire Colin d’Arabe Dialectal Marocain* (Rabat: Editions Al Manahil – Ministère des Affaires Culturelles, 1994), v. 3, p. 722.

²⁰ In this dialect *zaffān* has the suffix *-a* for the plural: *zaffāna*. See also Richard S. Harrell, *A Dictionary of Moroccan Arabic (Arabic-English)* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1966), p. 226.

5. \sqrt{zfn} in Semitic Languages

5.1. In North-West Semitic Languages

This Semitic subdivision evinces a metathesis of \sqrt{zff} . Biblical Hebrew, and later Modern Hebrew too, has the root פזז meaning ‘to dance;²¹ to jump’. In Syriac as well there is ܦܙܐ ‘to dance’ and ܦܙܐܝܘܢ ‘one who moves swiftly and easily’.²² We can implement the metathesis in Classical Arabic too, hence ٴفزز, which also means ‘to jump’ or ‘to do something with agile movements’,²³ a meaning semantically close to ‘dance’ [v.].

5.2. In South Semitic Languages

More solid and frequent evidence for \sqrt{zfn} is found in South Semitic Languages: on the Horn of Africa, and in Oman, on the southern rim of the Arabian Peninsula. \sqrt{zfn} exists in Ancient and Modern languages alike in this Semitic group.

5.2.1 Ethiopian languages

5.2.1.1. Ge'ez: \sqrt{zfn} as a verb denotes ‘to dance’ *yəzfan* [ደገገን] and it is also found in causative ‘*azfana* [አገፍን]; ‘dancer’ is called *zafāni* [ፈፍኒ]; *zafan* [ፈፍን] ‘dance, chant’; *məzfan* [ግገን] ‘place of dancing’.²⁴

²¹ Wilhelm Gesenius, *Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament* (Berlin, Göttingen, Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 1962), p. 638. For Aramaic words that derive from Ethiopic see also S. Fraenkel, *Die aramäischen Fremdwörter im Arabischen* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1886, rep. Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms, 1982), p. 323. Compare also J. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1957), pp. 440-441 ‘to leap’ and *pzītā* ‘agile, nimble’.

²² Wilhelm Gesenius, *Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament*, p. 638.

²³ See for example Ibn Fāris, *Mu'ğam Maqāyis al-Luğa*, pp. 438-349.

²⁴ See Wolf Leslau, *Concise Dictionary of Ge'ez (Classical Ethiopic)* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1989), p. 184.

5.2.1.2. Amharic: \sqrt{zfn} is deeply rooted in this language. All the semantic meanings are related to dancing, sometimes to dancing accompanied by singing, moving the body or clapping hands.²⁵ *zäffänä* [ረፍኅ] means ‘to sing, to dance and sing [simultaneously], move the head in time to rhythm, to clap the hands in time to the music; to tremble, shake, e.g. hands’. The use of the verb *zäffänä* [ረፍኅ] reminds us of the geminated root \sqrt{zff} which is also found in Arabic; in Amharic it means ‘to sing several times’; ‘to hum, sing in a low voice’. \sqrt{zfn} is also attested in the passive voice, e.g. *tä-zäffäna* [ተረፍኅ] ‘to be sung or danced’; ‘to be clapped (hands in time with the music)’ and also, in a more accurate semantic denotation, ‘to leap during dancing’; \sqrt{zfn} is used also in causative, *azäffäna* [አረፍኅ] ‘to cause to shake or tremble’ and *azzäffäna* [አረፍኅ] ‘to have s.o. dance or sing, have s.o. leap or compose poetry’; ‘to have a song sung (inf.)’ or *azzäffäna* [ተረፍኅ] ‘to help to sing or dance, help to clap in time to the music’; ‘to dance together, e.g. two clowns²⁶ doing matching dances’; ‘to accompany someone in singing’. As a noun, *zäfän* [ረፍኅ] (and also *zäfäna* [ረፍኅ] ‘act of dancing’ or ‘dancing’) has the following various meanings: ‘melody, song, dance’; ‘moving the head or body in time to music, clapping in time to music’; ‘doing the *askästa*-shoulder shrugging to music’.²⁷ The last addition in this entry regarding the *askästa*-shoulder dance is innovative. It may contribute to the ultimate comprehension of the etymon of \sqrt{zfn} since it emphasizes the rapid movement that we saw in other languages, especially Arabic, but it is also important regarding the particularity of this Ethiopian dance. Semantically, *zäfän* nowadays is understood to denote a traditional sort of Ethiopian dance, whereas the verb for modern Western dances is *dännäsä* and a modern dancer is accordingly called *dännäs*.²⁸

²⁵ Thomas Leiper Kane, *Amharic-English Dictionary* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1990), p. 1684.

²⁶ Compare Sinaceur, p. 722.

²⁷ \sqrt{zfn} can be phonetically shifted in Semitic Languages to other verbs such as *صفن*, or even *ظفر*. In the Triangle area of Israel the Arabic dialects use the verb *صفي* in the sense of ‘to collect sand rapidly’. See also Augusti Dillman, *Lexicon Linguae Aethiopicæ cum indice Latino* (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1970), 1070.

²⁸ Wolf Leslau, *Concise Amharic Dictionary* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), p. 312.

5.2.1.3. Tigrē: In this language \sqrt{zfn} means ‘to dance’, but it has a more delicate meaning of ‘to perform the dance of the dead’ with a gender element, namely ‘dance performed by women’.²⁹

5.2.1.4. Moča, Harari and Gurage: \sqrt{zfn} is not attested in these Ethiopic languages³⁰.

5.2.2. Languages of the southern rim of the Arabian Peninsula

5.2.2.1. Sabaic: \sqrt{zfn} is not found; the meaning of \sqrt{zff} is not clear as it may denote ‘outflow channel of a dam’.³¹

5.2.2.2. In Modern South Arabian languages Mehri³², Gibbali and Soqotri³³ there is documentation of \sqrt{zfn} . In Mehri \sqrt{zfn} is used only to denote a dance performed by men, in contrast to Tigrē, where, as noted above, the verb is assigned to women, e.g. ‘do dance’: $z\acute{f}\acute{u}:n/iz\acute{u}:fen$ (man) whereas $na\acute{h}y\acute{o}:t/tin\acute{o}:\acute{h}e\acute{y}$ (woman). Gibbali shows the same differentiation between dancing men and

²⁹ Compare to the verb *zānfāfa*, which means ‘drink very much’, perhaps from an original meaning ‘do something in abundance; be in abundance’. Semantically, the abundance can be related to swift or agile [movements]; see Wolf Leslau, *North Ethiopic and Amharic Cognates in Tigre* (Napoli: Instituto Orientali Napoli, 1982), p. 86. Maria Höfner, *Wörterbuch der Tigrē-Deutsch-Englisch* (Wiesbaden: Steiner Verlag GmbH, 1956), p. 506: \sqrt{zfn} ‘den Totentanz aufführen (Frauen), tanzen’; whereas \sqrt{zff} means ‘Tanzenplatz’.

³⁰ Wolf Leslau, *Etymological Dictionary of Gurage (Ethiopic)* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1979), p. 166-167. Compare also Wolf Leslau, *A Dictionary of Moča (Southwestern Ethiopia)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), p. 63 and the verb ‘to dance’ in Harari in Wolf Leslau, *Etymological Dictionary of Harari* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), p. 198.

³¹ Compare \sqrt{zff} in A. F. L. Beeston, M. A. Ghul, W. W. Müller, *Sabaic Dictionary (English-French-Arabic)* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Peeters 1982), p. 170. See also Joan Copeland Biella, *Dictionary of Old South Arabic: Sabeian Dialect* (Chico, CA: Harvard Semitic Studies no. 25, 1982), 160-161.

³² Aki'o Nakano, *Comprehensive Vocabulary of Southern Arabic. Mahri, Gibbali and Soqotri* (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (Studia Culturae Islamicae 29), 1986), 71.

³³ See Wolf Leslau, *Lexique Soqotri (Sudarabique Moderne) avec comparaisons et explications etymologiques* (Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1938), 155.

dancing women as in Mehri: *alé:q Muḥ*.³⁴ *d-iú:fen!* ‘Look M. is dancing!’ and *alé:q ’Am’ína tinó:ḥej!* ‘Look, Amina is dancing!’.³⁵ Note that in Soqotri \sqrt{zfn} has a different meaning, ‘to join’, whereas the root that marks ‘to dance’ is \sqrt{rgd} .³⁶

6. Conclusion and assumption

The root \sqrt{zfn} is nowadays alive and vividly in use in three different geographical locations: in some Ethiopian languages on the Horn of Africa, especially Amharic, with several expressions and idioms; on the southern fringes of the Arabian Peninsula in Modern South Arabian Languages, where it is used formally to denote ‘to dance’ and also to denote only ‘men dancing’; and in Maltese, the focus of this article, where \sqrt{zfn} has even several meanings, expressions and idioms that derive from the basic meaning ‘to dance’.

There is evidence that in the past \sqrt{zfn} was also used in Andalusian Arabic, which is now extinct. Some use of \sqrt{zfn} is found in Post-Classical Yemeni Arabic, in some Modern Yemeni dialects, and rarely in some Modern Moroccan dialects. Classical Arabic regards this root as alien and probably of foreign etymology: it is said that *زَفْنٌ* ‘resembles a dance’ with emphasis on the word *شبيهه* [resembles], namely it does not denote the dances that the Arabs were used to in the time of the Prophet.

In the Hadith tradition of ‘Ā’isha another layer is solved, as she attests that she saw a delegation of Abyssinians who ‘perform \sqrt{zfn} ’. Classical Arabic poetry assists us here also in two different ways: first, the \sqrt{zfn} denotes a dance of black maids and is also related to the Abyssinians and their king; secondly, the scarcity of the use of the root in this genre strengthens the probability of a foreign etymon penetrating the southern rim of the Arabian Pe-

³⁴ Here as an abbreviation of the name Muhammad.

³⁵ Gibbali also has the verb *rkʿd/irákod* which recalls the Biblical and also Modern Hebrew *רקד* [compare Arabic *رقص*] ‘to dance’.

³⁶ This root with a slight phonetic change is found also in Soqotri, *ré:ged* (pl. *tró:gid*), e.g. *férhem u-embó:riye ré:ged ka-tahidē:then* ‘the girls and the boys dance together’.

ninsula from Abyssinia. This explains the existence of the root in Post-Classical Yemeni dialects and its survival in Modern South Arabian Languages such as Mehri and Soqotri since they are remote yet reflect a very ancient use of vocabulary. In Biblical (and later also in Modern) Hebrew the root is changed by metathesis to $\sqrt{p[f]zz}$ and also to $\sqrt{p[f]zm}$. There is also an etymological-semantic relation between the meaning of \sqrt{zff} and \sqrt{zfn} , e.g. in Arabic, denoting the instrumental-musical atmosphere of a wedding.³⁷

We saw that \sqrt{zfn} means basically ‘to dance’. However, the sense of the verb and other morphologically and phonetically related verbs in Arabic and other Semitic languages sharpens the semantic meaning of rapid movements which are characteristic of this dance, and the shoulder shrugging, which is so typical of the Ethiopian *askasta*-dance to music.³⁸

All the data show us that \sqrt{zfn} originated in Abyssinia, from where it made its way to the Yemen in the southern parts of the Arabian Peninsula, and later also to the Mekka region at the start of Islam. The absence of actual use of \sqrt{zfn} in other Semitic languages, such as North-Western Semitic and East Semitic Languages, seems to support the assumption that \sqrt{zfn} is South Semitic in origin. Thus a lacuna is created, as we find \sqrt{zfn} again in Andalusia, Malta and Morocco. The root might have penetrated Andalusian Arabic by means of conquerors of Yemeni or even Abyssinian descent.³⁹

³⁷ See e.g. in Yemeni Arabic Dialects, *al-Mu‘jam al-Yamanī fi lLuġa wa-tTurāt* (Dimašq: al-Maṭba‘a al-‘Ālamiyya, 1996), 393.

³⁸ For other dance names in Africa see Esther A. Dagan, *The Spirit’s Dance in Africa: Evolution, Transformation and Continuity* (Canada, QC, Westmount: Galerie Amrad African Arts Publications, 1997), pp. 191-195. The *askasta*-dance in Ethiopia is not mentioned there.

³⁹ This strengthens the words of Martin R. Zammit in “Andalusi Arabic and Maltese: A preliminary Survey” in: *Folia Orientalia*, vol. 45-46 (2009-2010), p. 24: “This comes as no surprise since the Yemenite component constituted the majority of the early Muslim settlement in Andalus”. Zammit adds a glossary of Yemenite cognates in Andalus and Maltese Arabic; he continues saying: “Moreover, South Arabian culture has made itself felt in a number of loanwords which found their way to Old Arabic e.g. *šini* (Pl. *šawānī*) M <*xini*> ‘galley’”.

This assumption is emphasized in Malta by three levels of historical justifications. Charles Dalli in his book⁴⁰ on the Islamic period of Malta, tells us about the conquest of the island (869 or 870 AD) by the Moslem fleet commander Aḥmad Ibn ‘Umar Ibn ‘Abdalla, who was nicknamed *Ḥabašī* (*The Abyssinian*). This commander’s name is immortalized in Qaṣr Ḥabašī at Sousse (Tunisia), where an inscription recording his achievement is noted by Ibn al-Ġazzār. This circumstance highlights the Abyssinian influence of the Moslem commanders and soldiers on Malta from the very start in Dār al-Islām. The second reinforcement of Yemenite influence on Malta is personified in the Moslem historian of Malta, al-Ḥimyarī. His name itself betrays his Yemenite-Himyarite origins. He also lived in Andalus and Ceuta, and wrote his geographical dictionary *Kitāb ar-Rawḍ al-Mi‘tār fī Khabar al-‘Aqṭār* (*The perfumed Garden in the News of Countries*). al-Ḥimyarī, as quoted in Dalli’s book, had an eye for detail and excellence in pen, and was a master of the Arabic language.

The third factor that possibly put down Abyssinian roots in Malta is the mystery of Malta’s ‘*Abīd*’ (‘slaves’). al-Ḥimyarī relates the story of an attack on Malta by Byzantine ships that blockaded the Moslems on the island, almost forcing them to surrender. The Moslems asked for *amān*, or ‘safeconduct’, but it was refused except for women and possessions. The word used is *amwāl*, which possibly denotes the possession of slaves. The Moslems and their slave-soldiers joined forces, and early on the second day ‘they asked for the help of Allāh the Almighty and they marched and stormed around ‘the Byzantines’’. This historical episode reveals some interesting information about the composition of the local community of Moslems on Malta. Evidently, this slave population was distinct on both social and religious grounds from the *Aḥrār* (literally ‘free people’) social layer. Dalli writes that the origins of these ‘*Abīd*’ are unclear, as is their religious affiliation. He rhetorically asks, ‘was Malta their place of captivity, or their place of origin? It is equally possible that they were brought to undertake the colonization of the island and the cultivation of rural estates.’

⁴⁰ Charles Dalli, *Malta: the Medieval Millennium*. (Malta: Midsea Books Ltd., 2006), pp. 51-73.

Dalli anchors the use of the Maltese-Andalusian Arabic word *raħal* [‘village’] to this context, since it is plausible that the first *raħal* was established in Malta at this time.⁴¹ Yet it is no wonder that we find \sqrt{zfn} also in contemporary Arabic, in some Moroccan dialects, and in the extinct dialects of Andalusian Arabic.

We witnessed the connection of the numerous references of Abyssinians from Classical Arabic dictionaries throughout Classical Arabic Poetry and the historical facts on Malta during the Moslem time. Hence we suggest that \sqrt{zfn} is an Abyssinian word etymologically, which penetrated Yemen and Oman. With the Arab conquests of North Africa, Andalusia and Malta it entered these regions, especially by means of army officers and soldiers, and even some slaves, of Yemeni or Abyssinian ancestry. Consequently the absence of \sqrt{zfn} from a vast area from Yemen to North Africa, Andalusia and Malta is readily understandable. This linguistic factor strengthens the likelihood of a social layer of Moslems connecting Malta and Sicily⁴² – a matter already proven, strengthening the existence of a certain social linguistic Yemeni⁴³

⁴¹ The word *raħal* denotes at that period a private estate of around 50 hectares belonging to a socially or publically distinguished personality. A number of places called *raħal* are found not only numerous in Malta, but also in Sicily and the word is also documented in Andalusian Arabic. Thus, the Arabic of Malta which in the course of time became an independent language, at least in the eyes of its modern inhabitants, is undoubtedly related to North African and to Andalusian Arabic dialects. See Charles Dalli, *Malta: the Medieval Millennium*, 65, and Kaptan Pawlu Bugeja, *Kelmet il-Malti*. Floriana (Malta: ANG (Associated News Group Ltd.), 1999), 200. This word in contemporary Maltese is shortened to *ħal* and the *l* in this word, which is interpreted as a part of the determination, is shifted according to the Maltese ‘Sun Letters’ laws, e.g. *ħaž-Żebbuġ* [‘the village of olives’].

⁴² On Arabic in Sicily see Diunisis A. Agius, *Siculo Arabic* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996.) I did not find \sqrt{zfn} in Ibn Makkī Aṣ-Ṣiqillī, *Taṭqif al-Lisān wa Talqih al-Ġinān*. (Al-Qāhira: al-Mağlis al-‘A‘lā li-ššū‘ūn al-‘Islamiyya, 1966). Still, I suppose that this root existed in Siculo Arabic because of the geographic proximity and shared historical background with Maltese and Malta. About the relations between Maltese and Magrebine Arabic dialects and Siculo Arabic see in Albert Borg, *Maltese*. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), XIII.

⁴³ Alexander Borg arrives to the same conclusions in his article “Between Typology and Diachrony: Some Formal Parallels in Hebrew and Maltese” in

and as well as Abyssinian layer as characteristic in those places; we know that in Andalusia, for example, the Arabic dialects preserved their characteristics as in their original countries, such as Yemen.

This article emphasizes the role of the Yemeni and Abyssinian social layer of Malta during the Moslem period, but it also calls for further etymological research into these origins in the vocabulary of Maltese. Such research can shed light on the derivation of a specific word, but also on some unsolved mysteries of history.