



Laura
Bonato

Ritual paths

Local identity, tradition
and innovation

Mc
Graw
Hill

Laura Bonato

Ritual paths

Local identity, tradition and innovation





Copyright © 2024

McGraw-Hill Education (Italy) S.r.l.
Corso Vercelli, 40 - 20145 Milano (MI)
Tel. 02535718.1 - www.mheducation.it

All rights of translation, reproduction, electronic storage and adaptation in whole or in part by any means are reserved for all countries.

Due to the inherent characteristics of the Internet, the Publisher is not liable for any changes in the addresses and contents of the Internet sites listed.

The Publisher has made every effort to contact the rightful owners of the images appearing in the text and remains at the disposal of those who could not be contacted.

Names and trademarks mentioned in the text are generally deposited or registered by their respective manufacturers.

Photocopies for the reader's personal use may be made within the limit of 15% of each volume/issue of a periodical against payment to the SIAE of the fee provided for in Article 68, paragraphs 4 and 5, of law no. 633 of 22 April 1941.

Reproductions made for professional, economic or commercial purposes or however for use other than personal use may be made following specific authorisation issued by CLEARedi, Corso di Porta Romana 108, 20122 Milan, e-mail info@clearedi.org and website www.clearedi.org.

Photocomposition and editorial realisation: Nuovo Gruppo Grafico s.n.c., Milano

Cover graphics: Feel Italia, Milano

Cover image: © Laiotz/Shutterstock

ISBN 9788838612671

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 - 27 26 25 24 23

Table of contents

<i>Premise</i>	V
Peasant feast and (increasingly) complex society	1
Between propitiatory rites and Saracens: an invented but authentic and traditional past	11
A conscious cultural project of revival and protection of tradition: the egg quest	23
Alpine transhumance and community rituals: the bataille des reines	33
A “return’ party” contacts, contaminations, misrepresentations	45
Celtic festivals, an atypical ethnic revival	67
<i>Bibliography</i>	81

Premise

The materials presented here are the synthesis of ethnographic journeys conducted in an area of investigation that I have been exploring for several years: Piedmont, Valle d'Aosta and the western Alpine arc. By resorting to ethnographic observation and the oral testimonies collected, which constitute the fundamental documentation of my work, I will attempt to answer some questions.

What is the significance of celebration in today's society? If, as Canclini (1989) states, traditional culture, cultic culture and so-called "mass" culture, are to be considered interacting components of a single heterogeneous complex characterised by "hybridization", then, north-western Italy, for example – but the phenomenon can be extended to the whole country and southern France –, presents widespread and interesting phenomena of hybridisation between mass culture and the persistence or recovery of tradition. Certainly there is considerable persistence with regard to rituality, but the re-proposal and reintegration of abandoned ritual elements or the invention of traditional or supposed traditional models (e.g. alms songs, see below) are also very lively.

Does the analysis of the party allow us to enter the local/global game? Alongside the processes of the globalisation of the economy, the uniform spread of technologies and the market, the intensification of communication and the homogenisation of consumption, strong elements of particularism and localism reappear or appear *ex novo*, of adherence to models, symbols and values that are older or experienced as such, of rediscovery or reaffirmation of individual and community roots.

Why does the festival, more than other social signs, seem to better express continuity, rootedness to traditional values? Facts and materials from tradition, or inspired by it, have become the object of attention, collection and knowledge, preservation, consumption and new creation. Local identities are assumed for individual and group recognition and for negotiating or claiming one's own presence and rights: there is an effort to construct a kind of local, peasant, archaic characterisation, to represent and construct 'roots'. In some

cases one already observes that all this translates in economic terms into the promotion of local products (agriculture, handicrafts, food and wine); in socio-cultural terms one has the extreme cases in which it is not the community that organises the festive cycle but it is the festive season that now produces the community. The products to be sold are festivities, ritual paths, the preservation and reintegration of rituals, traditions. In order to realise all this, one relies on the latest technologies as well as on the great spectacle events and commercial circuits.

Among the most important protagonists and interpreters of this elaboration and offer are the Pro loco and cultural associations, which organise the largest number of activities - exhibitions, heritage and cultural initiatives, theatre, concerts - as well as the largest number of festivals and fairs. In these initiatives one can recognise processes of hybridisation, bricolage between mass culture and persistence or recovery of tradition.

The festival is reused in terms of reaffirmed belonging, consumption and promotion. The economic dimension is undoubtedly relevant: but is this enough to explain the amount of voluntary work, care and image employed in the organisation of a festival? Can we, and should we, speak of a market for ceremoniality and roots?

Who and why do festivals endure or even revive in the environment of modernity? In the revival of a festival of heritage or traditional taste there is a mixture of past community and family relations, roots, agriculture and agrarian landscapes as natural in a more or less ecological key, genuine food and drink: all needs that arise in the metropolis. In the search and desire for this, however, there does not seem to be a rejection of the metropolis. On the contrary, the most recent ritual practice is not necessarily re-proposed in a rural space as was the case with the re-functionalisation of folklore in previous decades, but is often reborn in the cities, presenting itself as an operation, in some ways unprecedented, of recovery of tradition. For Bravo (1984), in both the preservation and re-proposal of festivals, the promoters are those who leave and return from the country, who have acquired external experiences and occupations: they are the "commuters", people who are «mobile and open to the outside world, not infrequently active in the institutions and productive apparatuses of the contemporary context» (2001, p. 190) and who systematically traverse social complexity and experience its different contexts. In the feast, according to Bravo, the tradition and the farming community are revitalised for all participants, which come to constitute a precise reference in relation to the other social and territorial spaces of the complex society.

In Italy, festivals are revived, they are transplanted, they are also revitalised through elements borrowed from several places. Hence the "genres" are

blurred: festivals are no longer associated with the religious sphere and are no longer organised around the axes of the seasons, although elements of continuity with the old calendar cycle are discernible. Recognising a new “grammar” of celebration, through the following contributions it will be possible to recognise a map of its variety, in an attempt to understand the new repertoires of meaning and symbolic expression.

In the first chapter- *Peasant feast and (increasingly) complex society* - I will discuss the transformation of the feast in Italy, providing a summary of the extensive literature on the subject, placing it in an international frame of reference. Festivals that show continuity with the community past and tradition include the sword dances, analysed in Chapter 2, which show particular vitality and persistence in Piedmont. Without neglecting the study of ritual mechanisms, particular attention will be devoted to the bearers of the feast and their way of relating to local structures and power.

Chapter 3 will investigate a ceremony that completely disappeared for a few years and was then revitalised in some localities of Piedmont: the quest for eggs. In the localities chosen for the investigation, the revival of this ceremony was consciously chosen with the intention of recovering and preserving traditional knowledge. But the chanting of eggs and the material symbolic elements connected to it cannot be considered residual: they are signs that serve to further qualify the symbolic and behavioural universe of the ceremony.

Next, I will give an account of a phenomenon of local Alpine tradition that in today’s context spreads and is promoted through the latest technologies, large entertainment events and commercial circuits: the *bataille des reines*, the battle of the queens. This is a complex ceremonial system linked to an instinctive behaviour of the cows, a fierce but bloodless fight between cows that seems to be the resource that the local community uses to assert its identity and to promote local products and the territory.

The complex articulation of festivals in Italy paints a picture in which the initiatives that represent local, pre-industrial, peasant and artisanal culture appear significant. What, then, are the reasons for the success of the many Celtic festivals and of a celebration apparently foreign to our tradition such as Halloween? The issues addressed in the last two chapters will highlight the problems with which the Italian tradition of studies must confront, in an attempt to renew an approach that has privileged the peasant world and aspects of archaism.

Peasant feast and (increasingly) complex society

Our country presents widespread and interesting phenomena of hybridisation between contemporaneity and permanence or recovery of tradition. Certainly there is considerable persistence with regard to rituality, but the re-proposal, reintegration of disused ritual elements or the invention of traditional or supposedly such models are also very much lively. And so, alongside the processes of the unification of markets worldwide, the uniform spread of technologies, as well as of the popular ways of enjoying leisure time, and the intensification of communication, strong elements of particularism and localism, of adherence to models, symbols and values that are older or experienced as such, of the rediscovery or reaffirmation of individual and community roots, reappear or appear from scratch. Facts and materials from tradition, or inspired by it, have become the object of attention, collection and knowledge, conservation, consumption and new creation. Local identities are assumed for individual and group recognition and for negotiating or claiming one's own presence and rights: there is an effort to construct a sort of local, peasant, archaic characterisation, to represent and build 'roots'. All this from an economic point of view translates into the promotion of local products (agriculture, crafts, food and wine); in socio-cultural terms we have the extreme cases in which it is not the community that organises the festive cycle but it is the festive season that now produces the community. The products to be sold are the feast, the ritual paths, the preservation and reintegration of rituals, traditions. In order to achieve all this, we rely on the latest technologies, as well as on the great spectacles and commercial circuits. Among the most important protagonists and interpreters of this elaboration and offer are the Pro loco associations, which organise the largest number of activities - exhibitions, heritage and cultural initiatives, theatre, concerts - as well as the largest number of festivals and fairs. In these initiatives one can recognise processes of hybridisation, bricolage between contemporaneity and persistence or recovery of tradition.

The festival, more than other social signs, therefore seems to better express continuity, rootedness to traditional values: it is reused in a key of re-

affirmed belonging, consumption and promotion. The economic dimension is undoubtedly relevant: but is this enough to explain the amount of voluntary work, care and image employed in the organisation of a festival? Can we, and should we, speak of a market for ceremoniality and roots? With whose help and why do festivals endure or even revive in the contemporary environment? In the re-proposition of a feast of heritage or traditional taste there is a mixture of past community and family relations, roots, agriculture and agrarian landscapes as natural in a more or less ecological key, genuine food and drink: all needs that arise in an urban context. However, in the search and desire for all this, there does not seem to be a rejection of the city: on the contrary, the most recent ritual practice is not necessarily re-proposed in a rural space as was the case with the re-functioning of folklore in previous decades, but is often reborn in the city, presenting itself as an operation, in some ways unprecedented, of recovery of tradition. Festivals are revived, they are transplanted, they are also revitalised through elements borrowed from various quarters. Hence the 'genres' are blurred: festivals are no longer associated with the religious sphere and are no longer organised around the axes of the seasons, although elements of continuity with the old calendar cycle are discernible. A new 'grammar' of festivity is thus recognised and it is possible to define a map of its variety, which helps to understand the new repertoires of meaning and symbolic expression.

There is no doubt that that of celebration is a theme that opens up a range of complex questions, involving conceptual and definitional problems. The numerous interpretative hypotheses formulated over the years - contestation, orgy, subversion, initiation, rite of passage, recomposition of the alienation of the everyday, moment of socialisation, calendar deadline, re-foundation of time or the beginning of the year or season, document of community identity or, more simply, rest -, despite the apparent contradiction between them, are to a certain extent true and acceptable if placed in the contingency of a given historical moment rather than another.

In Italy, the festive theme has produced a very extensive literature in the last century: initially investigated mainly in the folkloric sphere - from Toschi (1955) to Cocchiara (1956), from De Martino (1958) to Di Nola (1976) -, at the end of the 1970s it presented new lines of enquiry more interested in the dynamic aspects of ceremoniality, the processes of evolution and innovation: if, in fact, until then the festivals had marked «with precise rhythms the course of the year, according to an apparently unchanging liturgical calendar, the result of the encounter between folkloric liturgy and Catholic liturgy, in any case reshaped and organically inserted into the cultural horizon of individual communities», they now appeared «now untied from a homogeneous socio-economic context and subject to transformations» (Buttitta 1999: 198).

It therefore becomes opportune to rearticulate the problem, also in consideration of the fact that the festival, characterised by symbolic-ritual expressive activities and periodicity, is expressed through rituals and ceremonies with an autonomous and particularly complicated structure. Since that time – the end of the 1970s – the ceremonial scene in our country, after experiencing a period of forgetfulness and neglect, has been characterised by significant processes of reinvention, refunctionalisation and resemantisation. And this revival presents a complex phenomenology, because the feast is no longer only an expression of ritual skills and traditional perspectives, but is part of a vast operation of revitalisation of elements of local and pre-industrial culture that stimulates the spontaneous formation of many groups and associations, whose work is absolutely autonomous, that engage in the revival of elements of tradition as well as in the setting up of museum exhibitions of objects and tools of peasant and artisan work. Festivals and museums constitute the symbolic representation of the community that perpetuates them and that, at the same time, identifies in both the elements through which to manifest its own specific identity.

This revitalisation took place after a process of industrialisation and urbanisation that broke up the old local communities and transformed their ways of living and working. In the 1950s and 1960s, a rapid process of industrialisation brought about major changes, such as the decay of economic, social and cultural conditions in the countryside and a massive flight from the fields to industrial and urban areas. «Certain farmsteads [...] were abandoned as if fleeing a catastrophe. The inhabitants only took the essentials with them. In one they left a book on the table and photographs of old people on the walls» wrote Vittorini in 1964 when, in his magazine «Menabò», he dealt with the problem of the exodus from the countryside. Every second a farmer changes occupation: statistics for 1964 record as many as 400,000 former farmers. Who stays in the countryside? Only the older ones, who «no longer have a young generation willing to listen and learn. On the contrary, young people scoff at this knowledge because they see in the city and in industry [...] a promising future, less uncertain and more guaranteed, a redemption from the peasant condition» (Grimaldi 1996: 14), and from a job considered unqualified and unskilled. Employment in the factory ensures a weekly wage and less harsh, as well as less precarious, living conditions; on the other hand, labour in the fields is subject to the changing seasons and their climatic patterns: in a moment, the work of months can be destroyed. In the face of this new social reality of reference, rituals and traditional festivals are transformed in parallel with the changes mentioned above, or they disappear where they have lost «their functional links with the social structure that produced them» (Lombardi Satriani, Mazzacane 1974: 384); if they survive, they are

refunctionalised, reinvented on urban cultural models (Grimaldi 1996). Take, for example, the patron saint and Corpus Christi processions that parade through the streets adorned with flowers, sheets and sacred ornaments to honour the passing of the saint or Christ; the statues, formerly laboriously carried on the shoulders of men, now «make the processional route in convertible cars borrowed by emigrants who have made their fortunes in the city and who reappear in their place of origin to flaunt the 'wealth' they have acquired in the factory» (Grimaldi 1996: 15).

The years of the economic boom seemed to have marked the end of the festivity because «the new models of mass culture were driving [...] a rejection of tradition» (Satta 1988: 202). But at the end of the 1970s, beginning of the 1980s, we witnessed a singular revival of the traditional festival, the proposal of ceremonies that drew inspiration and elements from it, the reaffirmation of community belonging, of local particularisms. All this, however, cannot be seen as a mere product of involution or reflux (Bravo 1984). What has happened? Lack of services, pollution, underemployment, unemployment, the energy crisis etc. lead to new cultural needs and an unexpected revival of interest in the countryside. «The exodus to the metropolises stops, young farmers no longer abandon the countryside, those who live in the city increasingly tend to rediscover the positive traits of a recently abandoned rural culture. This rediscovery is not so much about work in the fields as it is about traditional values and lifestyles» (Grimaldi 1996: 15).

One might think that this renewed focus on the countryside appears contradictory because it was during this period that urban society consolidated and structured itself by giving itself a solid economic and social apparatus. These are the years of great struggles and trade union conquests, years in which «the individual sees his job increasingly guaranteed by a welfare and social system that protects him. Moreover, the system of guarantees is accompanied by the conquest of more free time; this allows the individual, within the twenty-four hours, to explore other jobs, other social activities and leisure time» (Grimaldi 1996: 15-16).

In those years, Gian Luigi Bravo analysed the peasant festivals of the Piedmontese hills and mountains, demonstrating that there is a eurhythmic relationship between the revitalisation of tradition and the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation that invested the area at that time. Bravo's basic hypothesis is that it is precisely from this evolved context of strong communication with the outside world, from the needs that the context itself expresses, that the drive to breathe new life into the festival is born. In the complexity of our society, in the variety of situations it presents, in the alternation of different or contrasting stimuli, the celebration of a feast stands as a moment of stability and orientation. Not only that: the festival is nourished,

it is sustained precisely by the resources and characteristics of the complex society. Thus the folklorists' thesis that tradition is preserved – and for longer – among isolated communities where «consequently, the most reliable witness is the one who cannot read and write, who has never left his village, possibly who has not even served in the military, and who supports himself poorly with archaic work practices» (Leydi 1988: 54).

In the feast, according to Bravo, the participants and the community of Bravo, which is the reference to establish all the participants tradition and the peasant community, which is the precise relationship of other social spaces and territorial society complex. And the research conducted in Belvedere Langhe, which he gives an account of in *Festa contadina e società complessa* (1984), shows that those most involved in the festival are precisely those who most need these references: the “commuters between social formations”, i.e. those who systematically pass through social complexity and experience its different contexts. By social formation is meant «a particular structure of social relations, historically evolved, supplemented by appropriate instrumental and expressive values and motivations» (Gallino 1982: 81). A few years earlier Luciano Gallino (1980) had reconstructed the structure of the Italian social system by elaborating the concept of social formation of Marxist derivation: if, however, for «that tradition of thought, the various social formations tend to succeed one another over time in such a way that in each period there is only one dominant one, which can at most coexist with residues of the previous ones or embryos of those to come, in the approach proposed by Gallino they can be, and in cases like the Italian one they are, to a large extent coexistent and the functioning of each is conditioned by that of the others» (Bravo 1984: 30).

According to the theoretical model elaborated by Gallino, five social formations can be distinguished in the Italian society system of the 1980s: the peasant-artisan, the capitalist-mercantile, the capitalist-competitive, the capitalist-oligopolistic and the state. They are substantially characterised by the mode of production, but in their structure, in addition to this, Gallino (1980) recognises three other subsystems: the mode of political organisation, which establishes the distribution of resources and common goals, and guides the behaviour of individuals and groups; the mode of cultural reproduction, which transmits to subsequent generations the elements of culture gathered from all the subsystems; and the mode of bio-psychic reproduction, which guarantees the biological reproduction and psychic formation of the new members of society.

This type of model makes it possible to delineate in social and territorial space different contexts through which individuals move, even on a daily basis, experiencing different ways of experiencing contemporaneity. These

sufficiently regular movements give rise to a particular phenomenon of 'commuting', which obviously does not coincide, as in the more usual use of the term, with simple movements for work in the territory: instead, it is an alternation between social formations, the alternation that the individual experiences between the local reality and the other social, cultural and economic contexts that are configured in the region to which he or she belongs. Gallino (1980) argues that these daily, multiple life opportunities lead to a loss of orientation in the individual, who pendulums instrumentally within society assuming distinct roles, seeking to maximise his own interests, his own profits. Hence, according to Bravo (1984), participation in the festival is an active response to the problems of complex society¹, and the promoters of reproposal are therefore the people who leave and return from their place of origin for work or study, bringing with them the new experiences they have learned. «The man who most explores different social contexts, instrumentally maximising the opportunities provided by complexity, is the one who is most in search of traits of tradition, which by their mythical authority become elements of stability and cognitive orientation» (Grimaldi 2005: 12).

In *Festa contadina e società complessa* Bravo formulates his theory on the basis of three conceptual models: one is the one just outlined regarding social formations by Luciano Gallino, the second derives from biophysicist Atlan's (1979) elaborations of the production of complexity through noise, which «predicts the self-organising capacity of the agent system in response to environmental stimuli» (Bravo 1984: 34). Atlan, building on Shannon's (1948) information theory, according to which in a channel with noise the information quality of a message can only decrease, states that it is precisely from noise that information is generated. «For Atlan, too, not only does the self-organising system resist noise, it comes to use it as a factor in a new organisation» (Mazzoli 1996: 37). Bravo defines noise as the random disturbances that the environment introduces into the system's communication network and that can function as a stimulus to organisation: while it is true that noise causes the destruction of information and the collapse of network connections, it does not lead to the «collapse of the system itself, which can creatively start from this de-

¹ This hypothesis is confirmed in two different contexts investigated in the province of Cuneo by Renato Grimaldi (1987) at Sampeyre, in Val Varaita, in the Cuneo mountains, where every five years, during the Carnival period, the feast of the abaio takes place, interpreted in the local oral tradition as the re-enactment of the expulsion of the Saracens who are said to have invaded the area around the year one thousand; and in Valdivilla di Santo Stefano Belbo, a locality in which the analysis of the patronal feast, a ceremony particularly widespread in the Piedmontese territory, «gives greater solidity to the theoretical model and offers a high level of extrapolability to the results achieved» (Grimaldi R. 1987: 39).

struction – which is also liberation from constraints – to build new relationships, i.e. to complexify itself» (Bravo 1984: 35). Commuters, who experience noise from complexity more than anyone else because they are mobile between different social formations, are able to recover from the disorder this creates through cognitive self-organisation in the peasant-craft formation. And if the disorder, the noise disorients them – with respect to themselves, others and their own fundamental values – because «subjected in different contexts to distinct expectations and bound to value systems that are not always congruent, they find in the realisation of the traditional festival a moment of orientation and reconstitution of their community horizon» (Grimaldi 2005: 12).

Undoubtedly, the peasant festival proposes symbolic practices tested by repetitiveness that instil security and certainty, but in order to be functional to the existential needs of the individual exploring different social contexts they must be refunctionalised.

The concept of refunctionalisation introduces the third model adopted by Bravo to explain how commuters complexify the organisational response to noise, namely bricolage, in view of the fact that the constructive and reconstructive commitment that characterises the phenomenon of re-proposing and reinventing the feast proposes very composite ceremonies that present strange combinations or, at any rate, the co-presence, the juxtaposition of relatively heterogeneous elements. Used by Lévi-Strauss (1964) in his analysis of the way mythical thought proceeds², the technique of bricolage, on a practical level, consists of freely using pieces rendered free by shattering, recombining them within the framework of a broader system of analogies. The bricoleur does not have a plan, but collects and stores materials and pieces that have already been more or less processed, as well as animal and vegetable raw materials, which can be used to replace broken elements, possibly even performing functions different from those originally planned: this involves adaptability, flexible solutions and creativity. The festivity can be analysed in terms of bricolage because it «integrates tradition, with its consolidated languages and deep-rooted myths, and innovation and recombination» (Bravo 1987: 20), it collects pieces of other rites or collective representations, identifying free values for new meanings, which will be adapted to the context of community life and ceremoniality. Bricolage, however, is also play and fun, it is the casual use of parts that are originally parts of machines or tools or are intended for other purposes³. And the commuter, like the bricoleur, maxim-

² Lévi-Strauss defines thought as «an intellectual form of bricolage» (1964: 32).

³ For example, in Volvera (TO) a motorcyclist's helmet is the basis for the mask of the Carnival goat; the wolf in Chianale (CN) wears a gas mask, a detail introduced after the Second World

ises the resources and opportunities provided by the complexity he experiences on a daily basis by virtue of the roles he assumes: in actively participating in the feast, albeit reinvented, re-functionalised and re-semanticised, «the individual invests affectively in that time and space that is proper to the peasant-craft formation. The affective traits acquired in the practice of tradition [...] favour anchoring to a defined territory that regenerates identity lost in metropolitan complexity» (Grimaldi 2005: 12).

In recent years, the demand for community and festive experiences somehow rooted in the past and the local has become increasingly marked, so much so that even the media no longer overlook them. On the contrary, the media condition promoters to such an extent that they adapt to established and publicised festive models; many of these ceremonies are part of tourist circuits. Clemente writes that «when a culture or civilisation sees its ability to recognise itself in common values - its "identity" - in crisis, it has recourse to its past as a resource to invest in the future, and very frequently to the folkloric past, in which more than elsewhere it is possible to read the signs of a *communitas*, even if somewhat mystified and idyllic, but active as a possible ideal reference model» (2001: 192).

Commuters have remained the promoters of 'traditional' festivals and the most active in their realisation even in recent years, adopting various strategies of action: revitalisation, re-functionalisation, restoration of traditional elements that had fallen into disuse - «a tendency whereby what is presented to the observer as the most "archaic" or most alien to the official liturgy may in fact be the most recently introduced element» (Bravo 2013: 193) -, up to actual invention. Other social actors, however, have joined the commuters: returning immigrants, i.e. natives returning for the holidays; pensioners who choose to leave the city and search in the countryside for a forgotten, or never possessed, identity; children who maintain an affective bond with their parents' country of origin and who, despite often living in the city during the year, return even when their relatives are no longer there; sometimes even new residents, as shown by some studies on localities affected by a significant migratory phenomenon of tourists who, from occasional and summer, have become residential (Grimaldi 1996). The commitment of local actors and their in the recovery and re-functionalisation of elements as well as events of tradition highlight an active rural reality, a participant in complexity and in continuous dialogue with it.

War, demonstrating that bricolage is not a matter of recent years. But the game is not just a game, «it is the supreme bricoleur of fragile and ephemeral constructions [...] Its messages are a potpourri of apparently incongruous elements» (Turner 1986: 282).

Bravo thus teaches that the return to the peasant festival in complex society is not simply a perpetuation of tradition but the outcome of contemporaneity. Ariño (1997) adopted Bravo's theory to explain the revitalisation of traditional Spanish festivals. The same was done by the English scholar Boissevain (1992), thanks to whom the concept of revitalisation has achieved a kind of scientific consecration. If Bravo (1984) had hypothesised that festival participants find in it a refuge from the disorientation caused by complex society, in the revival of Good Friday processions and patronal festivals in Malta Boissevain identifies the protagonists' search for security and identity. Centelles (1998), while not sharing Bravo's heuristic framework, carried out monographic research on the pilgrims of the Cati in Spain, reaching conclusions similar to those of Bravo⁴.

Festa contadina e società complessa (1984) still remains a milestone in the field of ceremoniality studies: it is an investigation into the revival of the festival that establishes the relationship between the reactivation of tradition, the transformations of local community structures and the processes of modernisation, and reconstructs the connections between the research of local intellectuals, the revival of festivals and the promotion of rural museums. It is an obligatory reference point, a text that is still topical and fundamental for scholars interested in the analysis of festivity in Italy: the hypothesis that increased participation in festivity is an active response to the problems of complex society has been confirmed in different ceremonies, places and times over the course of forty years.

⁴ Centelles (1998) also highlighted the influence of outward gazes – tourists, TV – or semi-outward gazes – students, emigrants – on the local party.

Between propitiatory rites and Saracens: an invented but authentic and traditional past

The population that inhabits Italy today was formed over centuries with the ethnic and cultural contribution of different groups, such as the Arabs, whose rapid Mediterranean expansion led them to dominate the whole of Sicily in the 9th century and where they introduced «their science, mainly medicine and astronomy, and artistic and figurative elements [...] they also spread the scientific and philosophical traditions of Hellas, which the Latins had lost, laying the foundations for a new development of this knowledge in the West» (Bravo 2013: 37). Following the occupation of Sicily, which became one of their main outposts, the Saracens – the name by which western sources of the time referred to the Arabs or the Islamised populations of North Africa¹ – carried out numerous expeditions and built military garrisons along the coasts of southern Italy, where their presence failed to consolidate, in Liguria and Provence, from which they planned significant raids and acts of piracy inland; the fact that the raids were carried out by autonomous groups initially made it difficult for the local populations to organise their defence (Montanari, 2002). It is worth pointing out that the history of the Saracen incursions «should be placed in the broader scenario of the attacks conducted against Christian Europe by the Normans and the Hungarians» (Settia 1987: 142) and then the disintegration of the Carolingian empire: in 877, with the deposition of Charles the Great, a long and troubled period of struggles between the various lords began, which undermined unity and opened the borders to raids, so that, in this situation, the Saracens became «little more than an element in a tight game of unscrupulous forces, intent only on their own affirmation» (Tabacco 1966: 492-493).

¹ Panero also suggests «that the term “Saracens” was used in the chronicles of the time as a synonym for “foreigners”, “different”, a name that was in any case capable of generating terror in the populations affected by their presence. In reality, the raids carried out in the period before the second decade of the 10th century must be attributed to the Hungarians, while only in the second half of the century were the Saracens definitely responsible for the raids» (2006: 10).

Between 889 and 890, groups of Arab pirates landed on the French beaches of today's Saint-Tropez and set up camp in the area known as Frassineto² (today's La Garde-Freinet); they quickly invaded the territories of Arles and Fréjus, destroyed Ventimiglia and secured control of the coast as far as Albenga. Then, «after raging on eastern Provence, they turned their attention, not before 921, to the passes of the Alps, where they remained active in the following decades until their final expulsion» (Settia 1987: 127); and here they raided, destroyed, killed and kidnapped young men and women (Luppi 1983). This is not the place to investigate and evaluate the reliability and reservations raised by many historians about the available sources: there seem to be forged documents written in the 14th or 15th century to make local history more compelling (Settia 2009). It is certain, however, that between 921 and 972 the Saracens permanently occupied the routes of the Alps and their presence is fairly well documented as far as Piedmont is concerned. It was during this period that they devastated the abbey of Novalesa and the parish church of Oulx, which were then abandoned for the whole century; in 936 they reached Acqui, from where they were disastrously repulsed; they threatened Asti in 937 and destroyed the abbey of Giusvalla³; between 961 and 974 a band of Saracens was nesting in a forest near Vercelli (Settia 1987).

Despite the fact that the Saracen invasions had disastrous consequences for the economy, demography and political stability (Panero 2006), their memory, over the centuries increasingly elaborated, shaped and misrepresented, has become part of the collective imagination, producing traditions, legends, beliefs, toponyms. The image of these incursions can be seen in several festivals and rituals: one example is the *baio - abaio*, or *bahio* - of Sampeyre, in Val Varaita (CN), an Alpine carnival that has been repeated every five years since the Second World War and that in the local oral tradition is interpreted as the re-enactment of the expulsion of the Saracens who supposedly invaded the area around the year one thousand. But also some of the sword dances, of which, before giving an account, it is appropriate to briefly outline their profile.

The sword dance is a phenomenon of popular tradition that has been widely observed and analysed in Italy and Europe as a component of the

² Liutprand of Cremona (c. 920-970), a source considered a classic on the subject, failed to place Frassineto exactly, except between Italy and Provence. The supposed location was only established by later documents (Settia 1987).

³ Among the targets of Saracen raids were, above all, the great abbeys, places where great riches were kept (Montanari 2002).

complex system of spring, vegetable and agrarian rituals: its link with the renewal of vegetation seems to be suggested by various elements such as the colours of the spadonari's doublet, the presence and colours of the flowers and ribbons that adorn their headgear, certain choreographic figures that seem to mimic agrarian operations. According to some scholars (Frazer 1965; Sachs 1933; Toschi 1955; Vidossi 1936), the sword dance mimicked the confrontation and clash between opposing forces and propitiated the new season: it would not be a purely choreographic stylisation of combat but would unite «the two energies on which growth is based, the negative energy of defence and the positive energy of fertility» (Toschi 1955: 474). Originally, it was performed in the period of transition between winter and spring rebirth or, even better, as part of the carnival ritual; today it is danced in other contexts and within the framework of events that «do not intend and could not retain any ritual character to the dance, but instead enhance it as a spectacle» (Bravo 1981: 79). And if in the past it was presented as a peculiar moment of the rites of the beginning of the year, aimed at fostering the new agricultural year, nowadays the sword dance seems to be the resource that the local community uses to rebuild its own belonging and community visibility.

Sword dances, or armed dances, have many elements in common in Italy and throughout Europe⁴; in Italy, widespread until 1850, they were the subject – at least until 2001, when Piercarlo Grimaldi edited an interesting work on the subject – of only one specific study⁵ by Bianca Maria Galanti (1942) who, highlighting the prevailing character of each, proposed a division into three groupings⁶. This rather imprecise classification was followed by that of Paolo Toschi (1955), who instead identified four groups of dances⁷. Tullio Telmon (2001), more recently, mentioned that scholars generally distinguish three types of sword dances: Moresque, chain, and frontal. The Moresca con-

⁴ In Europe, sword dancing is active in France, Germany, Spain, Great Britain (England and Scotland), the Balkans and the Basque country (Bonato 2015).

⁵ Perhaps a convincing overall systematisation may have been hindered by «a centuries-long vicissitude of transformations, in time and space, of dances with weapons, in a continuous exchange of functions and contexts of use» (Castelli 2001: 125).

⁶ The groupings were subdivided as follows: a) dances with a historical-traditional content: these are subdivided into warrior dances, such as the Moresca (see below), and dances with an insurrectional character, which would celebrate victory against a tyrant; b) religious dances: these include both those that are an integral part of religious services and those that are performed on the occasion of religious festivities; c) dances with a varied content.

⁷ These are: a) dances of an archaic and distinctly rustic character; b) dances that follow the pattern of the Schwerttanz (see below); c) dances whose theme revolves around the fight for the hand of the bride; d) dances in which the agonistic motif is historicised in the struggle between Moors and Christians (the Moorish).

sists of a kind of ritualised combat between two groups of men armed with swords and with their faces painted black⁸. The chain dance is perhaps the most complex and culminates in two main figures, the rose and the elevation of the leader, «behind which scholars believe they recognise the death and resurrection of vegetative life» (Telmon 2001: 114). The frontal dance seems to lie somewhere between the Moresca and the chain dance, retaining of the one and the other, respectively, fast movements and leaping steps, and the reference to vegetation, the earth.

Armed dances are currently recorded in Italy in Piedmont, in Sicily, on the island of Ischia and in Apulia, in the province of Lecce⁹. The *Tataratà*, or *Tiritatà* – whose name derives, by onomatopoeia, from the rhythm beaten by the drum –, is linked to the Feast of the Holy Cross and takes place in Casteltermini (AG) on the last weekend of May. The '*Ndrezzata*'¹⁰ of Buonopane, a hamlet of Barano on the island of Ischia, is danced on Easter Monday, on the feast of the patron saint, St John the Baptist, on 24 June, and on the feast of the Madonna della Porta (15 August). The dance of the swords or fencing dance of Torrepaduli (Lecce) takes place from dusk on 15 to dawn on 16 August, the feast day of San Rocco: the dancers, accompanied by the

⁸ The term Moresca is generally used to refer to an armed dance of a dramatic nature that recalls the struggle between Christians and Turks. It is difficult to say when this performance, widespread in various European areas in past centuries, originated, although, obviously, in its form of the fight between Christians and Turks, it cannot predate the epic-historical episodes that inspired it. It is useful to remember that similar dance forms pre-existed the Turkish invasion in Italy, as in the rest of Europe, and this leads to the hypothesis that the Moresca represents an overlap with agrarian spring rites, i.e. fertility dances from pre-Christian times. These dances have never ceased to exist but, with the passage of time, the original meaning of the fight has disappeared in them, which is historicised, i.e. explained as the commemoration of a historical event as in the case of the Cross-Moon fight. In the 19th century, this dance progressively disappeared, remaining alive until the Great War only in a few centres, including Contigliano, in the province of Rieti, on which interesting research was conducted in the 1950s by Eugenio Cirese, later resumed in an essay by Bianca Maria Galanti and Paolo Toschi (Bonato 2015).

⁹ Regarding the armed dances of southern Italy, Antonio Gramsci, in a letter from prison (11 April 1927), wrote admiringly: «one night in Castellammare A., in the barracks of the carabinieri [...] special entertainment is organised in my honour [...] Pugliese, Calabrians and Sicilians hold a knife-fencing academy according to the rules of the four southern underworld states (the Sicilian State, the Calabrian State, the Apulian State, the Neapolitan State) [...] and for half an hour they develop the normal technique of all known fencing [...] The weapons were simple: spoons rubbed against the wall, so that the lime marked the blows on the dress» (1947: 33-34).

¹⁰ '*Ndrezzata* in the local dialect means entanglement, here referring to the rhythmic weaving of swords and *mazzarielli*.

sound of tambourines and the nasal chants of the stornellists, mimic a knife fight with their fingers (Bonato 2015).

The sword dance is a current, living phenomenon, especially in Piedmont, where the main Italian dances of this genre can be found today: although with different figures and rhythms, they are recorded in the province of Turin, in the Susa Valley (San Giorio di Susa, Giaglione, Venaus) and in the Chisone Valley (Fenestrelle), and in the Cuneo mountains (Bagnasco, Castelletto Stura)¹¹. The spread of the sword dance in this region was much wider even only fifty years ago: written and oral records confirm its presence in the past in the province of Turin, in Chianocco, Vaie, Mattie, Meana di Susa, Chiomonte, Exilles, Rueglio, Lugnacco, Salbertrand, and in the Cuneo area in Vicoforte, Fiamenga di Vicoforte, San Grato di Vicoforte and Briaglia (Borra and Grimaldi 2001). It should be noted that in the Piedmontese dances of Villaro d'Acceglio, Limone Piemonte and the *Lachera* of Rocca Grimalda, elements of the sword dance appear: although some scholars place them in this category, I have the impression that here the presence of swords is one element among many others and not a dance in its entirety¹².

Over the centuries, the sword dance has been transformed in content, interpretations, functions and narrative structure. This is the case in Piedmont, where it is sometimes performed in conjunction with festivals dedicated to patron saints, presenting itself as an integral part of the performers' religious consciousness; in some cases, it is now considered the dramatization of a legendary rebellion against the local tyrant (a type of event particularly exalted by nineteenth-century Romantic culture in its libertarian and anti-feudal significance); in others, it has undergone a historicization linked to more or less narratively elaborate memories of Saracen incursions into the Ligurian-Piedmontese hinterland¹³, e.g: Fenestrelle, Castelletto Stura and Bagnasco.

1. The *Bal do Sabre*

In Bagnasco, Castelletto Stura and Fenestrelle the sword dance is called *Bal do Sabre* (sabre dance) - more precisely *Bal do Sabre* in Bagnasco, *Bal del Sabre*

¹¹ For a detailed description of Italian and European dances, see L. Bonato (2006, 2015).

¹² The Villaro d'Acceglio and Limone Piemonte Carnivals, of which dance was an element, after a few attempts at revival, have not been active since 1989 and the early 1990s respectively.

¹³ Three different dances are preserved in the Susa Valley, Giaglione, Venaus and San Giorio, all related to the patronal feast of the village, which share common traits such as certain elements of clothing, dance movements and location in the festive calendar.

in Castelletto Stura and *Bal da Sabre* in Fenestrelle¹⁴ – and follows the chain pattern of the Schwerttanz of Germanic countries, from which it takes several choreographic figures: the chain, the circle, the rose, the braid. *Schwerttanz* was danced on precise dates in the rural ritual calendar (e.g. on Angel Monday) by a group of young bachelors, belonging to the youth companies, or badie (Meschke 1931). It includes the following figures: the chain, the rose of swords, the killing of the jester – or one of the dancers –, his elevation on the rose and the circle dance. Wolfram (1936) considered the figure of the jester to be very important: his killing and resurrection – as well as that of a similar character or dancer – would demonstrate the presence in the sword dance of a real initiation scene, in particular «the ritual, well-known consecration of the adolescent» (quoted in Galanti 1942: 38).

The figures proposed by the swordsmen in the Bal do Sabre are the jumping of the swords and the passage under them, the back-to-back crossing, the jumping in the circle, the double passage in the tunnel. In the chain, each swordsman lays his sword on his shoulder, pointing backwards, and grasps with his free hand the tip of the sword of the one in front: a chain is thus obtained, which then coils and uncoils without ever breaking, even when the swordsmen dance across a wooden circle. In the rose the swordsmen form a solid platform from the ingenious crossing of swords on which a character is hoisted: the condemned in Bagnasco, the Harlequin in Fenestrelle, a swordsman in Castelletto Stura. In the figure of the braid, the dancers form a circle in the centre of which is planted a pole from which coloured ribbons hang: the dancers, without swords, hold a coloured ribbon in their hands; as they dance, with steps in alternating directions, they cross each other, dancers and ribbons, so as to form a braid that they then unravel by turning in the opposite direction. It is interesting to note that, unlike in Bagnasco and Fenestrelle, where the dance around the pole closes the performance of the swordsmen, in Castelletto Stura the weaving of the ribbons constitutes the central moment of the ritual. Consider that in the past, the most significant act of the festivities marking the beginning of the year or the blossoming of spring consisted in “piantar Maggio” (planting a tree to which a propitiatory function was attributed): the tree was often adorned with flowers and coloured ribbons. Nowadays, in the above-mentioned locations, instead of a tree or branches we find a simple pole to which dance ribbons are tied to perform the circle figure¹⁵.

¹⁴ The Bal do Sabre form will be preferred here when it comes to outlining the general characteristics of the dance or dances of this type as a whole.

¹⁵ The tree, the pole, is also a recurring element in Sicily, as part of «Easter processional rites and dances of a propitiatory nature. Reference is made in particular to the large pole from

The tree is evidently perceived as the “centre of the world”, symbol of the *axis mundi*, but with the particularity of representing the cyclical nature and being the axis of orientation in space. It reflects axially in relation to space with its periodic regeneration, life-death-rebirth, in relation to time; the tree is therefore a unifying symbol of circular time and space: « several scholars believe that the dance of the armed men around the pole represents the circularity and repetitiveness of peasant time » (Grimaldi 1993: 271). However, it is interesting to note that dances in which dancers, moving in a circle, weave ribbons hanging from a pole are common throughout Europe¹⁶.

Over time, the Bal do Sabre, which used to be performed on precise dates linked to important moments in the agricultural year, has undergone a process of “historicization” and, as anticipated, is now linked to the legendary Saracen invasions in the Ligurian-Piedmont hinterland. This contamination manifested itself, depending on the case, with changes in the style and colour of costumes, no longer white as in the past; with the introduction of new characters, such as the Turks or the Moors; with the representation of an act of rebellion against the oppressor, such as Protasio Garrisio in Bagnasco and Revello in Castelletto Stura.

2. Castelletto Stura

Castelletto Stura, a Cuneo municipality of around 1,300 inhabitants, located on the right bank of the Stura di Demonte river, has made the Bal del Sabre its emblem and has dedicated a monument in the central square to those who have contributed to the preservation of this dance. There is no written documentation confirming this about the *Bal del Sabre*, which is danced on the feast of San Magno, the patron saint of the village, on the first Sunday in July¹⁷, but Pola Falletti (1937) believed that it was performed continuously from 1632 until the Second World War. It was then revived in 1968 by a

which hang long white bands held by devotees during the Good Friday procession in Pietrapertusa (EN) and to the pole from which dangle multicoloured ribbons held by dancers in the ‘cordella dance’ in Petraia Sottana (PA)» (Bonanzinga 1999: 85). Also in the dance of the cordella, as in the *Bal do Sabre*, the dancers move in a circle, each holding a ribbon: their different movements make up creative interlacements.

¹⁶ Sachs (1933) reported on the widespread use in North Africa of dancing in pairs by weaving ropes dangling from a natural tree.

¹⁷ In the past, the patron saint’s day fell on the third Sunday in August, it has only been brought forward to July for the past ten years or so. The *Bal del Sabre* for some time was offered at the end of August, on the occasion of a gathering organised by the local Camper Club,

group of young people led by Gian Giacomo Allione, later mayor of the village for several terms: some characters, however, including the Harlequin, have disappeared¹⁸. The only sources, from the early 20th century, seem to be a few brief mentions by Euclide Milano (1920 and 1929) and an oil painting by Giulio Boetto, *El bal dël Sabre ëd Castlèt*, conserved in the Cuneo civic museum, « although many scholars have doubts about the authenticity of the dance depicted in it » (Borra and Grimaldi 2001: 55). And on the basis of this painting just over ten years ago, the “Bal del Sabre” Folkloric Association modified the costume of the swordsmen, which is in the colours red and blue.

Before the revival, the *Bal del Sabre* was danced during Carnival and was combined with a singular event, the *Regiment of Spiantà* (Army of the Spiantati), linked to the re-enactment of the legendary occupation of the village in 1363 by John Hawkwood’s (Giovanni Acuto) company of adventurers, who had made Castelletto Stura their stronghold. Local people believe that the *Bal del Sabre* was inspired by a real episode that happened in 1539, when the people of Castelletto rebelled against the Saracens. The Saracens, who had landed near Savona, led by Selim, allegedly pushed their way to Castelletto Stura and occupied its castle; they would then have forced the population to pay 3,000 ducats and hand over the twelve most beautiful girls in the village. A peasant, Revello, is said to have opposed the kidnapping of his daughter by hitting a Saracen soldier with a hoe: the episode triggered the entire population to rise up and drive out the invaders.

3. Fenestrelle

In Fenestrelle, a commune of about 600 inhabitants in the Val Chisone, in the province of Turin, the feast of the patron saint, Saint Louis IX, falls on 25 August and has a particular component in the Bal da Sabre, which has taken place since 1886 with significant interruptions¹⁹.

which in turn coincided with the festival of the bean, a typical local product that bears the designation of origin mark (Bonato 2006).

¹⁸ The group of the *Bal del Sabre* currently consists of twenty elements: twelve swordsmen, a drummer, two drums, the maidens - representing the maidens of the *Regiment of Spiantà* -, two assistant swordsmen, whose task is to hold the circle through which the dancers pass and to set up the tree.

¹⁹ The *Bal da Sabre* was suspended during the years of the Great War and then, after World War II, there was another interruption until 1965; it was resumed by the Fenestrelle folk group in 1967 (Bonato 2015).

There are fourteen swordsmen, assisted by two or three drummers²⁰, who beat the rhythm of the dance, and the Harlequin. The Harlequin, who disturbs the dancers with shrieks, leaps and stimulating flicks of the stick throughout the performance, is undoubtedly the most characteristic figure who, at a certain point in the dance, is pinned with a rose of swords to his waist and then released; immediately afterwards the swords close around his throat (rose at the throat). Harlequin falls to the ground to rise almost immediately to the platform of swords, from which in dialect he greets those present and thanks the authorities; it seems that this dialogue part did not exist originally²¹, and that it was proposed in the 1960s with the last revival of the *Bal da Sabre*. Note that when the group performs outside Fenestrelle, the Harlequin "speech" is offered in the local language. Until a few years ago, the group also included two guards or heralds, whose job it was to ask the spectators for permission to start the dance, and a Turk, who held the wooden hoop and the tree of liberty, so named perhaps in reference to that of the French Revolution, as Pola Falletti speculated (1939-1942).

In the morning, the spadonari parade through the village preceded by girls dressed in the ancient Fenestrelle bridal costume: they hold trays of bread, decorated with fresh mountain flowers, which is blessed during the mass; it will be distributed to those present in the churchyard at the end of the service. The dance is performed in the afternoon at the sports ground and is preceded by the performance of the women's group²².

The *Bal da Sabre* used to be danced during Carnival; the performance was then followed by the trial of the *Sarasin*, the Saracen: this detail manifests the "historicization" of the dance previously mentioned.

4. Bagnasco

The *Bal do Sabre* of Bagnasco²³ is linked to a legend according to which a commoner, Protasio Garrasio, refused the hand of his daughter to Ramset, the leader of the Saracens who oppressed Bagnasco, and was therefore con-

²⁰ The number of swordsmen - at least twelve - and drummers - at least two - may vary from year to year, depending on the availability of the local population.

²¹ The Harlequin's speech, courtesy of the Gruppo Folkloristico di Fenestrelle, was first published in my contribution *Il Bal da Sabre di Fenestrelle* (2001).

²² The women's group generally consists of sixteen girls between the ages of 10 and 22 and performs the ancient Occitan dances and costumes.

²³ Bagnasco, in the province of Cuneo, is an important road junction linking the Tanaro Valley and its side valleys. The municipality has about a thousand inhabitants.

demned to death and killed. Although the Saracen presence in Bagnasco is not historically certain, the population believes it possesses significant evidence: the ruins located next to the chapel of Santa Giulitta are said to be those of the ancient Saracen fortress, destroyed following a popular uprising. In particular, a carved stone representing a turban surrounding a scythe and a star according to the people of Bagnasco constitutes proof that the Moors invaded the region.

The oldest records of the *Bal do Sabre* date back to the beginning of the last century and document, after an interruption of thirty years, the revival of the dance in 1900 on the occasion of the Carnival. From then on it was performed occasionally (1905, 1914, 1927, 1948, 1951, 1952), until, in 1968, the Pro loco, under the leadership of Beppe Carazzone and Fulvio Seno, reconstituted the group of dancers with the support of the elderly who remembered the rhythm and steps of the dance, and staged the performance for the Garessio Carnival (Carazzone 1994). Since then, the group's activity has not been interrupted and the dance is performed several times a year and in various locations - Italian and foreign (Belgium, France, England, Czechoslovakia) -, no longer respecting the traditional calendar schedule that proposed its performance during the carnival period. Since 1999, the *Bal do Sabre* has been one of the events included in "Bagnasco a colori" (Bagnasco in colour), an event dedicated to art in its various forms, organised by the Pro loco and the municipality on the third Sunday in August. Bagnasco has hosted the event called "International Meetings of Armed Dance Groups" several times: the latest edition took place on 7 and 8 July 2018, and simultaneously celebrated the 50th anniversary of the reconstitution of the *Bal do Sabre* group. On that occasion, I met Maria Raviolo Ferrando, whose valuable testimony I quote a few passages from. « This dance [...] was perhaps brought by the Saracens when they came to infest our valleys, certainly before the year 1000. It was performed before every capital execution. At one time, all the villages in the valley knew how to dance it, then it fell into disuse. Only more Bagnasco remained. To our village, Napoleon Bonaparte, by his own decree, granted exclusivity for the performance of this dance. It was always performed at Carnival and was saved in the early 1900s thanks to the elders of the village, to whom my maternal grandfather Domenico Brunetti turned, who danced it and taught it to young people after an interruption of more than thirty years. [...] Under my grandfather's direction it was danced in 1900²⁴, then in 1905, 1914 and 1927. [...] Under my grandfather's direction, after the war it was performed in 1948, 1951, 1952. Then nothing more until 1968».

²⁴ The informant pointed out that the *Bal do Sabre*, performed that year at the Marengo theatre in Ceva, won an award.

Domenico Brunetti reiterated in a manuscript dated 2 April 1959²⁵: «the Saracen sabre dance is [...] very difficult, with varied and original movements almost resembling an Arabian fantasy. [...] At least 20 to 25 young men aged 18 to 25 are needed to do this dance. Of these no less than 12 and no more than 14 must be armed with sabres and with these perform the necessary movements and never break away from each other. There are also three or four young men who are given the task of representing the Moors, dressed almost like the Ethiopian Ascari».

The revival registered significant changes in terms of costumes and distribution of roles: central characters such as Harlequin and Brighella, grotesque mirrors of the dancers, whose gestures they parodied, were replaced respectively by the condemned man and the jester, who nonetheless retained similar functions; the herald, who reads the death sentence, and the guards escorting the condemned man were also introduced. The costumes, made up to that time from recycled fabrics, essentially white, have undergone a progressive Arabisation and are now the property of the Pro loco. The death sentence, in a cocktail of macaronic Latin and local dialect, was drafted by the village parish priest, Don Blengino, at the end of the 1960s: for the condemned man's name he chose that of one of the village's oldest families, affirming his intention to intimately associate *Bal do Sabre* with the people of Bagnasco and its history.

The *Bal do Sabre* group currently consists of twenty-five elements: twelve swordsmen, who, armed with sabres, dance and perform various choreographed figures; three drummers²⁶ and a herald, who announce the dancers' entrance into the square; four Moors, who hold the wooden hoop, through which the dancers will pass, and the tree with the coloured ribbons; two guards; the condemned, the protagonist of the dance in the figure of the rose, killed by the swordsmen and resurrected by the jester's breath; the flag-bearer, who holds the banner of the folkloric group; the jester, who orchestrates the rhythm of the dance, marked by seven different fundamental modules.

5. Reflections

The sword dances of Bagnasco, Castelletto Stura and Fenestrelle, interrupted and forgotten for years, have been revitalised, becoming the object of special attention, preservation and also new creation: their more archaic or traditional elements not only define a distinct local peculiarity but, in the intensifica-

²⁵ The writing is in the possession of his niece, Maria Raviolo Ferrando.

²⁶ Occasionally two drummers are added.

tion of relations with the outside world by the group that performs them, they become a channel for the expression of cultural specificity. The attendance and presence in recent years of numerous spectators from neighbouring towns and the various performances in other Italian and European localities contributes on the one hand to reinforcing the positive image that the locals have of their festival, and on the other hand to accelerating the process of re-functioning to which the ceremony has been subjected.

But what is the meaning, the value attributed to the dance by the audience of onlookers? And by the swordsmen themselves? It is evident that this practice is today almost completely defunctionalised and desemantised: in fact, we register a loss of meaning relating to beliefs about the ritual's magical-religious effects and to the gestures, symbols and ritual actions that has nevertheless been recovered on a formal level. To what extent, then, can the sword dance be related to «its traditional prototype, the result of centuries of meaning-making by communities [...] who have elaborated and transmitted it over the centuries from generation to generation?» (Artoni 1997: 130). From the words of the informants, it seems that, although moving away from their original purpose, sword dances are not intended to be kept exclusively in the form of entertainment and for tourist purposes, although it must be emphasised that they are often promoted and publicised as part of cultural and recreational events of various kinds, outside the community and regardless of calendar dates. The dance of swords is thus used in a key of reaffirmed belonging but also of consumption and promotion of local products and the territory. Pro loco associations and folkloristic groups, the organisers and promoters of such events, publicise the event by relying on the latest technology, large entertainment events and commercial circuits. Often, then, the performance of the *spadonari* takes place on Sundays, during holiday periods, or, if the date remains unchanged, it is repeated to allow tourists to attend.

It would perhaps be useful to consider the workings of the dance of swords on a productive and communicative level: thus, the commitment of the protagonists could be read as «a strategy of self-representation and communication that aims to show an original image of rootedness in the community and the territory» (Bravo 2003: 42). The information gathered shows that dance seems to be preserved above all as a commitment of the local population to defend the traditions, culture and history of their country: by sustaining continuity, it speaks to us of the uniqueness of the culture and country in which it takes place and promotes the growth of cultural heritage. In my opinion, we are faced with a double relationship of signification: the dance of swords constitutes the symbolic representation of the community that perpetuates it and, at the same time, the latter identifies in it the element through which it manifests its specificity of identity.

A conscious cultural project of revival and protection of tradition: the egg quest

The component of creativity and intentional reconstruction of the feast – local, peasant, of the past – that characterises the Italian ceremonial scene generates a rituality shaped on models that are intended to be traditional. Thus, in many cases, thanks above all to the commitment of young people, the promoters have undertaken important research (anthropological, historical, musical, choreutic) and a collection of oral and material evidence; at the same time they have participated in events outside their country. The result of this endeavour are well-kept festivals, also from a philological point of view, which nevertheless often offer «kitsch assemblages of lewdly rural and purportedly archaic elements, where the old farmer or mountain man plays himself with good grace in artefactual costumes and artificial settings» (Bravo 2005: 58).

A careful recovery work) by spontaneous groups in southern Piedmont has enabled the revival of the “questua delle uova” (egg quest), *canté j’euu*, cheerful spring songs that used to be totally spontaneous, un-piloted, and are now organised annually as a grand recital of the beautiful peasant past.

1. Resacralising time and space

The quest for eggs, *canté j’euu*, once widespread in the rural area of southern Piedmont, was a spring ceremony that augured the blossoming of the fine season and propitiated domestic fortunes. The rite provided that at nightfall, during Lent, in the «time of silence, penance and fasting» (Grimaldi 2012: 94), noisy groups of young singers, exclusively male, would wander from house to house: they would visit the most isolated farmsteads, enter every farmyard singing the questing song. The travelling troupe was accompanied by various instruments, the most important of which was the accordion, the sound of which formed the musical basis of the song. The motif knew many variants – also reported and documented by various researchers such as Ferraro (1870), Barolo (1931), Pola Falletti (1939-1942) and others – and consist-

ed of quatrains whose number changed depending on the composition of the family to which it was addressed. The first verse of greeting was always dedicated to the lady of the house, to whom compliments and good wishes for health and prosperity were addressed; then followed one for each member of the family. While verses were therefore improvised to reverence each member of the family visited, it should be noted that this extemporaneity was in a sense controlled: the singers belonged to the community and knew their guests well.

Eggs and other foodstuffs were requested, which were then used to prepare a collective lunch on Easter Monday. Very often, the families visited also offered specially prepared food and drinks, inviting the singers to come into the house to enjoy them, chatting and often singing songs from the popular repertoire together. It could happen, however, that the guests did not respond to the invitation and did not open their homes, and then they would hear insulting stanzas: «the singing curse, consisting of a few stanzas, becomes... a collective censure that communally sanctions the family's irritable, selfish, miserly behaviour» (Grimaldi 2012: 86).

This ritual nocturnal pilgrimage each year sacralised the spaces and times of the community, reintegrated «to the community the places marked by winter social and emotional distances» (Grimaldi 2005: 21). The young questors were only men, and their questing was conditioned by the search for homes where girls were to be found: in this sense, *cantè j euv* also fulfilled the not insignificant function of ritually renewing the social fabric of the rural community and allowing girls and young men to get to know each other and meet.

I will not analyze in detail the interpretation of the quest egg in terms of a procedure of ritual redistribution of goods and resources, a ceremony of seasonal passage or the beginning of a productive and communal cycle, I will simply point out that it was an extremely simple ritual. Both a generator - for the recipient - and a propitiator - for the giver - of abundance, it envisaged at a later stage the distribution of the collected eggs in a communal meal.

After falling into disuse in the 1940s, (By the 1940s, the quest was no longer a frequent practice), but in recent decades egg collecting has been experiencing significant revitalisation by local groups. One of the Lenten quests - if not the first of them all - resumed in the mid-1960s is that of Magliano Alfieri (CN): interrupted in 1948, it came back into use in 1965 thanks to the action of the Gruppo Spontaneo, still one of the best known and most active in Piedmont, which «anticipated by several decades the revival and re-functioning of local popular traditions, now so widespread» (Bravo 2005: 25). Just as in the past, the questing begins after sunset and continues until late at night. The questors, who used to be the young men of the village, now

belong to both sexes, with no shortage of mature people. The procession is led by a person masked as a monk who collects the gifts in a basket of willow branches (Adriano 1998). The egg song is in dialect.

In the years that followed, again on the initiative of local people and thanks to patient recovery work by spontaneous groups, *cantè j'euu* was revived in areas where it was already widespread in the past. An interesting phenomenon of revival is the questua of Mongardino, a small town a few kilometres from Asti, in the hills of Monferrato; here the ceremony of singing the eggs had fallen into disuse for several decades, perhaps in connection with the Second World War, and was revived in the 1980s - only to be interrupted in the mid-1990s and resumed in 2012 - by members of the Pro loco, who managed to re-establish the text of the questua song in an Italian version: the questors, however, addressed an ominous verse in dialect to the family who did not open their doors, as mentioned above.

Compared to the traditional form described, the egg quest in which I have participated in several locations, and for several editions, maintains the same ceremonial structure but has substantial differences - some immediately evident, others confirmed by informants - concerning the organisers, the questors and the timing of the performance. As far as the organisers are concerned, the Pro Loco has generally replaced the spontaneous initiative of young people; the group of beggars is particularly composite, as the distinction by age and gender no longer applies, and includes young women and the elderly; and, finally, the calendar setting of the ceremony has changed considerably. Active in a geographical and social space in which economic concern is no longer linked to the products of the land but to those of development or industrial or commercial crisis, questing is today totally defunctionalised. However, the fact that it is re-proposed stimulates reflection.

In 2001, the first 'Festival delle uova d'Italia' (Italian Egg Festival) was inaugurated in Canale (CN); in the same year, in Guarene (CN), the still-active event called "Cantè j'euu Roero" got underway: during the month of March, individual groups quest in their village and then participate, all together, in a grand final kermesse with shows, songs and dances. In subsequent years it has been repeated in various locations in the Roero, Langa and Monferrato because the final evening is itinerant.

"Cantè j'euu Roero", whose aim is the rediscovery and enhancement of popular music and the promotion of small towns in the provinces of Cuneo, Asti and Alessandria, is also a solidarity project: the proceeds of many of the quests, and especially of the final rally, are donated to charity each year to support humanitarian initiatives. In this event, which has been sponsored by the Piedmont Region for a few years now, the provinces of Asti and Cuneo are amply represented by a large number of groups; for Alessandria, on the

other hand, only the group from Casal Cermelli, the only locality in the province that has preserved the tradition of egg-singing, participates.

2. The case of Casal Cermelli

In Casal Cermelli, a small town in the plains of Alessandria with a population of around 1,200 inhabitants, essentially agricultural and horticultural in nature, the quest for eggs has never been interrupted. This is, in my opinion, a successful case of grafting invention onto the continuity of tradition: this is why I believe it is worthwhile to describe first of all the ceremony as it appeared to me the first times I witnessed it – and as it certainly appears to the eyes of a non-native public –; I will then set out some considerations deriving from the careful study I have carried out on this event.

In the past, unlike in other Piedmontese towns where it was widespread, the ceremony took place on Holy Saturday, when groups of questors arrived from Rocca Grimalda, in the Ovada area. These, during Lent, stopped to sing in all the towns of the valley bottom to arrive in the last one, Casal Cermelli, precisely on Saturday; « it is said that [...] some came with [...] old carriages used by the nobility of the time, to which they tied barrels, tanks and cisterns to make noise »¹. The tradition was interrupted during the years of the First World War only to be resumed soon afterwards by the locals, who maintained the custom of singing eggs on Easter Eve.

In keeping with tradition, only on the Friday and Saturday before Easter does the group of singers wander around the farmsteads and houses of the village. This appointment was “formalized” in 2001 in the event known as “Cantè j’ov”, organised by the Pro loco and entrusted to a single group, that of the Calagiubella, whose members have always quested together, as Mauro Nizzo states: « we never missed a year; the first few times we were 15-16 years old, we rode on mopeds and knew absolutely nothing about playing! »². And reiterates: « We (Mauro and I) used to go egg-singing in improvised and spontaneous groups with childhood friends when we were kids. So I can tell you that the group formed spontaneously, as often happens in these cases. There’s also one thing to point out, not to boast or not, but the whole egg-singing thing is, in most cases, a form of revival (when a village wants to revive a festival that had been lost), whereas we never revived anything, we

¹ Interview with D.C.

² Interview with M.N.

always continued what was already happening every year. The good thing, for us, is that nothing ever stopped»³.

Until then, there were several groups who, independently of each other, went around singing: the gifts received were then consumed privately by the questors alone. The performers used to be the young men of the village, some of whom have become the current actors, those who have taken on the task of promoting the egg quest outside⁴.

The two evenings of the "Cantè j'ov" are quite distinct and very different: apparently more genuine the first, publicised and spectacular the next. On Fridays, as soon as it gets dark, an increasingly large group of beggars following the Calagiubella family, moving from house to house by car⁵, pass by to sing the egg song. The singers are mostly people who frequent contexts other than the peasantry, characterised by different models and values: it should be noted, however, that the houses they visit are not only inhabited by farmers. Nevertheless, they establish with the households to which they go a system of traditional ritual behaviour, strongly characterised in a peasant sense: the householders intervene in the ritual as producers and owners, who dispose of their goods enough to redistribute them through the ceremony.

On Saturday evening, after the mass, at around 10 p.m., the singers arrive on foot, playing, in the main village square, where the public, consisting also of many outside visitors, awaits them. A large bonfire is already lit in the centre and, next to the stalls of local exhibitors, there is a rich stall set up by the Pro loco where you can taste boiled eggs, salami, farinata, wine and the local speciality, almond cake. The questors intone the song under the windows and terraces of some families who drop a basket with offerings, at the end of the performance. The Calagiubella, with the support of various musical ensembles from other areas and provinces of Piedmont, then entertain the public by playing on the stage set up in the square; groups offering traditional dances also often perform. This theatricalised form of questing, for which the Calagiubella painstakingly restore elements of the past – for example, they wear their grandparents' cloak and hat – could, however, compromise a complex system of traditional ritual behaviour. In fact, we recall that here too, as in the whole of southern Piedmont where it was practised, systematic and articulated questing required that the beggars enter the farmyard or court-

³ Interview with G.N.

⁴ As mentioned, the group from Casal Cermelli is the only one representing the province of Alessandria at "Cantè j'eu Roero".

⁵ Until a few years ago, the group travelled on a wagon pulled by a tractor, which was decommissioned for safety reasons.

yard of each household and sing the egg song. Sometimes the offering of guests was accompanied by ritual exchanges of phrases and jokes; more often, then, the singers were invited to enter the house for a richer and more prolonged reception, during which they chatted, exchanged impressions, wished each other well, and sang, also with the guests, other songs from the folk repertoire. It is on these occasions that the questing brings out hints and moments of satire, social criticism or references to the political situation. And then, until 2001, there were several groups in Casal Cermelli who, autonomously and independently of each other, went around singing: the gifts received were then consumed privately by the questors alone.

Compared to the canonical one, the “new” Saturday evening quest has an unusual morphology, dare I say disrespectful of the past, taking place on the stage that is the centre of the village. Yet this is the “authentic” evening! The elderly remember that in Casal Cermelli they have always “sung eggs” only on Holy Saturday, causing – now and then – disagreements with the parish priest, even if it started strictly after mass (as is still the case today). On Fridays, the most genuine interpretation, was invented by the Calagiubella in 2003 in response to numerous requests from villagers; now the questors visit certain houses and farmsteads according to previously established agreements. The same is done by another group from Casal Cermelli, which has (re)formed for the occasion since the early 1980s, when most of its members, who were still boys, used to go begging by bicycle or moped; now the means of transport used is a lorry, open at the back, on which chairs are placed for the beggars: «in ‘83 a gentleman from the village taught us the music and we set off with the trailer to carry on this tradition»⁶. It is important to point out that there is no animosity between the two groups, but rather a healthy and friendly rivalry that is resolved around midnight on Friday, when they all come together to feast. And it not infrequently happens that the proceeds from the quests of the two groups are then consumed by them at a dinner organised in the Pro loco headquarters on the Sunday after Easter.

Unlike the Calagiubella, the second group of questors, which describes itself as the heir to the old village band, seems to have retained a certain genuineness because it does not set up visits in advance but meticulously passes through every house in the village offering its services: «we pass by everyone. We collect eggs, bottles, Easter doves»⁷.

I think, however, that despite the reciprocity being agreed upon in advance, the wanderings of the Calagiubella and their retinue also retain a cer-

⁶ Interview with M.C.

⁷ Interview with M.N.

tain spontaneity: it could not be otherwise because the - apparent - artificiality inherent in the agreement regarding the visit is diluted in the inventiveness that nonetheless manifests itself during the quest and which goes beyond the planned event. There are always, inevitably, "outliers" that stimulate the group first of all to transgress the rules of the singing context by extending the song with extemporaneous stanzas; my own presence, often with colleagues and students, undoubtedly creates a diversion!

On the other hand, the Saturday evening ceremonial system is decidedly more "rigid" and inflexible, also motivated by the fact that it starts strictly after the mass and, obligatorily, has a space of action of a couple of hours because prolonging it would disturb the inhabitants. Exactly as in the past, singing eggs on Easter Eve generates disagreements with the parish priest; but if questing, which in the past was everywhere represented during Lent, a period of penance and fasting, was configured as «a counter-rhythm that defies the canonical liturgy» (Grimaldi 2005: 16), in Casal Cermelli, while maintaining this provocative ritual otherness, it becomes «a real fundamental strategy for the immaterial and material survival of the community» (Grimaldi 2005: 17).

Alms-gathering is one of the "meeting places" of the Casalcermellesi, «involving them if nothing else in marking their degree of participation in collective life, their role and social respectability» (Buttitta 2007: 15). The perpetuation of this ceremony is the community's conscious desire to recognise and affirm itself through its repetition «as a founding moment of its social and cultural belonging» (Giallombardo 1999: 99). I consider it extremely significant that the same people have been chanting eggs in Casal Cermelli for the past forty years, but accompanied by young people to whom they are passing on the active knowledge of the ritual. The innovation of Fridays, which takes place in a network across the territory, ritually redraws the boundaries of the community, which do not coincide with administrative boundaries⁸, «annually resacralises community spaces and times that have loosened [...] over the course of the year» and allows one to «maintain active, constantly fortify a social circuit and relationships that daily spaces and times tend to depotentiate» (Grimaldi 2005: 21). It is important to note that in questua there are no distinct roles of actors and spectators: the actors are in fact not only those who go from house to house singing but also the guests who await the questors' visit and who, for the occasion, prepare the offering

⁸ An example of this is the Cascina Torre, located on the territory of a neighbouring municipality, whose inhabitants identify with the community of Casal Cermelli, and which questors do not fail to visit every year.

or even organise a banquet. At the very moment when users open the door to welcome the singers, it is as if they were opening it on a stage because they become part, as protagonists, of the performance.

The quest, even in cases where it has been conserved over time without interruption, as in Casal Cermelli, cannot be understood simply in terms of perpetuating an ancient tradition because the ritual has been charged with new content, has taken on new functions: topicality and tradition here mingle and merge – as happens in other ceremonies – to reinvigorate the institution itself. We are not in the presence of a folkloric residue: if the annual repetition of the ritual represents an emphasisation of tradition, in particular the chanting and material symbolic elements allow the ritual's symbolic and behavioural universe to be «further qualified, as relatively available markers of social location, identity» (Bravo 1983: 93). The quest is repurposed to elaborate new cultural meanings, and with each performance it accentuates the topicality of its function, that is, to orient and coordinate to behaviors and values related to the peasant world

3. The double reproposal of Mongardino

The first egg quest I took part in, in 1988, was in Mongardino, a municipality in the Asti hills with a population of about a thousand. Here the ceremony had fallen into disuse for several decades, perhaps in connection with the Second World War, and was revived in the 1980s by members of the Pro loco, who managed to re-establish the text of the questing song with the help of Giuseppe Tartaglino, a local farmer who had accompanied the questors with his accordion when he was young. The song has since been offered in an Italian version: the questors, however, address an ominous verse in dialect to the family that does not open its doors, as already mentioned. The Mongardino questua song could be a cultured reworking, perhaps censored in the more transgressive stanzas that characterised it, «a “purged” version» – as Grimaldi puts it – «by some local intellectual who believed he was doing an educational work by Italianising... the text of the spring questua» (1993: 225). The accurate study carried out by Piercarlo Grimaldi (1993) in Mongardino revealed an active presence of the local Church that strongly influenced the traditional calendar cycle. This cultural operation may have been carried out by Don Lorenzo Gentile, a priest in the Asti municipality until the early 1930s, an intellectual and scholar who was committed to reconstructing the historical roots of the village. «Aimed at the formation of a national character and the moral edification of the young» (Grimaldi 1993: 225), in his printed works, Don Gentile formalised data, events, information

but, at the same time, selected, excluded, kept silent on other aspects of Mongardino's life. It can then be assumed that the egg song, in the Italian version, may derive from the intellectual context now outlined.

In Mongardino, starting in 1984, people began to sing eggs during Holy Week on Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings, in order to adapt to the contemporary rhythms of work and the needs of those who worked outside the village. It often ended in May, i.e. only when all the families in the village had been visited. In fact, the organisers intended to involve all local families and also allow those who worked outside the community to participate in the collection. In fact, only about one hundred individuals were employed in agriculture, the majority were active outside the village in other productive sectors: they were therefore "commuters" between different socio-cultural contexts, and Bravo showed that it was precisely this "commuting" that generally determined «attention to local culture, and in particular the revival of traditional festivals and ceremonies and active participation in them» (1993: 19).

The beggars, young and old of both sexes, would meet at the oratory at around 9 p.m. and from there, until late at night, they would walk a predetermined route: the programme of the various evenings was printed on posters posted throughout the village. The group consisted of the players, usually comprising two accordions, a drum, a mandolin and some clarinets, and the singers. The latter, just as in the past, addressed the song of praise to all the members of the family visited, mainly to the man and woman who owned the house, and then to the children, grandparents, etc. The quest, however, was no longer characterised by the gift of eggs or other foodstuffs, but by cash offerings. The proceeds were then used for interventions in small public works and to thank, with a collective dinner and dance, all those who had contributed to the ceremony.

The Mongardino quest for food is an interesting phenomenon of double repetition because, after having been suspended in the late 1990s, it was resumed in 2012 with renewed vigour and fortune, confirming that it serves to ritually renew the membership of the local and rural community of the questors and users; and it is also an element of reorientation for all members of the community. My last observation of the ceremony - March 2016 - now prompts some thoughts on the perception of questing by locals. Not neglecting the fact that the fundamental expressive performance of the quest consists of singing, which, as we know, is of great importance as a tool for emotional communication, another interesting element of this ceremony is the hospitality. Every single act of welcome by one family towards others, especially if performed through the offering and sharing of food and drink, can give rise to a lasting bond of friendship and solidarity, can strengthen an already existing and more or less solid relationship. It is clear that questua is a

phenomenon of reciprocity, of exchange. And it can be defined, in the words of Clement, as an itinerant ceremonial action with exchange: «in fact, in the extensive European documentation, the itineration, the exchange between certain actions (singing, mime, performance, music...) and gifts (mainly food) appears constant» (1981: 47). And here we are far from Mauss's classic theme because there is no ostentation and waste, no acquisition of prestige, nor can the «mechanism of distribution of goods be considered as alluding to an ideology of limited resources» (Clemente 1981: 53). I would focus attention on the exchange of gifts in which, as Sahlins (1976) argued, the cultural significance is prominent, expressing a specific logic of correspondence between the economic and cultural dimensions: «reciprocity, in this sense, reproduces, through a form of exchange, roles, occasions, functions and cultural situations» (Matera 1997: 653).

However, while these elements are significant in the ceremony, they do not bring us any closer to the meaning of the re-proposal for the people of Mongardino. With regard to itinerant ceremonial actions, Clement speaks of asymmetry, meaning by this term «an imbalance in the distribution of behaviour and actions» (1981: 51). In fact, the group of beggars experiences the ceremony in its entirety, for the whole cycle, while the users are only part of it for a few minutes. Hence «the celebration is not visible to everyone as a whole, but only to the group that primarily acts and determines it» (Clemente 1981: 51). This structural asymmetry - Clemente continues - is partially resolved in the final banquet that reaffirms the collectivity of the feast. I agree with Clemente that there is asymmetry and that it is fundamental and significant, but it seems to me that in reality, despite this asymmetry, the visit allows the guests to take full ownership of the ceremony when, for a few minutes - those few minutes that, compared to the entire duration of the ceremony, determine the asymmetry - they invite the beggars into their home. And so perhaps the significance for the inhabitants of Mongardino lies in the fact that «the acceptance of the beggars by the family... transforms the people of the farmstead into actors who begin to weave a formal, sometimes musical dialogue with the guests» (Grimaldi 2005: 15). The party thus seems to enter their everyday life, it becomes intimate, it is theirs, and they can have exclusive and almost absolute control over the ceremony.

Alpine transhumance and community rituals: the bataille des reines

1. *Bullfighting*

My contribution aims to give an account of a phenomenon of local Alpine tradition that in today's context is spreading and being promoted through the latest technologies, large spectacle events and commercial circuits commercial circuits: the bataille des reines, the battle of the queens, which takes place in Valle d'Aosta and Piedmont; and then in Switzerland, in the Valais, and to a lesser extent in Savoy and the French region of Faucigny, at the foot of Mont Blanc. It is a complex ceremonial system related to an instinctive behavior of cows, a fierce but bloodless struggle between cows, whose goal is not to eliminate the opponent but to obtain its submission. Obviously, two different types of battles can be distinguished: spontaneous ones, brought about by the need for animals of the same species to coexist in the same territory, and those organized by man, codified and planned to promote breeding, to improve the breed and also to ensure the conservation of cows.

The battle of the queens, whose diffusion contrasts with the shrinking rural world of the mountains (Giglio 2019), today seems to be the resource that the local community uses to assert its identity and to promote local products and the territory; it currently combines tradition and innovation, creatively mixing past and present, grafting new values on old models, attributing new meanings to symbols of the past. This phenomenon can be associated with certain aspects of bullfighting, the first written documentation of which dates back to Strabo, who saw bull games practised in Egypt: «in the dromos of the Hephaestium, at Memphis, it is customary to organise bull fights. Some breed such animals for this very purpose, as breeders the horses. The bulls, free, fight each other and the one that is deemed the winner receives a prize» (quoted in Leiris 1938: 13). Most of the scenes showing bull games, which are widespread in almost the entire Mediterranean area, are found in tomb paintings. Fighting between men and bulls is well documented in Crete and differs from that practised in Egypt: Egyptian bullfighting consisted of having two bulls fight against each other, while in the palace of Knossos

the game between men and bulls was more dangerous: it consisted of grabbing the bull by the horns when it attacked. At that moment one had to avoid the horns, make a somersault over the animal and fall to the other side. In Rome, a type of game was widespread that consisted in knocking down bulls by grabbing them by the horns. According to Leiris (1938) approaching the bull, as if to appropriate a part of its power, was the purpose for which the ancients organised these games.

In the Middle Ages fighting with bulls was already popular in Spain, although there were no precise rules yet: the animal was attacked with sword and lance by the man, who protected himself from the assaults with a shield, or by rolling a barrel in front of him. From the 13th century, the man, or rather the gentleman, began to fight on horseback, although in some fights he had to dismount and continue the duel with his sword. Today's bullfighting is the result of a major change that took place in the 18th century, when gentlemen began to neglect the practice of fighting on horseback. Thus, bullfighters who duelled on foot came onto the scene and gave an art and a category of professionals (Leiris 1938).

Bullfighting is a widespread art not only in Spain but also in France, Portugal and many parts of South America. In France, in the Camargue region, *abrivado* is practised, a type of bullfighting during which guardians on horseback lead some bulls, specially prepared for this type of event, to the centre of the country, along a predefined route. During the crossing, spectators called *atrapières* try to make the bulls run away from the circle formed by the horses. Another type of bullfighting is called *bandido* and consists of leading a few bulls to the centre of the village towards the end of the afternoon, after a "camarguaise run". Unlike the *abrivado*, in which the bulls all arrive together, in the *bandido* the herdsmen may lead one animal at a time. The camarguaise run, or free run, is a form of bullfighting typical of southern France (lower Provence and eastern Languedoc) during which characteristic toreadors called *raseteurs* attempt to snatch a rosette and two acorns placed between the horns of a Camargue bull with the help of a *raset*, a kind of hook specially designed for the game. Also worth mentioning is the *encierro*, which consists of releasing a few Camargue bulls in a course surrounded by barriers. The different forms of French bullfighting do not involve the death of the animal.

In Provence, in Arles, the "feria of Easter" still opens the French bullfighting season, attracting 60,000 spectators in the arenas and 500,000 visitors in the city's festive streets; the same happens in September on the occasion of the "feria of rice": during the feria days, the bulls are repeatedly let loose in the streets. Then, every year, on the first Monday in July, the "Golden Cockade" (Conrad 1961) takes place in the Arles bullring: it is the flagship race of the

bull season, at the same time the most prestigious camarguaise race and the most important bovine festival. Between the beginning of April and the end of October, numerous races are held in the arenas of the villages around Arles.

In Italy, until the end of the 19th century, the hunting of the ox, also known as "staccato"¹, was widespread in the Papal States. The stockade is something similar to a Spanish bullfight but organised differently: the term refers to the wooden fence that was erected in the People's Square to divide the place of action from the audience, creating special bleachers for this purpose. The fence was of two types: with oxen, dogs and men or with oxen and dogs. The oxen were numbered and were introduced into the arena one at a time; against each of them a trained dog was thrown, which attempted to immobilise it by biting off the root of its ear, while the ox was thrown back with its horns. Jousting was when men were also present – as was the case in Rome – who participated with feats and acrobatics on the excited animal, which was then pierced with a sword. The jousts were mostly local butchers who challenged outsiders, amateurs and professionals (Conrad 1961).

In the Marche region, fences with humans were quite rare while particularly widespread and applauded were those between bulls and dogs. In the provinces of Macerata and Ascoli, the fence was widely practised: in Offida² it was regularly organised and jousts were invited from nearby towns – Ascoli, Fermo, San Benedetto, Grottammare, Moterubbiano, etc. – where, during the spring and summer, similar shows were staged. However, this form of entertainment did not meet with the favour of the French who, judging it uncivilised and cruel, tried to hinder it during their stay in our country (1797-1815). However, popular passion, probably combined with political reasons, got the better of the French prefects' initiatives and the shows continued, albeit under strict regulations. The fence resumed more frequently with the return of the Papal State, only to disappear with the unification of Italy (Verdone 1955).

2. *Instinctuality*

The cattle of the Valle d'Aosta breed belong to the Pezzata Rossa and Pezzata Nera breeds, which are particularly suited to mountain grazing conditions.

¹ It is thought that the period of greatest diffusion of the fence was between the end of the 1600s and the first half of the 1800s, as evidenced by some writings by Vincenzo Monti for Fano and Gioacchino Belli for Rome.

² The last fence in Offida was organised on 14 November 1849 (Verdone 1955).

The diffusion in the region of the brown spotted black breed, the result of a cross between the spotted black cow and the Hérens cow, bred in Switzerland, in the canton of Valais, is more recent.

The timing of cattle breeding in Valle d'Aosta is determined by three significant moments: *decorda*, *enarpa*, *desarpa*. In late spring, the long period of stabling ends for the cows and they prepare to return to the pastures: their stay in the cowshed begins at the end of October-mid-November and usually lasts until late May. Each year the timing is determined by the weather and the growth of the grass: in high mountain villages, the stabling time is obviously longer. In the days immediately preceding the ascent to the mountain pasture, the farmers open the stables and let the cows out, to allow them to get used to life in the open air again: this practice is called *lo dzor de la decorda*, or the day of untying, which each farmer chooses for himself. The *decorda* implies various tasks for the farmer: cleaning and grooming the animals, attaching cowbells to their necks, preparing the enclosure close to the barn where the cows will be let loose.

The *enarpa*, in Valle d'Aosta patois, is the transfer of the herds to the mountain pasture, which lasts about 100 days, from mid-June to the end of September, that is, in the traditional formulation, from St. Bernard's Day (June 14) to St. Michael's Day (September 29)³; a Piedmontese proverb reads: *le vache San Bèrnard a-j pija e san Michel a-j rend* (St Bernard takes the cows and St Michael returns them). It is interesting to underline that St Bernard, in popular iconography, holds the devil in chains: he is thus tasked with protecting the long period of mountain pasture that shepherds spend in isolated places (Grimaldi 1996). Another reference point for the climb is 8 June, St. Medardo, which the people of the Valle d'Aosta consider a "marca" day, i.e. a day on which they are able to predict the weather from a meteorological point of view, as this proverb recalls: *se piut lo dzor de San Medar per caranta dzor ne fei par* (if it rains on St Medardo's Day, it will rain for forty days).

Despite the fact that the transfer of the cows is now organised to a certain extent by lorry, the day of the *enarpa* has retained its fascination for the farmers, the shepherds, the *arpian*, and the *montagnard*, the alpine pasture manager, to whom the herds are entrusted⁴. Everyone eagerly awaits the moment

³ The ascent can also take place on St John's Day, «when the grass ripens and the pastures are blessed» (Grimaldi 1996: 269). Similarly, the descent can be brought forward to 22 September, St Maurice's Day, depending on weather conditions.

⁴ Currently in Valle d'Aosta, as in other valleys of the Alps, there is the presence of Moroccan, Albanian and Romanian shepherds and cheesemakers who contribute «to the management of

when hundreds of cattle from different stables will mingle and, inevitably, battle it out to determine who will lead the herd for the summer season.

As soon as they reach the alpine pasture, the shepherds take care to still keep the different herds separate; but in the afternoon, after milking, the cows are led out to pasture and left free until the evening: this is the signal for the battle of the queens to begin. The formation of the new herd in fact calls into question the hierarchies already established within each individual cowshed, so the cows must re-establish their acquired dominant roles. The most aggressive cows confront each other in generally bloodless and extremely quick duels of no more than ten minutes: they study each other for a long time, then furiously scratch the ground with their hooves to intimidate their adversary, then clash by pushing each other with their horns; the cow that manages to push its adversary away wins. The weaker animal abandons the fight and the cows are rarely injured, even if superficially. In these confrontations, agility and stubbornness count, as well as good musculature and strong horns, which must be curved forwards.

At the end of the fights, the queen of the horns, the queen of the herd, will be recognisable, although the verdict is not always final: the fights may in fact continue over the following days and «sometimes even flare up again in the last days of the alpine pasture, leading to the reversal of previously won positions» (Giardelli 1997: 72). These fights arouse feelings of hope in the farmers, of feverish anticipation for the results of the fights, but also of disappointment, as one farmer points out: «owning the *reina* of the alpine pasture is a great boast and is also of considerable economic value: the *reina* does not only revalue itself, but the whole herd and enhances the ability of the owner» (reported in Bonato 2017: 134).

The summer transhumance concludes with the *desarpa*, the descent of the herd into the valley, led by the horn queen and the milk queen, the largest milk-producing cow, traditionally crowned at the weighing on 29 June, St Peter's Day. The presence of the two queens, proclaimed for very different reasons, strength and aptitude for leadership on the one hand and productivity on the other, «translates the desire not to separate the dimension of fighting from that of production, reveals the reluctance to make a distinction between the utilitarian aspect of the cow (milk production) and the symbolic aspect (valour in fighting)» (Kilani 1997: 162).

the mountain pastures and the production of Fontina and Toma cheeses, prized PDO cheeses. This component seems destined to provide a new generation of *arpian*, new mountaineers who have already taken root in the Valdostan community» (Giglio 2019: 31). The passion for *reines* and *batailles* is for some of them an opportunity for integration into the local community.

The *desarpa* follows a very precise ritual: the shepherds will have the task of brushing and grooming the cows, especially the two *reines*, who will lead the entire herd through the villages and hamlets; to the bell collar of the *reines* they will insert the *bosquet*, a pine tip decorated with ribbons and flowers: red with a small mirror for the horn queen, white with a small bucket carved in wood for the milk queen. The owners of the two queens, who have gone up to the mountain pasture to accompany the descent, will add a large bell to the *bosquet* to signal their arrival from afar to the inhabitants of the villages they will pass through: people flock to the call of the cowbells, admire the queens and offer drinks to the shepherds.

3. Rivalry

In the Valle d'Aosta, the *bataille des reines* has become a spectacular event in recent decades. It takes place and continues to take place outside the alpine pastures: a real championship is organised with some twenty local preliminary competitions, in spring, summer and autumn, in the valley and in the alpine pastures. The final, or *combat final*, takes place on the penultimate Sunday of October in Aosta, in the Croix Noire "vaccodrome", a structure specially built on the outskirts of the city for this event, which hosts thousands of enthusiasts every year⁵. «Having a *reina* qualified for the regional finals continues to give them social prestige and identity value, in addition to the economic return. Such an achievement gives a sort of quality label to the breeding» (Giglio 2019: 5).

From the end of March, every Sunday, with a break in June-July for the ascent to the alpine pastures, the queens compete in arenas set up in various locations around the region⁶. To be eligible to fight, the cows must meet the following requirements

- they must be at least four months pregnant, which guarantees the spontaneous retirement of the weakest cow;
- belong to owners and breeders resident exclusively in Valle d'Aosta;
- not have horns that are too pointed either naturally or artificially⁷;

⁵ The first *bataille final* in Aosta took place in 1962, in the Pont de Pierre district.

⁶ The *batailles des reines* are scheduled, by calendar, by the Regional Assembly and divided into elimination competitions: a) spring to take place by 30 May; b) summer to take place from 1 July to 31 August; c) autumn to take place from 1 September from the Sunday before the regional final competition.

⁷ The farmer takes care to shape the horns with a rasp on crescent moon nights.

- produce milk: cows that do not produce milk, for different reasons, are not allowed to participate in the spring eliminatory competitions.

According to local historians, the first tournament organised on a regional basis took place in the Conca di Vertosan in 1859, perhaps stimulated by the verses of the Franco-Provençal poet Jean-Baptiste Cerlogne, who had dedicated a poem to the *bataille* of Vertosan a year earlier, in 1858, *La Bataille di vatse a Vertosan*, compiling perhaps, in addition to a fine literary text, the first written documentation of this event⁸, of which no other quotations can be found until 25 March 1904, when the weekly newspaper “Le Mont Blanc” published on its front page the article, *Chatillon: Lutte des vaches* (Giglio, 2019). But the “history” of the battle of the queens began on 6 May 1924, a fair day in Châtillon, in the Sarteur brothers’ orchard. The show - for a fee - attracted a huge crowd, which flocked to admire the 30 competing cows. The Sarteurs’ initiative was not followed up, however, and one had to wait until 1947, in Aosta, to see an organised meeting again: the *bataille de reines* was in fact banned by Fascism, as was any other popular event considered unsuitable for the training of Fascist youth. But the cows did not cease to confront each other in the mountain pastures during the mountain pasture period, under the eyes of the farmers.

From 1958, the battle of the queens began to be supported and valorised by the Autonomous Region of Valle d’Aosta. It was at that time that the need arose to create an organisation that would take care of the preparation of the battles and contacts with the administrative and health authorities: the Association Régionale Amis des Batailles de Reines was therefore established, 90% of which was made up of breeders from the region⁹. Equally important is the contribution and voluntary work carried out by the various zonal committees, which every Sunday in turn host the regional circuit.

The arena in Aosta for the final *bataille* is prepared on Saturday; on Sunday morning, at 9 a.m., the weighing operations begin. Each cow is weighed and, while the attendant calibrates the scales, another person in charge fills out the card: this is a kind of registration form, which the breeder must sign, on which the cow’s name, its owner’s name, the animal’s eartag, the date of the last calving and the weight are recorded. Afterwards, the cow’s participation

⁸ Indeed, it is said that Roman troops, travelling through the Aosta Valley on their way to Gaul, would have witnessed real battles between cattle; even Napoleon’s soldiers, travelling through the region during the Italian campaign of 1800, would have been attracted by the confrontations between the queens (Gerbelle, Maccari and Ramires 1996).

⁹ The Association consists of 350 members owning 2,500 fighting cows.

number is marked on both sides with white spray. At 11.30 the weighing operations are closed. Those in charge proceed to draw lots for the three categories and draw up the schemes for the fights that will take place from 13.30 onwards. The connoisseurs distinguish different types of “hits” by the queens: the hooking with the horns behind the nape of the opponent’s neck; the “return” of the head from the bottom to the top; the “hit”, i.e. the *colpo de puent*, which can be decisive.

The example of cattle breeders has also been followed by goat breeders, who have been organising the *batailles des chèvres* since 1981. These are bloodless encounters between goats divided into categories according to weight; the course of the fight is similar to that of the *reines* and the final competition for the proclamation of the queen takes place in the municipality of Perloz. The winners are rewarded with *tchambis*, maple and walnut wood collars, inlaid by hand, from which the bell hangs.

A few years ago, a partial spread of the pastoral tradition in Valle d’Aosta began in neighbouring areas of Piedmont, in the upper Canavese and Lanzo Valleys, where two different tournaments are organised. «The Piedmontese initiative originates from the participation in 1979 of Balangero veterinarian Fiorenzo Benedetto exported the concept to the area of his professional expertise and founded the Associazione Amici delle Reines delle Valli di Lanzo (Association of Friends of the Reines of the Lanzo Valleys) that same year, becoming its president. Today, the association has about 40 breeders whose stables house black or pezzate nere cows» (Giglio 2019: 66).

4. Skills

As early as the 1970s, battles between cows belonging to a small number of friends were organised: farmers would gather in a shed, have their cows fight in the open and then celebrate by eating polenta. The first unofficial confrontation, in which 7-8 cows competed, was held in Cuorgnè; the first organised battle took place in Cantoira in 1980. In 1985, some breeders formed the *J’ami d’le reines d’vai ed Lans* Committee, which still today organises the battles in the villages of the Lanzo Valleys; in the 1990s, the Comitato Regionale per i Confronti delle Reines del Piemonte was founded, which promotes the meetings in other areas of the region. The two committees respectively promote two tournaments: that of Cantoira, which includes five preliminary rounds and a final of its own; the one called “del Piemonte”, which organises ten confrontations and a final.

In the “Confronti delle Reines” in Piedmont, the cows are divided into five categories and must strictly be of the chestnut breed: Pezzate rosse from

Valle d'Aosta are not allowed. Before each elimination round, the cows are weighed and then numbered on their flanks in chronological order of arrival; their horns are also checked: if they are too sharp, they are filed down, an operation that often provokes negative reactions from the owner. The breeder must then provide the commission with his and his cow's personal and personal data, specifying the date of the last calving and the probable date of the next calving¹⁰. The winners of the final in each category are awarded with «large cowbells, supported by finely inlaid collars, enriched with ribbons of various colours» (Giardelli 1997: 80). In addition, the queen is presented with the *bosquet*, decorated with flowers and ribbons, which is inserted and fastened into the stud of the cowbell collar; then the neo *reina* walks around the competition field receiving generous applause.

The cowbells¹¹ in Piedmont and Valle d'Aosta are used by most farmers both for practical reasons¹² and to continue an ancient tradition; the most sought-after and used ones bear the Chamonix Devoussoud, Premana or Alpine mark, and are made in the French town of Chamonix, at the foot of Mont Blanc. The sharpness and depth of the sound depend both on the quality of the material and the skill of the craftsman. The cowbells are then completed with inlaid leather collars and richly woven ribbons and laces. During the winter stabling, when the cowbells are not used, each farmer checks the effectiveness of the collars: before using them again in the spring, the inner and outer surfaces are greased to soften the stiffness of the leather, which could cause wounds and burns on the cows' necks (Bonato 2017).

Years of selection are necessary to "make" a queen and, once she has been identified, she must be prepared, just as one prepares an athlete, but with the shrewdness - and the necessity - of choosing the cow from a lineage of high lineage; it is then important to take care of the feeding, in order to ensure perfect muscular development. From these premises, the breeding draws a great advantage, because the cows are the object of special care and an unusual relationship of friendship is established between the animal and the owner, to the benefit of the wellbeing of the cowshed: the *reina* is a pres-

¹⁰ To compete, a *reina* must be pregnant and to participate in the final she must be at least four months pregnant. In the final, before the competition, qualified cows are subjected to an ultrasound test to determine pregnancy.

¹¹ A tradition that is still widespread in Piedmont and Valle d'Aosta is that when a serious bereavement strikes a farming family, the cows on the farm must not wear the cowbell for a whole year or it is replaced by a bronze cowbell (Bonato 2017).

¹² It can happen that a young cow in the first days of grazing does not know how to return to the cowshed: it is then grabbed by the cowbell collar and accompanied; the sound of the cowbell can help farmers find a cow that has wandered away from the herd and got lost.

ence felt at the same time as humanised and feminine, familiar and appreciated, the children approach her and stand beside her without fear. And just as one does with pets, one «gives her pretty names, brings her portions of food or treats from the family, cuddles» (Bravo 2013: 100).

Thus a spontaneous behavior has become a sport and an exciting show. But it also represents an opportunity for breeders to compare the fruit of their selection by presenting the cows they managed to qualify during the elimination competitions at the finals. He who succeeds in having the most beautiful and fiercest cow secures a prestigious position in the rural society to which he belongs: and of his *reina* «he keeps the photos and trophies and, at least until recently, the skull with the horns after [...] death, to be displayed on the façades or in the stables, while in the family it is customary to narrate her exploits» (Bravo 2013: 100). A number of young people from Valle d'Aosta and Piedmont have taken up cattle breeding thanks to the opportunity to feel valued and protagonist during these events. Given the prestige that the winning cows obtain, and attracted by the price they fetch on the market, many breeders invest exclusively in them, transforming the stable into a real stable.

The decrease in the number of fights on alpine pastures in favour of organised fights has generated disagreements in recent years between breeders in favour of highland fights and those promoting lowland fights. Fighting on alpine pastures is considered more authentic because it is in keeping with the temperament of the cows; moreover, it involves the entire herd and does not only bring a few animals into play as is the case with organised fights. The latter also seem to unite people from different worlds who do not share the same values. For the mountain breeder, the conquest of the title by his queen has no mere economic significance: it is the reward for hard work, sacrifices, fears and expectations. It is «the comparison of the different systems used in breeding, in selection, giving the measure of the goodness or otherwise of the choices made» (Gerbelle 1985: 11). The lowland owner, on the other hand, sees the cow as a useful tool for acquiring prestige and money: «certain people, attracted both by the price a queen reaches on the market and by the glory they can gain from their cow's victory, now invest exclusively in queens. Consequently, many stables specialise in breeding "wrestlers", in imitation of the stables where racehorses are bred» (Kilani 1997: 190).

On the other hand, breeder Serafino explains: «winning the title of queen has a very high value for the owner both from a venal and a psychological point of view: the winning queen, especially in the first category, can in fact reach very high prices, several millions. Certainly, however, there is no price for the gratification and prestige gained by the owner. Especially for this reason it is difficult for the owner of a queen to give in to offers from those who

want to buy her. For breeders, it is a great satisfaction to have a winning queen, above and beyond all the money that can be earned. Of course there is no shortage of those who have spent considerable fortunes to own a tournament queen. Often, however, these breeders are not as successful as they had hoped: the cow withdraws from the comparisons because, lost, it seeks its true owner» (reported in Bonato 2017: 140). These 'new' cattle breeders are reproached for their disregard of animal husbandry proper, because they do not take care of their herds directly but hire labourers: «it is ironic about those farmers who are unable to recognise their cows in the pasture, but are always proud to see them fighting in the arena» (Kilani 1997: 190).

The *batailles de reines*, already the subject of predictions during a good part of the year, became the occasion for an audience of around ten thousand people to cheer and support their favourite bovine during the final. They also preserve «a concrete educational function [...] of safeguarding and defending values. They encourage encounters between different people and environments, they facilitate the acquisition of new knowledge, new experiences, they are occasions for dialogue, confrontation» (Gerbellé 1985: 11).

5. Typicality

Fighting has a different ritual in the Aosta Valley, Valais and Upper Savoy, respecting a tradition that refers to different social organisations and cultures.

In the Valais, the Association des Amis des Reines du Valais is active, defence of a breed of cattle considered a national symbol, operates with the support of the Fédération Suisse d'Élevage of the Race d'Hérens and cantonal public bodies. In the combat arena, 12 pairs of cows are introduced at the announcement of the speaker, who spontaneously choose their opponent. This confrontation system is similar to the behaviour of the herd left to graze immediately after the *désarpa*. The *batailles de reines* and the championships with public participation in the Valais began in 1922 and are now a well-established tradition. This practice is included in the special list of 167 living traditions drawn up by the Federal Office for Culture of the Swiss Confederation.

The *batailles de reines* championship takes place mainly in the canton of Valais, but by involving other cantons it is taking on a national dimension, so much so that in 2020 the *Finale nationale* de la race d'Hérens was supposed to take place in Sion on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Fédération suisse d'élevage de la race d'Hérens: the event did not take place due to the Covid-19 emergency. The Val d'Hérens is today the heart of the Valais *batailles de reines* and a large arena for the fights was built in Les Hauderes,

which rivals the Croix Noire arena in Aosta in size and economic commitment, and like the latter bears witness to the influence exerted by the breeding community on the politics of the valley's municipalities and the Canton of Valais.

The Val d'Hérens is the custodian of a tradition that has spread throughout the Valais, where full-time breeders and owners of fighting cows engaged in bourgeois or entrepreneurial occupations take part in the *batailles*.

In Haute Savoie and Savoy, there is no association that organises and regulates *batailles de reines*: they are believed to be contemporary with those in Valle d'Aosta and Valais, as Frison Roche's description in his novel *Premier de cordée* (1941) testifies. The cows compete in fights that take place particularly in the Arve Valley and other valleys bordering the Aosta Valley, «they also regularly take part in the *batailles de reines* of the triangular fights that take place every year alternately between the Aosta Valley, Upper Savoy and Valais» (Giglio 2019: 68).

A “return’ party” contacts, contaminations, misrepresentations

1. *Ascendances*

I remember that as a child, I was fascinated by a story that my mother often repeated at my insistence. It told of a little girl who longed for a pair of white shoes, but her mother could not afford to buy them for her, as she did not have enough money for such an expense. One day the little girl fell seriously ill and died. Shortly afterwards, the mother began to hear strange noises in the house and seemed to sense her daughter’s presence, until she heard her voice repeatedly begging: “Mummy, buy me white shoes!”. The poor woman, torn by grief, at one point thought that only by buying shoes would she allow the child to rest in peace. She bought the white shoes with sacrifice and laid them on the window sill in the evening: the next morning they were gone and the woman never heard the child’s invocations again. Although I knew this tale by heart, each time I heard it again it still managed to capture my full attention, it absorbed me completely: I was probably baffled that the dead could communicate with the living. Or perhaps, unconsciously – and I say this now, as an adult – I was more comforted by this possibility and, above all, by the idea that the dead could return to earth. Yes, because the dead return.

In pre-industrial society, the dead were a constant presence: they returned to the places where they had lived, they frightened the living with their apparitions, they atoned for their sins on earth, and all together they walked in procession through the streets of the village on the night of 1 to 2 November. Although death was frightening because it brought disorder and imbalance to the community, the dead were considered an extremely important presence, and with them the living maintained an alliance and communication made up of material care. In the past, many legends were told about the return of the dead, but contemporary fiction also gives them a prominent place: even if the dead are mainly monsters, zombies, vampires, they still seem to reaffirm that life continues after death and that there is the possibility of returning from the Afterlife.

Traditionally, on 1 November, All Saints' Day, people attended morning mass and in the afternoon, to honour the dead, there was a procession from the parish church to the cemetery. It was also believed, as mentioned above, that on the night between 1 and 2 November, a connection between the world of the living and the afterlife was possible. The rosary would be recited and, before going to sleep, the table would be left set with chestnuts and baked beans – enjoyed the next day by the inhabitants of the house themselves – for the dead who would return to their dwelling; often a small lamp would be placed in the window to show them the way. People got up early in the morning to leave the beds free for the souls who were to rest. It was then customary to eat certain foods for this occasion, for example legumes, chestnuts, sweets called “dead man’s bones”.

Some old people have not forgotten the custom of leaving food and a bed for their dead to rest, but no one believes any more that on that night the souls of the dead roam in procession. Might they have been frightened off by the army of witches, zombies, monsters and vampires that roam the night of 31 October, one day ahead of them? These are the protagonists of Halloween, «the most popular festive format of all time» (Niola, 2007, p.37), which involves groups of children visiting homes dressed as ghosts, vampires, witches, skeletons, monsters and other scary characters. They carry a pumpkin with a candle inside, ring bells and «torment adults unless the adults redeem their peace of mind with small gifts» (Lévi-Strauss 1995: 72): trick or treat? they ask. In the United States, unfortunates without sweets might find their dustbins emptied in the garden, holes dug, flower pots knocked over, eggs thrown at the front door, windows soaped up, empty cans tied to the car exhaust pipe, etc. «Traditionally, on this day of the year, the adult world indulgently admits to this mild form of vandalism, the pranks and shenanigans of children, who are granted the right to demand, or rather, to symbolically extort gifts» (Dégh and Vazsonyi 1981: 58). Expectations that well-behaved little Americans are good are temporarily suspended: Halloween is a special night for children, it allows them to give orders to adults and punish them if they do not carry them out, it is a ritual of reversal and rebellion. Such characters of licentiousness, excess and reversal in my opinion automatically suggest a parallelism with Carnival, which I reserve the right to explore further in the next pages.

What are the origins of Halloween? Of all the hypotheses proposed, two seem the most likely: one traces it back to rituals of Celtic tradition, the other to a Christian practice.

Julius Caesar in *De Bello Gallico* (Book VI: 14 and 18) narrated that the Celts divided the year into two seasons: winter, the period of the black months, of hibernation and death, and summer, the season of the bright

months, of birth and the luxuriance of nature. Without entering into the still current debates – this is not the appropriate place – on the validity of the "Coligny Calendar" rather than the reconstruction made by Robert Graves (1948)¹, it seems plausible that the Celtic calendar was defined on the basis of the observation of lunar and solar phases; it also attached particular importance to the changes of seasons and the days dedicated to specific community rituals. The beginning of summer and winter were respectively celebrated on the days of Beltane and Samain: the former fell in May, the latter in autumn, more precisely on the night between 31 October and 1 November. Samain was an essential temporal reference point for farmers, because it marked the end of work in the fields and propitiatory rites were celebrated for the new agricultural year; it was the sacred festival par excellence, a solemn moment, the most important event of the Celtic year, and it lasted for three nights, also because 1 November marked the beginning of the new year, the official end of the hot season (Kruta 2003). Samain served to exorcise the arrival of winter and its dangers, it was a celebration that combined the fear of death and spirits with the merriment of end-of-year festivities. It was the night when the gates of the Afterlife opened and the spirits of the dead, who lived in a land of eternal youth and happiness called Tirnan Oge, returned to earth to show themselves, communicate with the living, and amuse themselves behind their backs by playing pranks and frightening them with their appearance². The Celts feared that on 1 November the forces of the spirits might unite with the world of the living, causing the temporary dissolution of the laws of space and time: so on the night of 31 October they would gather in the woods and hills for the ceremony of lighting the Sacred Fire, called *Tlachtgha*, and perform animal sacrifices; they also performed propitiatory dances for the fertility of the coming year (Kon-

¹ In November 1897 in Coligny, southern France, fragments of two bronze tablets dating back to the 2nd century BC, and thus attributed to a Celtic population, were found at the bottom of a well, the engravings of which reproduce the sequence of days in a calendar (these finds have been named the Coligny Calendar). It seems that the year was divided into twelve months, of 29 and 30 days, respectively marked *mat* and *ann*. Graves (1948), on the other hand, argued that the Celtic year was divided according to the phases of the moon, into thirteen months of 28 days plus an additional day: this sequence is not confirmed by the Coligny calendar nor by other evidence, but it is considered by many scholars to be the most reliable theory.

² According to Hutton (1996), there is no evidence that Samain was about the cult of the dead: rather, he celebrated a minor New Year, marking the transition from one season to the next and thus the end of the harvest period. The scholar believes that it was only with the spread of Christianity that legends were developed about the spirits of the dead returning to visit the living between 31 October and 1 November.

dratiev 2005). Then, disguised in the skins of the animals they had killed, they returned to their villages, illuminating themselves with lanterns made from carved turnips inside which were placed the embers of the Sacred Fire. The next day, the children went from house to house collecting wood to light a huge bonfire in the centre of the village: at the moment of its activation, the hearths of all the houses were extinguished, only to be rekindled with embers from Samain's bonfire, perhaps as a symbol of unity among the villagers. There is a variation according to which, on 31 October, the dead returned to earth in order to take possession of the bodies of the living and ensure their immortality: the living then disguised themselves to camouflage and deceive them; to keep the spirits away, all domestic fires were also extinguished in the villages, as well as the Sacred Fire on the altar. The following morning, a new fire was lit with wood collected house by house by the children, symbolising the start of the new year. Extinguishing the fire symbolised the arrival of the dark part of the season, while rekindling it testified to hope and trust for the coming of the new year and represented the cyclical nature of time (AA.VV. 2006).

Various divinatory practices were associated with Samain, such as those revealing girls' chances of marriage or concerning the union of couples, weather patterns and specific events of the year. In some areas, villagers buried stones in the ground that were covered with ashes; if one of these was disturbed the next morning, it meant that the person who had buried it would die by the end of the year. In other places, there was a tradition of leaving something to eat and milk outside the door, so that the spirits, passing by, could refresh themselves and decide not to play tricks on the inhabitants of the house (Markale 2005).

During the period of the evangelisation of Europe, the Church tried hard to eradicate pagan cults. In 835 A.D., in an attempt to make the rites associated with the feast of Samain lose their significance, Pope Gregory III moved the feast of All Saints' Day, first celebrated in 609 on the occasion of the consecration of the Pantheon to the Virgin Mary and dedicated to all the saints of Paradise, from 13 May to 1 November³. In the 10th century, with the Clunian reform promoted by Saint Odylon of Cluny, the Church added a feast day to

³ According to some scholars, it was the Saxon monk, master of Charlemagne, Alcuin of York (735-804) who proposed the transfer of the date of All Saints' Day in order precisely to Christianise the feast of Samain, even though Celtic culture was in decline well before the advent of Christianity (Vuchez, 2006). However, several centuries passed before « 1 November became the feast of All Saints' Day throughout the Western Church: it was Pope Sixtus IV who made it compulsory in 1475 » (Cattabiani 1988: 264).

All Saints’ Day: 2 November, commemoration of the dead in suffrage (Fédensieu 1997-1998). The celebration of All Saints’ Day is also called All Hallows’ Day; the feast began at sundown⁴ on 31 October, so that day, All Hallows’ Eve, took on the name All Hallow’s Even, later changed to Halloween⁵.

A second hypothesis has it that Halloween originates from a practice in vogue in Anglo-Saxon countries, documented since the 9th century AD, called *souling*, i.e. begging for the soul. On 1 November, All Saints’ Day, questors roamed the villages begging for soul cake, a square of bread dough decorated with sultanas and currants: for each gift received, they promised a prayer for the donors’ deceased relatives. In fact, it was believed that before entering Paradise, the dead remained in limbo for a certain period of time: the prayers of strangers, therefore, together with those of relatives, could have limited their stay. Here again, the connection between the earthly world and the Hereafter emerges, possible, however, on the night of 1 to 2 November⁶. The dead were perceived as a positive and extremely important presence, which is why people refrained from certain activities, such as hunting – the woods were teeming with wandering souls who, if wounded, would bring bad luck – and ploughing, to avoid digging up bones of the departed (Markale 2005). Towards the end of the Middle Ages, souling was still practised, especially by children: their prayers, however, served to shorten the pause in Purgatory, the intermediate realm between Paradise and Hell, where the dead served their sentences for a certain period and then ascended to Heaven. During the quest, the children sang a song:

A Soul Cake!
A Soul Cake!
Have Mercy on
All Christian souls
For a Soul Cake!

If one accepts this second hypothesis about the origin of Halloween, one will agree that certainly the practice of begging is a characteristic feature of it,

⁴ Recall that the Celts determined the length of time by the number of nights, not the number of days; the day for them began at sunset, as Caesar reports in *De Bello Gallico* (Book VI)

⁵ Note that Even in Middle English meant the end of the day, or eve, and in modern English it has been shortened to Eve.

⁶ A Breton proverb said in this regard that on this night «there were more souls in every house than grains of sand on the seashore » (reported in Markale 2005: 146).

but the nursery rhyme intoned by its participants is absolutely devoid of the religious aspect found in the one above:

Trick or Treat
Trick or Treat
Give me something
Good to eat!
If you don't
I don't care
I'll pull down your underwear!

There are various theories regarding the birth of the trick or treat: some scholars claim it dates back to the 5th century A.D., when, in order to participate with dignity in the festivities of Samain, many people begged for food and money to offer to the deities; others claim it originated in England in the 9th century A.D., Others claim it originated in England in the 9th century A.D., a time when the feudal regime had helped to create a great divide between the rich and the poor, and the latter, miserable and hungry, begged for food from the wealthier classes; a third hypothesis dates the trick or treat back to the early post-war period: American children tried to get food and money to participate in Halloween, despite the great crisis of 1929 (Malizia and Ponti 2002).

The practice of “trick-or-treating” is perhaps the funniest and most entertaining aspect of the whole festivity and has been observed for some time in Italy as well; it involves both masked children, who play house to house, and adults, who in their homes prepare to welcome them with sweets. For several years now, I have personally followed the wanderings of the young questors in my town on the evening of 31 October, and I have realised that, while in the early 2000s some of the inhabitants of the houses visited showed mistrust towards the children – sometimes even chasing them away in a rude manner –, in the years that followed, little by little, the attitude of the guests changed: they started to wait for the questors to offer their gifts; they often invite the children in to enjoy specially baked cakes and biscuits. I have also noticed that the habit of marking “hospitable” dwellings is spreading: leave the outside light on or display an object that is clearly Halloween-related.

2. Confluences

Regardless of what one believes to be a sufficiently well-founded assumption about its origin, it is reasonable to say that Halloween is a European celebra-

tion. For many, however, it is the signature holiday of the United States: but how did it get overseas? It is said to have migrated there with many Irish people in the mid-19th century (1840-1844)⁷, a time when Ireland was hit by a terrible famine following a potato disease, blight, which devastated entire crops. Since potatoes were the farmers' main food, because until 1845 all vegetables and wheat by law had to be exported and sold in England, to escape poverty many people embarked for the New World in search of fortune. Here the Irish communities kept alive the traditions and customs of their homeland, including Halloween, which at least initially represented a break with the native communities and gradually spread among the American people (Malizia and Ponti 2002). In the Victorian era, the elite of American society appropriated it by organising parties, mainly for charitable purposes, on the night of 31 October. In order for the whole of society to accept it, however, it was necessary to rid the celebration of all religious references and, above all, to amplify its playful and joking aspect. «In the decade between 1870 and 1880, there is no evidence of 'outside' celebrations, at least not among upper-middle class youths for whom it would have been considered extremely inappropriate to roam the streets in fancy dress⁸. On the contrary, this was apparently permissible for young - male - men of the lower classes who, in fact, for once went beyond the confines of the blue collar neighbourhoods for celebrations often marked by excess» (Tiberini 2008: 85). Factories in the first decade of the 20th century began to produce Halloween-related gadgets, which at that time took on the connotation of "night of pranks", during which people indulged in anarchy and acts of vandalism, to such an extent that it was deemed appropriate to cancel it. It was reinstated during the Second World War to keep up the morale of the troops, but pranks and vandalism were banned; at the end of the war, it was the children who took over the festival, thanks to companies that dedicated costumes, gadgets and sweets to them (Markale 2005).

In the previous pages, it was mentioned that originally the pumpkin was... a turnip. This is confirmed by the legend of Stingy Jack, a drunken Irish blacksmith who met the devil on Halloween night. Although there are several variants of this tale, all insist on the fact that three times over the years Jack defied the devil who claimed his soul and cheated him, so that the evil one

⁷ It seems that the first contacts were through Ulster Protestants fleeing from Ireland because of the discrimination they were subjected to (Santino 1994).

⁸ The "Canadian Illustrated News" on the occasion of Halloween «in those same years often published prints depicting well-to-do families gathered for the feast around the fireplace, with friends variously engaged in traditional activities such as fortune-telling with tarot cards or egg whites, and children intent on roasting chestnuts» (Tiberini 2008: 85).

had to give up his claims. When Jack, now very old, died, he was not accepted into Heaven because of his many sins and dissolute life; but neither did he have access to Hell. The devil, however, gave him a burning ember from the flame of the underworld to illuminate the dark road. To make that light last longer, Jack emptied the inside of a large turnip and placed the burning embers inside. From then on Jack was condemned to wander in the darkness with his lantern until the Day of Judgement. From then on Jack was nicknamed Jack O'Lantern, Jack of the Lantern: a symbol of the damned souls, according to tradition he wanders around on Halloween night making himself light with the devil's wick. A scholar friend of Irish origin also says that when the Irish emigrated to the United States they could not find turnips big enough to carve, so they replaced them with the many available large pumpkins, which were also easier to carve. That is why to this day Jack O'Lantern is still a large carved pumpkin with a candle inside.

And this has become the contemporary icon of Halloween, which in our complex society has morphed into a series of commercial gadgets – cards, decorations, masks and sweets – that go wild in shops as 31 October approaches. It seems that only Christmas in the US surpasses Halloween in sales and purchases⁹. But the autumn festivity is also a pretext for organising humanitarian and solidarity initiatives: a fund-raising campaign called Trick-or-treat for UNICEF has been active in the United States since 1949, and now also involves Canada and Mexico (www.unicefusa.org). In Italy, for example, the Italian Multiple Sclerosis Association (AISM) has for years been raising funds on Halloween to support research.

As mentioned, in the collective imagination Halloween today represents the American holiday par excellence, the symbol of a society dedicated to unbridled consumerism. The United States, through cinema¹⁰, television, music¹¹, books and horror stories, with Halloween as a backdrop and as the start-

⁹ According to a report by the National Retail Federation (NRF), Americans spent about \$8.8 billion on Halloween in 2019 on costumes, decorations, pumpkins, and candy (www.nrf.com). Italians are estimated to have spent €300 million on the occasion (www.codacons.it).

¹⁰ In 1978, American director John Carpenter decided to make a low-budget film, with young, semi-unknown actors, exploiting the atmosphere of festivity mixed with fear that hovers on the night of 31 October in the States: *Halloween* was a worldwide success, inaugurating a new strand of the horror genre. Michael Myers, the protagonist, who after spending some twenty years in a criminal asylum escapes on the very evening of All Saints' Eve and returns to sow panic in the small town of Haddonfield, became the progenitor of all the *boogeymen*, i.e. of the subsequent monster serial killers.

¹¹ Several singers have dedicated music and lyrics to Halloween: for example, Marilyn Manson (*This is Halloween*), Lou Reed (*Halloween Parade*), Siouxsie and the Banshees (*Halloween*), The

ing point of their plots, exported this festivity all over the world, infecting even that part of Europe that had remained alien to it, as well as Africa; it then landed on the other side of the Pacific affecting Japan, Korea and the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, conservative China and even India. Even in Copenhagen, since 2006, Halloween is celebrated from mid-October until early November in Tivoli Gardens, the second oldest amusement park in the world: traditional rides, shows and games entertain more than 250,000 patrons; more than 15,000 pumpkins can be carved to create your own lantern (www.tivoligardens.com). Information on the different ways of celebrating Halloween in a number of European and non-European countries was gathered through a field survey that revealed peculiarities that favour or emphasise a specific celebratory aspect and that unexpectedly - or perhaps not? - refer to local traditions¹².

In Scotland, there is no *trick or treat*, replaced by a quest called *guising*: masked children visit neighbourhood houses offering short performances of dance, music and magic. Appreciated performances are rewarded with candy, sweets and fruit. To light the way, children always carry a *neepy candle*, formerly a tuber with the devil's face engraved on it and a candle inside, now mostly replaced by a large plastic lantern in the shape of a pumpkin. The youngsters, on the other hand, used to gather near large abandoned cottages to tell each other gloomy tales of terror¹³.

Preparations for Halloween in Ireland begin as early as mid-September with houses being decorated with pumpkin streamers, balloons of various shapes, spider webs, bats, flying witches and skeletons hanging from doors; shops set up their windows in the theme and sell masks, costumes and make-up for adults and children, various products and gadgets. The last Monday in October is a national holiday in Ireland and, although it very often does not coincide with the 31st, many schools decide to extend the holiday into early November, celebrating the imminence of Halloween with various games. Adults gather in pubs and take advantage of the event to enjoy special benefits such as, for example, getting two pints for the price of one or gaining gadgets by exceeding a certain number of beers ordered; in other cases, the person who manages to visit several pubs during the evening (*Pub Crawl*)

Dream Syndicate (*Halloween*), Japan (*Halloween*), The Fuzztones (*Happy Halloween*). There are also many children's songs; in particular, the record company Emi Music, in cooperation with Rock FM, published a compilation in 2003 - still to this day - to accompany fancy dress parties: it contains sixteen songs by different international artists.

¹² The following data were provided by local informants.

¹³ Informer S.G.

will have part of the beers ordered reimbursed. Some pubs offer special deals such as the *Halloween Scoop*, a larger-than-normal pint of Guinness at a reduced price. On Halloween, it is traditional to enjoy a typical cake, the *Barmbrack*, a sandwich filled with candied fruit usually served toasted and with butter and accompanied by a cup of tea, inside which is often found an object believed to have special properties in predicting the future: a legume, a stick, a scrap of cloth, a coin or a ring. The person who bites into the *Barmbrack* and finds will find a legume will not marry within the year, if a stick they will experience an unhappy marriage; a piece of cloth is an omen of great misfortune and poverty while a coin and a ring symbolise wealth and a short marriage respectively. Another typical Halloween food in Ireland is *Colcannon*, made of mashed potatoes mixed with pepper, butter and cabbage. It is understood that the celebrations in this country are not centred on dressing up, a practice, however, mainly implemented by tourists and college students, who usually organise masquerade parties involving singing contests, drinking contests, blind dates¹⁴.

In Sweden, Halloween is also known as *Alla Helgons Natt*. The festivities especially concern children, who are allowed to practice *trick or treat* (*Bus eller Godis* in Swedish) but only during the day and in the homes of families who know each other or who are in close proximity. In schools, however, large masquerade parties are organised in the afternoons and each family prepares some snacks for the occasion, bearing terrifying names such as *Blood fingers*, i.e. sausages dipped in ketchup, and *Eyeball punch*, a large punch jug with fake plastic eyes floating. This is followed by a night-time ceremony known by the Swedish name *Skräckrunda*, during which the children have to follow various ribbons attached to the trees, walking among fake cobwebs and snakes, while masked parents appear from time to time, often jumping down from trees or emerging from behind thick bushes to scare them. On the way there are then boxes into which the young participants have to stick their hands and try to guess the contents: it is usually something slimy to the touch, such as cooked spaghetti, crushed oranges, seaweed, crushed eggs or raw meat. At the end, the children are rewarded with various sweets for their courage¹⁵.

Halloween in Finland is also called *Pyhäinpäivä*. Here, due to the very cold climate, the festivities take place indoors and therefore do not include quests: consequently, children are excluded and the celebration almost exclusively involves children and adults. It is interesting to note that, in conjunction with Halloween, the frequency with which Finns go to the sauna increases.

¹⁴ Informer E.P.

¹⁵ Informer L.G.J.

This fact is probably connected to an ancient belief that towards the end of November, the month of the dead (*marraskuu*), which coincided with the end of the agricultural year, preparing a hot bath and a fragrant sauna would entice the dead to return to their homes. This supposed connection between the sauna and the world of the dead has been preserved to the present day, brought forward, however, to the night of 31 October, when saunas are decorated externally with rows of small ornamental gourds inside which scented essences and small lights are then placed. However, the Finns are warned not to stay in the sauna for too long as they would risk encountering souls returning from the dead¹⁶.

In France, Switzerland and Belgium, the playful aspect is favoured, and Halloween is an opportunity for primary and nursery school children to prepare crafts to give to their parents: small cross-stitch embroideries, festoons to hang in windows or pumpkins made of painted clay. Children, on the other hand, organise theme parties in their homes or go to clubs in disguise. Trick or treat is still little practised by Swiss children and those who do it only go to the homes of close relatives¹⁷.

In Romania, Halloween has for some years now been an opportunity to promote the legendary Dracula¹⁸, made famous by Bram Stoker’s novel of the same name (1897), through “Dracula-Tours”, real organised trips that take curious tourists to discover Transylvania, with stops at Sighisoara, the town where the famous (alleged) vampire was born and grew up, and his castle. At the end of the visit, tourists are usually offered “terrifying” snacks such as sugar skulls or head-shaped biscuits¹⁹.

In Portugal, people visit cemeteries on Halloween, bringing with them a basket containing wine and hazelnuts, which will be left on the tombstones of deceased relatives along with a slice of the cake that is customarily eaten on the occasion, a cake made entirely out of sugar and, once firm, sprinkled with cinnamon and herbs²⁰.

As far as the United States are concerned, we know that Halloween is a very heartfelt celebration, celebrated by children and adults alike with *trick*

¹⁶ Informer T.S.

¹⁷ Informants E.P., C.H., L.C., M.E.

¹⁸ Vlad Dracula III, sanguinario principe valacco vissuto nel 1400, era soprannominato l'impalatore (Tepes) per il metodo di tortura che preferiva infliggere, l'impalamento: il palo, con punta arrotondata e spalmata di grasso per prolungare il supplizio, veniva introdotto nel malcapitato attraverso il retto o l'ombelico; senza ledere organi vitali, usciva dalla bocca senza provocare immediatamente la morte (Teti 2018).

¹⁹ Informant H.N.

²⁰ Informer C.A.

or treat, dressing up as ghoulish and scary as possible, parades through town streets with a final prize for the best costume. "Ghost houses" are set up in various houses, spooky settings that can be visited a few weeks before Halloween for a small admission fee. It is worth dwelling on the peculiarity of the Texans' costumes, which are handcrafted well in advance, i.e. as early as July, when they begin a kind of quest to collect useful materials such as cloth, wood, plastic, as well as tools such as hatchets, knives and chainsaws, and anything else that can contribute to the making of a creepy costume. It is believed that the disguise will turn out better if it is sewn on full moon nights, which are then mostly disturbed by the noise of the sewing machines assembling the various parts. At the end of the festival, the intact parts of the costumes are retrieved and will be reused in new creative combinations the following year²¹. In Ocean Beach, a small southern California town, a masked dog parade called – in an attempt to imitate the howl – Howl-O-Ween has been organised on the last Sunday of October for the past 15 years²². Each dressed specimen, loaded onto a special cart, is transported around the city to the applause of onlookers; the three most original costumes are rewarded²³.

In the Caribbean area, Halloween night celebrations are practically absent, but on the small island of Bonarie, children practise a special kind of *trick or treat*: they gather in the early afternoon in the central area of the island and form large groups of beggars who head for the shops asking for candy, sweets, flowers, but also money and toys²⁴.

From the United States, Halloween easily reached South America. Specifically, in Brazil, where Carnival has absolute priority, as interviewee A.A.A. recalls, English-speaking schools are promoting the spread of the 31 October festivity, which in any case remains marginal: in particular, they rent sheds and rooms within the premises to organise dances and masked parties or evenings dedicated to horror films and scary stories.

It is only in recent years that people have started to celebrate Halloween in Australia and New Zealand, where 31 October is summer and masked parties take place on the beach. Australian and New Zealand children are not allowed to trick or treat except in exceptional cases and, even on these occasions, they are always accompanied by their parents. If trick-or-treaters do

²¹ Informant A.F.

²² The success of the initiative is such that for some years now it has been repeated in various locations.

²³ Informant J.G.

²⁴ Informer A.O.

not receive gifts, no trick-or-treating is allowed, as it would be an act of vandalism and therefore socially unacceptable²⁵.

Perhaps the Italians' first approach to Halloween dates back to the 1960s and the comic strips of Charlie Brown, who practised the unusual cult of the "great watermelon": this is the expression chosen by the translators of the Peanuts strips for the great pumpkin, because the literal translation seemed unequivocal and elegant. Gradually, Halloween has conquered Italy and become more and more popular: every year, both the number of organised parties, private and public, and the sales related to the event (toys, gadgets and sweets) increase exponentially. There are initiatives that animate the city streets, starting with the trick or treat practised by numerous groups of young people independent of each other: and then great parades, historical re-enactments, "monstrous" processions. «This hybrid festivity has begun to occupy the night of [All Saints'] Eve, drawing on a wide market of various types of consumption, even the most up-to-date: surfing websites dedicated to it, with games and instructions for building horror and death in the home; the purchase of costumes, masks, make-up and horrific and disgusting scars, which shops display to customers along with the inevitable pumpkins; special fittings and evenings, staff dressed as zombies in nightclubs, pubs and discos» (Bravo 2013: 180). Thousands of clubs and discos organise fancy dress parties, musical evenings and themed dinners; there is no shortage of appointments in evocative locations such as castles and medieval villages to discover ancient sites on the night of the ghosts or to organise a murder mystery dinner²⁶. Shows, games and parades are also organised in several theme parks.

Disguise is a must when celebrating at some venue. In Italy, the mask, make-up and camouflage aspect of Halloween is particularly popular. For a perfect costume, the colour black cannot be missing: black must be the hats, witches' skirts, trousers, cloaks, etc. Alongside the more traditional costumes – devil, witch, zombie, ghost, vampire and Death, the hooded skeleton with scythe in hand – it is easy to encounter new monsters imported mainly from the film market (horror films are an inexhaustible source of inspiration to draw from) and from comic books. The disguises currently most in vogue are those of serial killers²⁷; in recent years, however, masquerades inspired by

²⁵ Informant O.H.

²⁶ This is a popular formula both in Italy and abroad, in which diners watch a theatrical representation of a murder during dinner. Each table is an investigation team competing with all the others to solve the "case".

²⁷ These are *The Scream of Munch*, protagonist of the *Scream trilogy*; the disfigured face of Fred-

certain animated films and the good wizards from the magical world of Harry Potter have also made an appearance.

3. *Divergences*

At the beginning of the 1970s in the United States, the huge and growing popularity of Halloween fuelled a simultaneous production of spooky legends: tales of children who bit into an apple and had their tongues cut out due to the presence of blades inside the fruit, others whose tongues melted because the candy contained muriatic acid, maniacs who caught children ringing their doors, and the disappearance of blond, blue-eyed girls who were later found maimed and mutilated in the woods (Santino 1994). Panic ensued and attempts were made to take appropriate measures. The "Times" urged parents to only allow their children to practise trick-or-treating in the homes of people they trusted and knew. In many parts of Florida, Texas and Maryland, Halloween festivities were banned and replaced with *Harvest Festivals* and *pumpkin fun days*. In Pennsylvania, on the other hand, Halloween continued to be celebrated but a safety list for safe trick-or-treating was published: it contained precautions for both parents and children, such as not entering houses, especially strangers' houses, but only taking candy on the doorstep; only accepting candy in well-sealed packages²⁸; always staying in groups and not carrying toy guns or weapons that could be mistaken for real (Santino 1994).

These legends did not find fertile ground in Italy at the time, and by now in all cities witches, vampires, mummies, skeletons and monsters crowd the streets and squares throughout the evening of 31 October. Halloween is a topic in the school curriculum of many institutions, addressed through an interdisciplinary connection involving, for example, teachers of English (presentation of the holiday from a historical point of view and contextualisation, English language), geography (territorial distribution), image education (representation of objects and characters), motor education (dramatisation). However, the testimonies collected in some schools in north-western Italy indicate that not everyone loves this holiday and that the celebrations concerning it are at the discretion of the teachers. In order to assess their awareness of

dy Kruger, the claw-gloved killer from *Nightmare*; the expressionless white mask of Jason, the murderer from *Friday the 13th*; the skeleton from *Nightmare before Christmas*.

²⁸ An original initiative proposed by the hospital in Hazleton, Pennsylvania: doctors and radiologists, disguised as pumpkins, ghosts and witches, X-rayed the sweets collected from the children to check that they did not contain anything sharp or dangerous (Santino, 1994).

the holiday, their participation and involvement, a short questionnaire was submitted to about fifty children, class IV pupils of two primary schools in Turin. The results revealed, first of all, a fair rate of ‘religious illiteracy’, as about 20 of them showed no knowledge of All Saints’ Day, while all of them were able to explain what Halloween is and are aware that they are celebrating an event of Anglo-Saxon origin.

But what do adults think about Halloween and how do they define it? Do they celebrate it or did they do it when they were children? Do they know its origin? Do they believe that this event has replaced our commemoration of the dead? These and other questions formed a short questionnaire that I drew up in the summer of 2019 and to which 264 people responded, 108 males and 156 females, aged between 18 and 65, mostly residing in northern Italian regions and with an education level of no less than high school diploma.

If I had to define Halloween on the basis of the most frequent answers, I would say that it is an American holiday, whose Celtic ancestry is paradoxically known, which in our country coexists with – but does not replace – All Saints’ Day. Consider, however, that 95 per cent of those interviewed are under 30 years of age, so during childhood they presumably practised *trick or treat*, also perceived as a time of sharing between parents and children and of aggregation between beggars and neighbours, and/or as adults participate in masked parties or dinners with friends. It should be pointed out that 35 respondents described Halloween as alien to our tradition, 33 as a commemoration of the dead, 25 as a Carnival and 47 people answered “other”, generally without specifying, except in a few cases: «despite being a foreigner, it has become part of us and our childhood, although unfortunately it is not taken as seriously as in other countries»²⁹. Informants over 50, emphasising its extraneousness to our traditions, stated that they do not celebrate Halloween – «never celebrated and I will never celebrate a US clown show»³⁰ –, some, however, regretted not having done so: ‘in my time it did not exist. It came to my country areas [...] when I was 20 years old, but it probably already existed in bigger cities»³¹. Some harshly criticised Halloween, nevertheless, apart from a few sporadic cases – «I wouldn’t even think of opening, I would pretend I wasn’t there. Fortunately, where I live, I am surrounded by quite intelligent people and few children, and on 31 October they do better things»³² –, the more adult respondents tolerate, and even accept, the prac-

²⁹ Informer G.V.B., 21 years old.

³⁰ Informant A.P., 64 years old.

³¹ Informant G.G., 55 years old.

³² Informant A.P., 64 years old.

tice of *trick or treat* by opening the door to beggars and offering them sweets: «I always get myself some sweets to give to the children»³³; «I always leave a bag outside the door with the sweets inside so that the children, but certainly also adults, can help themselves»³⁴.

For many scholars, intellectuals and members of the clergy, Halloween is an anti-Christian, uneducational, divorced from our traditions and consumerist holiday. For some time now, its unstoppable spread in Italy has alarmed the Church, which already in 1998, inaugurating a Catholic crusade, through Cardinal Ruini urged Christians not to allow themselves to be led astray by those 'folkloristic and banal' forms that revolve around festivities dedicated to saints and the dead. Bishops, cardinals and people of faith still insist on the alienation of Halloween from our culture, on the risk our children are running by celebrating this dangerous and pagan holiday, on the distancing of people from the Christian values proposed by All Saints' Day. What has been called an «American carnival» (Mussapi 2008: 31), actually contains elements belonging in the past to New Year's Eve rituals: begging, masquerade, food and drink offerings; certainly the halo of sacredness that surrounded these practices has disappeared, and today they are widely defunctionalised and desemantised: gestures, symbols, ritual actions – as is inevitable, as we well know – have lost their original meaning but have conquered others already at the level of community and social interaction (thus, in practice, resemantised). We are absolutely aware that the playful aspect has been preserved above all. Even Don Aldo Buonaiuto³⁵ in an interview in "Avvenire" stated that «Halloween pushes the new generations towards a magical-esoteric mentality, it attacks the sacred and the values of the spirit through a devious initiation into the arts and images of the occult» (reported in Ciociola 2008: 15)³⁶. I find this position truly absurd because it goes beyond the playful dimension that in my opinion characterises Halloween; children are absolutely aware of the difference between fiction and reality: when they dress up at Carnival, for example, they know very well that they are "playing" a character and not "being" that character.

Some scholars and intellectuals have decided to fight Halloween because they consider it to be a consumerist holiday emptied of meaning, a carnival

³³ Informer M.V., 54 years old.

³⁴ Informer A.F., 53 years old.

³⁵ Don Aldo Buonaiuto is in charge of the Occult Antisect Service of the Pope John XXIII Association, created in 2002, judicial police auxiliary and technical consultant to the judiciary.

³⁶ Paradoxically, the Church's criticism has favoured neo-pagan groups – for instance, and above all, Wicca – who seek to re-sacralise Halloween by re-engaging precisely with the festival of Samain. And they too, like the Church, are critical of the secularisation and more commercial aspects of the 31 October celebration.

with a touch of the macabre; some young people say they do not celebrate it because it is a mere commercial gimmick, and then it does not belong to us, it is not linked to our traditions but is imported from the American continent along with hamburgers, McDonald's and reality shows. But what does it mean that Halloween does not belong to our traditions? Can we speak of a tradition that is "ours"? Tradition is fluid and composite, it cannot be "pure": and this presumption to boast of an uncontaminated one can be traced back to the Restoration period, when the concept of statehood had to correspond to a single people, a single ethnicity and language. In my opinion, this attitude draws attention to the resistance to uncritically accepting what comes from abroad, particularly from the United States; but above all, it gives voice to feelings of dislike for what represents American national identity. I agree with Lombardi Satriani (2009) that Halloween is not a threat to our cultural integrity but rather an enrichment, not a depletion of identity. I greatly appreciated a pro-Halloween intervention by the journalist Marco Belpoliti in the pages of "La Stampa" dating back several years ago but which I still agree with: «what is at stake, as Lévi-Strauss had already seen fifty years ago, is the right of modern man to be a little pagan too, that is, to draw for his symbols and behaviour on a heritage of traditions, beliefs, cults, and even superstitions, which are an integral part of our past» (2000: 45).

Some have defined Halloween as a holiday that celebrates the victory of evil and death, others as one that exorcises fear and death (Gulisano and O'Neill 2006) or a carnivalesque celebration of death itself, characterised by the playful dimension linked to the globalised collective imagination of horror and the macabre (Mugnaini 2001). I agree with Niola that «the Halloween festival, or All Saints' Day as it may be, in its interweaving of pagan ceremonies, Christian dogmas and consumerist rituals, continues [...] to commemorate the dead, to establish a distance with them that is both playful and affectionate. Of course, it does so in its own way, in the contaminated forms of the present, in the language of the society of the image» (2007: 37). This irreverent relationship with the dead in my opinion is a significant expression of a festival capable of renewing itself and adapting to different cultural contexts, in spite of those who would like it to be "only" a pure American or Celtic or pagan product. After all, how much can "purity" befit a festival of the dead?

4. Influences

I would like to reiterate that Halloween, exported by the Irish, revised and corrected by the Americans and adopted by the Europeans, is a festival that

originated on our continent and has crossed the Atlantic twice: if, as mentioned, it was first imported to the United States, there it underwent considerable changes and then returned to Europe again after a long time. Stripped of all sacred and celebratory aspects, it has taken on the appearance of a new all-American festival and therefore foreign to our cultural roots, although, as we shall see, this is not quite so.

But how is it possible that a non-Christian holiday, apparently foreign to our tradition, has spread so rapidly in our country? At first glance, the popularity of Halloween may seem strange, especially if one takes into account that in Italy the feast of the dead is instead a time of recollection. You may remember the controversy unleashed some time ago by Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, Archbishop of Milan, against Halloween, which he considered to be “the bad joke we play on our culture”. Martini, forgetting that Christianity in the past uprooted the cults and traditions of the peoples it wanted to convert, invited believers to repossess the cult of the dead, which is part of Italy’s history, thus resorting precisely to tradition to oppose Halloween. The impression is that the celebration of 31 October coincides with All Saints’ Day, but this is not the case; moreover, the two feasts are not antithetical and have always coexisted (see below). According to some scholars, intellectuals, and members of the Catholic Church, the great success of Halloween in our country is the cultural surrender to American imperialism. It seems to me that this position externalises the fear of cultural subjugation, which is paradoxical in a country that boasts centuries of history and deep-rooted traditions and accuses the United States of lacking both history and traditions. But Halloween is not as foreign to our cultural roots as we believe! Although stigmatised by the more extremist fringes of the ecclesiastical world because it is considered profane, its practices can be likened to various traditions of the rural world that ritualised the eve of the dead. Suffice it to say that in the past, on the night between 1 and 2 November, «perhaps to ward off hostile presences, candles were lit in those hollowed-out pumpkins, with eyes and mouths carved to imitate scary sneers, which today seem reserved (and invented) for the celebration of the new arrival from the USA, Halloween» (Bravo 2005: 62): in Piedmont, in Chivasso (TO), the pumpkin carved in this way was called a ‘dead man’s head’; in San Benedetto Belbo (CN), the pumpkin with the candle inside was placed on a stick or in front of the house door to frighten the inhabitants; in Umbria, the same joke was played by children to the detriment of adults; in Calabria, carved in the same way, children carried pumpkins during quests for the dead (Lombardi Satriani and Meligrana 1982). Besides, it is not certain that every product that arrives from overseas conquers us: the field of fashion, for example, proves this. Moreover, the holiday of 31 October does not replace All Saints’ Day, a celebration that – in my

opinion - had already lost its meaning when Halloween arrived in Italy. I reiterate, in Niola's words, that Halloween, «however hard it tries to appear go-liardic, mercantile, superficial [...] it fails to conceal its true and very profound nature as a wake. Which, despite the tricks and treats, likens it to the oldest and most widespread family of human rituals. Those that serve to establish good neighbourly relations between the living and the dead» (2007: 37).

The reasons for this success, according to some scholars, are manifold, starting with the process of worldwide diffusion of trends, fashions and ideas, whereby there is a tendency to assimilate the customs and traditions of culturally hegemonic countries: consider specifically the American influence in global and trans-Atlantic relations; then there is a widespread orientation towards fun, escapism from everyday life, the playful, in a society that has now moved beyond the years of sacrifice and the primacy of work; also worth mentioning is Halloween's ability to fit into those tried and tested mechanisms that promote purchases, which provide for a sales occasion every month: this anniversary would fill the gap between the end of the summer holidays and Christmas. Without dwelling on the fact that in September there is a particularly intense promotion of school supplies, and this month therefore presents itself as an important sales opportunity, and that since October there have already been proposals in the shops to plan Christmas shopping, I would like to observe that a holiday does not necessarily coincide with a moment of uncommitted sociability: on the contrary, it is always a strong social occasion. Moreover, the predominant consumerist aspect of Halloween is criticised, without however reflecting on the fact that this is now a common element of the most important festivities of the year, even Christian ones such as Christmas.

According to Niola (2000), Halloween is the emblem of the global world's new festivities built on ancient symbols: its success is linked to the need for a party to be satisfied with a pre-packaged product; he also believes that, in terms of popularity, we are witnessing a shift from Carnival to Halloween. I do not fully agree with this last assertion: there are undoubted similarities between the two events, because they both celebrate the beginning of a season, are characterised by a playful dimension and involve masquerade (Niola 2007), but Carnival, to this day, retains its popularity, which makes it more familiar than Halloween.

Carnival is a complex phenomenon with an extraordinary symbolic apparatus: it is the popular festival par excellence, which in the past was placed «within the traditional calendar system as a paradigmatic time and space» (Grimaldi 1993: X): it marked the transition from winter to spring and the beginning of the new agricultural year. It is no coincidence that Kezich and Mott, in one of their important curatorships on the subject, described him as

“one of the longest reigning ‘kings of Europe’, the one in whom European cultural identity can mirror and recognise itself» (2011: 15). Its origins are not easily traced, nor is its history through the centuries; even its calendrical location cannot be determined with precision: its end is certainly marked by Ash Wednesday – with which Lent begins – but it is more complex to determine its specific starting days: Christmas; 6 January, Epiphany or the following day; 17 January, the feast day of St. Anthony the Abbot; Septembers or Sundays in Lent; 2 February, Candlemas, etc. Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly temporally located in the period of transition between winter and spring rebirth, and in the past it was a peculiar moment in the rituals of the beginning of the year, aimed at fostering the new agricultural year: «Carnival is a festival propitiatory of the fertility of the earth, of the abundance of the harvest. Now, to generate the new ear or the new plant, the seed must spend a more or less long period underground. There, in the darkness of the infernal plains, are the powers of generation, the subterranean divinities, the demons, the souls of the ancestors who, on the fateful day of the restart of the year, of the eternal return of the productive cycle, evoked by special rites, appear on the earth, and exert their power there» (Toschi 1955: 382). Carnival thus celebrated rebirth but at the same time had roots in the underworld, was connected to chthonic-infernal forces, which at that particular time of year seemed very close to the world of the living. For this reason, the festival was meant to be functional for the regeneration of the world: the chaos, the subversion of rules, the perpetual «mixing of the high and the low » (Bachtin 1979: 92), the dissolution of the world, the exit from profane time, peculiar characteristics of Carnival, were essential to recreate sacred time, from whose disorder – also given by dietary, sexual and verbal excess – to re-initiate a new order, to restart the cycle of life and the seasons (Eliade 1954). We are dealing here with a “regulating infringement”, an oxymoron that well explains the infringement that was necessary – and tolerated – for the community to legitimise itself. And it has undoubtedly been functional from a community point of view and has been able to respond to social expectations: this is demonstrated by its longevity and the fact that it has been viable in the past in social, economic and geographical contexts that were also very different. It is a festival that demands excess, licentiousness, overturning, laughter. But the element that characterises it more than any other is masquerade, which once again refers to the underworld, to the world of the dead. Surrounded by various ritual prescriptions, such as their use in certain circumstances and on certain occasions, masks in the past represented the spirits of the dead returning to establish a relationship with the living; they were thus the means by which such contact could be made by those impersonating the departed. In the Middle Ages, Christianity rejected such personification and

considered the act of masquerade sacrilegious: the mask claimed to substitute a false appearance for the authentic one, and behind the fake one could see the presence of the devil. And so the dead-anonymous were replaced by the dead of hell (Schmitt 1988). It follows that the mask was the medium for communicating with the Beyond and revealed the presence of the other. The ecclesiastical authorities therefore considered disguise a way of distancing oneself – and not only spiritually – from the divine image, and consequently approaching diabolic beings. And indeed, some of the traditional and oldest masks have devilish features or are personifications of infernal beings, such as Harlequin, for example, originally from France, where already in the second half of the 13th century he was the comic type of the devil, mocking, boisterous, trivial. It is worth noting that in the moment that it conceals the identity of the wearer, the mask also allows a distinction between the living and the dead.

Carnival and Halloween are a New Year's Eve, because they include elements belonging in the past to the rituals of the beginning of a new year, i.e. the offering of food and drink, begging, masquerade – understood as a mechanism for the transformation of one's identity, also useful for enacting a detachment from the pre-established order –, of which we are aware the playful aspect has been preserved above all. That was a special, almost extra-temporal time when other entities were able to manifest themselves. Let it be clear that Halloween is not Carnival: both, however, originally celebrated the bond between the living and the dead, the continuity of life against death; they were a space and time for the dead that determined a space-time order for the living. It is perhaps useful to emphasise the parallel between the Church's past opposition to Carnival and its current opposition to Halloween: arguably, both festivals, by proposing themselves as ritual and playful mediators with the world of death, "usurp" some of the Church's functions in the realm of the sacred.

According to Apolito, «Halloween clearly highlights the contextual dimension of the festival: not one unfolding, but several unfoldings, not one centre, but several points of reference, not one "text" but several texts that enter into communication. Certainly, "communication" is still what brings together, it is a "community". But it certainly no longer has the ideological significance that the idea of "festive community" has always had» (1993: 144). Halloween is a controversial holiday whose historical reality, as can be seen in the preceding pages, is complex and articulated, difficult to "fix" in a precise form, given that it originated in the transition between different places, times and societies. Every year, as 31 October approaches, our daily newspapers and television broadcasts ignite the usual (by now) debate between those who support this holiday and those who denigrate it, calling it vacu-

ous, a figment of imitation, a generator of consumerism, or even demonise it, considering it immoral. In this regard, I would like to point out an initiative called Holyween, which came into being just over a decade ago to counter the spread of Halloween and recover the “true” meaning of All Saints’ Day: parties are organised where children dress up as saints and angels. The neologism coined for this anti-Halloween practice, while intended to “mock” the pumpkin festival, in my opinion ends up highlighting how it is not only – first and foremost – linguistically related to it³⁷ but also that they both possess a sacred connotation and «the reference is explicitly Christian» (Markale 2005: 17). Paradoxically, Holyween itself becomes a way of reinventing tradition, while referring to “legitimate” and Church-approved canons. Aureole versus pumpkins? Halloween is not an “evil” holiday: it may be considered superficial, lacking in spiritual connotations, but I think that knowing its origin, its evolution over time, its meaning and value in the past can be useful in freeing oneself from the consumerist and occult ties that ignorance attributes to this festivity.

³⁷ Please refer to the analysis on the etymology of the term on the previous pages.

Celtic festivals, an atypical ethnic revival

1. *Heritage*

The Celts are the oldest civilisation – one cannot speak of a people – known to exist in the entire area north of the Alps¹: their origins have been the subject of much dispute among scholars and are still unclear today. One of the most credible hypotheses holds that towards the end of the 3rd millennium B.C. a people known for their battle axes and burial mounds moved across the Carpathians from the Russian steppes to central Europe, just as some merchants belonging to the bell-shaped vase culture (also known as the Beaker culture) began to explore the same region (Kruta 2003). It seems that the two cultures merged, or that the former simply absorbed the essential aspects of the latter, giving rise to the “people” of the Celts.

Historians generally attribute the genesis of this civilization to around 1000-900 B.C., marking the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age. During this period, the Celts gained renown for their exceptional skill in working with iron. They amassed wealth through trade, established new settlements along river routes to control major trade pathways, and expanded their territories across western Europe and the British Isles (Kondratiev 2005). Migrations and interactions with indigenous civilizations on the continent gave rise to diverse groups sharing similar cultural and linguistic traits, hinting at a possible pattern of Celtic migration across Europe, with a suggested central core in the west-central Hallstatt region. From around the 6th century B.C., Celts are believed to have spread southward and southeastward, as well as westward and southwestward. Evidence of this expansion lies in

¹ It should be borne in mind that the Celts, as we conceive of them today, as will be seen in the following pages, were ‘invented’ by European 17th-century historiography: «the ancient peoples we call by this name were not at all aware that they were Celts: they never had a political organisation that brought them together [...] a common cult, nor did they ever fight a common enemy. And above all they never felt themselves to be a people» (Giordano, 2002, p. 40).

the distribution of Hallstattian artifacts and more recent discoveries characteristic of the La Tène culture.

Central Europe, particularly the region between Bohemia and Bavaria, is thought to have witnessed the earliest Celtic settlements. Here, the 'urn field' culture emerged between the 13th and 8th centuries B.C., named after its burial practice of cremating the deceased and placing their remains in urns buried across extensive areas (Taraglio 2014). This culture predates the Celtic civilization and laid the groundwork for its subsequent development, evidenced by its social structure characterized by a warrior class, gender equality, and communal living.

Here is where ancient Greek authors placed the Celts on the territory: «Hecataeus of Miletus [...] places Keltiké, the land of the Celts, beyond Massalia (Marseille) and the country of the Ligurians; Herodotus [...] places them on the banks of the Danube and beyond the Pillars of Hercules (Gibraltar); Apollonius Rhodius [...] speaks of them in relation to the Rhone and Lake Geneva» (Cuisenier 1994: 83). Herodotus wrote about it around 450 B.C. in the *Histories*, without, however, giving any historical indication: «this river Istro [Danube], whose sources are in the country of the Celts near the city of Pirene, with its course cuts Europe in half (the Celts are settled beyond the Pillars of Hercules and con-finish with the Cynetians, who are the last inhabitants of Europe to the west) and, crossing the whole of Europe, it flows into Pontus Eusinus where there is the city of Istria, inhabited by colonists from Miletus» (Erodoto II: 33)².

The decline of the Celtic civilisation was marked by the advance and conquest by the Romans of areas of great strategic and commercial prestige and then by the spread of Christianity. Under the consulship of Julius Caesar, who testified to this in *De Bello Gallico*, Roman expeditions into Cisalpine and Transalpine Gaul began in 58 B.C.³ The final surrender of Vercingetorix – who is credited with having succeeded in uniting the majority of the Gallic peoples by overcoming the traditional historical divisions- in the siege of Alesia in 52 B.C. decreed the end of independence and the beginning of a profound social, political and cultural change for these populations.

By virtue of the prosperity they enjoyed for centuries and the territorial expansion they were protagonists of, the Celts are referred to as the 'founders of early Europe', a substratum of individual national and regional cultures that has cyclically fascinated scholars over the centuries. «A first return to

² The 2000 edition was consulted here (Milan, Mondadori).

³ From the perspective of the Romans, Cisalpine Gaul (today's northern Italy) was that situated "on this side of the Alps", Transalpine Gaul (i.e. today's Belgium, Luxembourg, western Germany, France, Switzerland), "beyond".

the Celtic spirit took place when, from the 12th century onwards, wandering minstrels [...] spread knowledge of Celtic tales throughout the lands of France and Germany, and poets such as Chrétien de Troyes, Gottfried of Strasbourg and Wolfram von Eschenbach presented new versions of the courtly epics of the Celts» (Taraglio 2014: 44). In the context of antiquarian and humanistic studies of a classical-state nature based on the analysis of Latin sources, in particular the *De Bello Gallico*, in the 1500s several French authors attempted to rediscover their Celtic roots, albeit with dubious results (Percivaldi 2003). In 1708, new perspectives were opened up by the Breton abbot Pezron: by studying the language still spoken in Brittany, he concluded that it was a direct continuation of that of the ancient Gauls. His volume, *Antiquité de la nation, et de la langue des Celts, autrement appelez Gaulois*, was translated into English and read by the Welshman Edward Lhuyd, who in «an unfinished work that marked the destiny of modern Celticism [...] was the first to use the collective term 'Celts'» (Percivaldi 2003: 152).

Celticism began with the work of intellectuals on the ancient manuscripts of Wales, encouraged later by the Scottish poet James McPherson, who in 1760 anonymously published a collection of ancient Gaelic songs he had translated, attributing them to a legendary bard singer called Ossian, son of Fingal, an ancient Celtic poet. The success of the work prompted the author to publish further volumes, up to the final version of 1773, consisting of twenty-two poems, which had the merit of arousing in the educated public a renewed interest in the wilderness, the fabulous past of the Celts and their beliefs (Rivoallan 1957). «More generally, McPherson's Ossian arouses, in all the countries of Europe at the end of the 18th century, the desire to rediscover their own ancient national poetry and the will to trace popular customs and beliefs, crude and primitive, certainly, but immune to artifice» (Cuisenier 1994: 22). The *Ossian Songs* were in fact a historical forgery of which McPherson, as was later discovered, was the real author: nevertheless they stimulated the study of folk traditions as the foundation of national identity⁴.

Celticism exploded across the European continent. In 1805, the Académie Celtique was founded in France, with the nationalist objective of rediscover-

⁴ In 1776 David Hume, a Scottish philosopher, addressed a letter to Edward Gibbon, a member of the English Parliament, arguing about the authenticity of the *Songs of Ossian*: «I see you entertain doubt with regard to authenticity of the poems of Ossian. You are certainly right in so doing. It is indeed strange that any men of sense should have imagined it possible that above twenty thousand verses, along with numerless historical facts, could have been preserved by oral tradition during fifty generations, by the rudest, perhaps, of all the European Nations, the most necessitous, the most turbulent, the most ferocious, and the most unsettled» (reported in Dundes 1989: 48).

ing the glorious Celtic and Gallic past; three years after its foundation, it promoted a scientific fieldwork, one of the first organised and systematic demographical surveys, through the administration of a questionnaire that still remains the oldest known⁵. And by attributing everything that was not of Greek or Roman ancestry to the Celts, France could boast a national antiquity as prestigious as classical antiquity. However, the nationalistic motivations went too far – some scholars imagined that the Celts had reached the highest levels of civilisation⁶ – to the point of generating a veritable Celtomania, hardly in keeping with the initially declared scientific ambition: numerous scholars left the Celtic Academy, which ceased all activity in 1812. Celtomania survived, however, with Chateaubriand and La Villemarqué, who supported the Celtic claims of the Breton people with the collection of folk songs *Barzaz Breiz* (Ballads of Brittany) (1838).

In the 19th century Scott and Tennyson, in the following century Yeats and Joyce: these are some of the authors who have been influenced by the Celts; more recently Tolkien and Zimmer Bradley. Celticism has also invested the record market, and “Celtic” music groups have sprung up, sharing the writing of lyrics in Breton or Gaelic and the use of ancient instruments traditionally associated with Celtic culture, such as harp, bagpipes, Celtic violins or horns, alongside the more modern. I mention, by way of example, the “Celtic” rock of Cranberries, Pogues, Sinéad O’ Connor, Moya Brennan; and the music of Chieftains Enya and Loreena McKennit⁷. Many bands also perform throughout Europe at the numerous Celtic festivals, the most famous of which is the ‘Fe-stival Interceltique’, which has been held every August since 1971 in Lorient, Brittany, for ten days (www.festival-interceltique.com). The intention of the founders was to contribute to the development of Breton music and culture and, at the same time, to open up towards the populations of the British Isles – Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, Isle of Man, Ireland – and of northern Spain – Galicia and Asturias – who now speak a Celtic language, which has enabled the event to become a place of in-counterpoint between Brittany and other nations, thus forging a new concept that brings interchange: interceltism (www.festival-interceltique.com). The “Pan

⁵ The questionnaire was dealt with extensively by Paolo Toschi, who reported it in full in the text *Guida allo studio delle tradizioni popolari* (1962: 38 and 59).

⁶ Some were convinced that the Low-Breton dialect corresponded to the language of the Celts (Cuisenier 1994).

⁷ Interesting is the case of Manau, a French group that in 1998 released *La Tribu de Dana*, a highly successful Celtic rap about an ancient battle that was also broadcast extensively on the radio by Italian stations.

Celtic International Festival”, held every year in Ireland during the week before Easter, has the same objectives: it is an itinerant event whose venue changes every two years and which, since 1971, has offered parades, concerts, traditional dances, musical, dance and singing competitions, workshops, markets, storytelling, poetry readings, artistic performances and traditional food tasting.

In Italy, interest in the Celts has spread since the early 1990s, after Venice hosted the largest archaeological exhibition on the Celtic world⁸. The first Celtic festivals then appeared, particularly in northern Italy, and to date there are about fifty of them, centred in particular in Piedmont, Lombardy, Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia⁹.

In Italy, to make up for the aforementioned limited number of sources, a generic “cult of nature” has been used. In particular, through the Celts, the Lega Nord political party has sought a re-cognition of its own policy, making constant reference to an alleged descent, «functional to legitimise and ennoble a cultural-historical unity that is evidently negated by facts» (Aime 2004: 36). In the elaboration of a mythical-ideological horizon, the League has resorted to a strong ritual aspect: «in the usual confusion between the peoples of ancient Europe and the peoples who today speak a Celtic language in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Brittany, and without bothering to refer to well-founded and articulate documentation, a sort of cult of water and the river is constructed, with the ceremony of collecting ampoules from the Po springs and their symbolic reunion with the waters in Venice» (Bravo 2013: 61). Among the most popular activities among the Leghists are the Celtic New Year, celebrated on the same day as Halloween, 31 October, and the Celtic weddings, celebrated in Pontida, the meeting place for members of the political party.

Are we therefore facing a case of ethnic revival? By this expression we mean a phenomenon that stems from a strong feeling of nationalism¹⁰, i.e.

⁸ The exhibition “The Celts. The First Europe”, at Palazzo Grassi, from 24 March to 8 December 1991, «under the scientific direction of Sabatino Moscati, had the patronage of 13 European Academies, and was supported by a committee of lenders of works with more than 200 institutions and museums from 23 countries» (Clemente 1993: 209). Over 700,000 people visited it, with an average of almost 3,000 visitors per day (www.repubblica.it).

⁹ Among the most important - in addition to those in Piedmont, which I will discuss later - are Celtic Days in Ome (BS), Triskell Celtic Festival (TS), Celtival (TV), Bundan (FE), Montelago Celtic Festival (MC) (www.celtical.it).

¹⁰ In the second half of the 18th century, the early Romantic period, with its cult of nature, antiquity and the Middle Ages, gave a strong impetus to the rise of nationalism, a set of doctrines and movements that attributed a central role to the idea of nationhood and national

that ideological movement that seeks to achieve and maintain the autonomy, unity and identity of a social group. «The aim of nationalism is always the creation or conservation or consolidation of “nations”» (Smith 1984: 38). For an ethnic group to be defined as such, its members must share a common past and certain cultural traits (language, religion, skin colour, customs, etc.). The eventual social marginalisation of ethnic groups leads to the need for vindication, revival of one’s own identity and revitalisation of one’s own culture and traditions (Smith 1984).

2. *Transmissibility*

If the ethnic revival is presented as an attempt at the survival and preservation of the culture – customs, religion, language, etc. – of a given group, the Celtic revival is, however, atypical, because it concerns a civilisation that has long since disappeared and of which very little remains, traceable through three main sources: the writings of Greek¹¹ and Latin authors, especially Caesar’s *De Bello Gallico*, which contains valuable information about the society and customs of the Celts; the texts of Irish monks, who recorded facts and details from oral literature, undoubtedly by misinterpreting and adapting its contents to the Christian religion; archaeological finds, remains of necropolises and objects of everyday use.

Writing was rarely used by the Celts and only for commercial matters, while culture and religion were transmitted orally¹² by the Druids¹³, the most

identities. Nationalism has historically manifested itself in two forms: as an ideology of liberation of oppressed nations and as an ideology of the supremacy of one nation over others.

¹¹ In addition to the aforementioned Hecataeus of Miletus and Herodotus, I recall that Plato’s *Laws* refers to the Celts as a warlike and wine-loving people; Aristotle in *The Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* describes their discipline and courage on the battlefield, but accuses them of low intelligence. The historian Ephorus calls them “friends of the Greeks”, probably because of the trade relations the Celts had with the colony of Massalia (Cerinotti 2005). The most significant source in Greek is Polybius, who reports on the Celts’ main military events and provides ethnographic information and the first description of the structure of society (Vitali 2012).

¹² Although the transmission of culture was essentially oral, the Druids possessed a writing system called Ogham – whose survival up to the 7th century in Ireland, Scotland and Wales has been attested by some scholars – whose alphabet consisted of a series of horizontal and vertical lines, perpendicular and transversal to each other, traced on rocks or on yew or hazel wood sticks; the letters were associated with the names of the plants whose initials they were, a functional system as it facilitated the memorisation of knowledge.

¹³ The etymology of this term over time has been subject to numerous interpretations: the most plausible seems to be the one proposed by the French writer Jean-Baptiste Bullet (1759),

prestigious figures in society along with tribal leaders and chieftains, who enjoyed special privileges. Their power went beyond the religious sphere because they also exercised their authority in the cultural and social spheres: in fact, they were not only considered high priests, but also teachers, sages, poets, judges, astrologers, doctors, guardians of the herbal sciences (AA.VV. 2006). Caesar in Book Six *De Bello Gallico* specified: «Illi rebus divinis intersunt, sacrificia publica ac privata procurant, religiones interpretantur: ad hos magnus adulescentium numerus disciplinae causa concurrat, magnoque hi sunt apud eos honore¹⁴». Founded mainly on the knowledge of nature, its rhythms and laws, and the energies derived from the cosmos, Druidic teaching was exclusively oral: writing would in fact have caused the fixity and death of knowledge, which could therefore only be kept alive through the verbal medium: myths and legends, through the epic deeds of heroes and deities, handed down the rules of social and religious behaviour, beliefs, and customs of one's own culture (Kruta, 2003). Julius Caesar in *De Bello Gallico* wrote: «the Druids are concerned with worship, they provide for public and private sacrifices, they interpret things pertaining to religion, a large number of young men gather with them for instruction, and they are held in great honour and esteem. They are called upon to decide in almost all public and private disputes [...] it is the Druids who decide on reparations and punishments» (reported in Massignan 2001: 36). Women could also become Druids, just as they could be warriors and military leaders¹⁵.

Celtic religion had hundreds of gods and mythological creatures, but all were expressions of a single supreme being called OIW who revealed himself in the natural elements. And indeed, the Celtic religion expressed itself through contact with nature and its rituals were held in open spaces; nevertheless, archaeologists have discovered remains of temples with altars and columns dating back to the 1st century B.C., a sign of a change that took shape in material structures. The four basic elements of nature – air, water, earth and fire – were for the Celts an expression of primordial forces; the gods dwelt in trees and mountain tops, the goddesses in the waters of springs, lakes and ponds (James, 1999): the waters in particular were the point of con-

according to whom it derives from the Celtic *derwydd*, later transformed into *druyd*, meaning wise, soothsayer.

¹⁴ Translation: the druids perform religious ceremonies, deal with public and private sacrifices, interpret auspices: large numbers of young people flock to them for instruction and they enjoy great prestige among them.

¹⁵ Famous for her military exploits became Boudicca (c.a.33-60 A.D.), queen of the Iceni: she led one of the most impressive revolts in Britain against the Romans (Rutherford 2004).

tact between the visible and invisible worlds. The Celts believed in an otherworldly world that welcomed the souls of the dead after death: the soul spent a period in the Otherworld and then could return to earth in an animal, vegetable or mineral body¹⁶: many legends described the land of the dead as an island of peace and tranquillity, so much so that it was given the name “island of the blessed” (AA.VV. 2006).

A symbol of the OIW was the sun, which the Druids addressed during invocation ceremonies and initiation rites. It seems that the Celts attached great importance to astronomical phenomena because the sky was considered the seat of the OIW if not the OIW itself. Astral movements, in particular the phases of the moon, determined the beginning and duration of the months and defined the auspicious times for all agricultural work. The calendar therefore followed the course of the moon and the constellations, and they used megalithic sites as astronomical observatories, whose stones were arranged in correspondence with astral movements; they also gave names to the stones, according to their size, shape or arrangement: menhirs, dolmens, cromlechs and stelae were altars or otherwise spaces in which they performed rituals. On these stones, the Druids engraved oghamic symbols or triskell, the triple spiral symbol whose meaning is still unclear: some scholars have advanced the hypothesis that it is the elementary representation of the sun (Kruta 2003). Among the best-known symbols is the Celtic cross, which represented harmony between the human being and the OIW, with the four directions formed by the intersecting axes delineating the path seen by man; and then the circle, a direct expression of cyclicity and continuity in time and space. Another recurring element in rituals was fire: a bonfire was lit, fuelled with wood from sacred trees, and this was believed to be a threshold between the world of the living and the afterlife. Each ritual had music in the background, i.e. sounds and/or chants, as support for the narration or pronunciation of particular formulas; the most commonly used instruments were horns, trumpets, flutes, cymbals and especially harps, the use of which was reserved exclusively for the Druids.

On the subject of the calendar and the division of the year, without going into the still current debates on the validity of the “Coligny Calendar” rather than the reconstruction by Robert Graves (1948)¹⁷, it seems plausible that

¹⁶ This belief was reported in *De Bello Gallico* by Caesar, who noted that «souls do not perish, but after death pass from one to the other. According to them, this is a great incitement to valour, since it eliminates the fear of dying».

¹⁷ Found in November 1897 at the bottom of a well in Coligny, southern France, the Coligny Calendar is a series of fragments of a bronze tablet dating back to the 2nd century BC, and

the Celtic calendar was defined on the basis of the observation of lunar and solar phases; it also attached particular importance to changes of season and days dedicated to specific community rituals.

There were two major festivals, Samain and Beltane, to which Imbolc and Lughnasadh were added. The Celts divided the year into two seasons: winter, the time of the black months, hibernation and death, and summer, the time of birth and the luxuriance of nature. Summer and winter were celebrated on the days of Beltane and Samain respectively: Beltane fell in May, Samain in autumn, on the night between 31 October and 1 November. Samain was the most significant event of the Celtic year, the sacred festival par excellence that lasted for three nights, not least because 1 November was the start of the new year, the warm season officially ended and winter began. Samain served to exorcise the arrival of winter and its dangers, it was a celebration that combined the fear of death and spirits with the merriment of end-of-year celebrations. It was the night when the gates of the Hereafter opened and the spirits of the dead returned to earth to show themselves, communicate with the living and amuse them behind their backs, playing pranks and frightening them with their appearances¹⁸. The Celts feared that on 1 November the forces of the spirits might unite with the world of the living causing the temporary dissolution of the laws of time and space: so on the night of 31 October they would gather in the woods and hills for the ceremony of lighting the Sacred Fire, known as Tlachtgha, and perform animal sacrifices; they also performed propitiatory dances for the fertility of the coming year (Bonato 2020).

As mentioned above, Beltane marked the beginning of the warm season: it was the festival of the sacred fire, which the Druids lit using seven different types of wood, including the sacred oak wood. Rituals were celebrated to propitiate the fertility of the earth, and a wooden pole, usually made of birch, was erected and coloured ribbons were tied to the top of it. Imbolc – 1 February – was a festival dedicated to meditation and purification, which

thus attributed to a Celtic population, whose engravings reproduce the sequence of days in a calendar. Graves (1948) argued that the Celtic year was divided according to the phases of the moon, into thirteen months of twenty-eight days plus an extra day: this sequence is not confirmed by the Coligny calendar nor by other evidence, but it is considered by many scholars to be the most reliable theory.

¹⁸ According to Hutton (1996), there is no evidence that Samain was about the cult of the dead: rather, he celebrated a minor New Year, marking the transition from one season to the next and thus the end of the harvest period. The scholar believes that it was only with the spread of Christianity that legends were developed about the spirits of the dead returning to visit the living between 31 October and 1 November.

was achieved by lighting candles in homes. On this day, initiation rites were celebrated for poets and especially the warrior class, who were given a drink of honey and hallucinogenic herbs to stimulate physical energy and spiritual activity. Lughnasadh – 1 August – fell at the height of summer, at harvest time: games such as stone-throwing, archery, steeplechase or wrestling competitions were organised for the occasion; and then markets and poetry competitions (Cerinotti 2005).

The mention of Celtic ceremoniality once again allows us to note that there are festivals that last for centuries, perhaps even retaining some formal traits intact; however, they transform their meanings and functions, adapting to the needs of their subjects that are constantly being renewed. I will not dwell on the direct connections of Samain with the celebration of All Saints' Day¹⁹, of Beltane with May Day, of Imbolc with Candlemas, of Lughnasadh with the harvest festival: I think that in order to understand and bring to light not only phenomena of continuity but also, and above all, variations, flexibility and syncretisms, it may be useful to briefly describe some Celtic festivals held in northern Italy – and which I have observed directly –, bearing in mind that all the elements that characterise them have been recreated, if not invented²⁰: hence the possible use of the adjective “typical” does not correspond to “authentic”: in this context, typicality is the result of a process of stereotyping, as well as of inventing tradition.

In Italy, in Valle d'Aosta, “Celtica” has been celebrated since 1997. It is one of the most important festivals in Europe dedicated to Celtic art, music and culture, born from the idea of a group of enthusiasts, who later came together under the name of Clan Mor Arth²¹. It takes place on the first weekend of July, over four days, in Val Veny, on the slopes of Mont Blanc, in the Peuterey forest²², in the commune of Courmayeur, located at an altitude of 1510 me-

¹⁹ For more on the connection between these two celebrations, and then with Halloween, see Bonato, 2020 (see Bibliographic references).

²⁰ For example, as far as music is concerned, which, as we shall see, plays a major role in the festivals, there is no evidence other than that relating to a few instruments: in particular, in 2004, five specimens of a wind instrument, the carnyx, used by warriors to produce a very loud sound, were discovered in Tintignac (France); thanks to other findings, we also know about the use of the flute and the zither.

²¹ Clan Mor Arth, or Clan Grande Orsa, is a cultural association named after the Valle d'Aosta, whose borders seem to draw the outline of a large bear, an animal to which certain Celtic deities such as the goddess Andarta were linked, and which seems to embody the virtues of royalty and strength in that culture.

²² Other localities are also involved in the event: some activities, such as concerts and conferences, also take place in Courmayeur, Pré-Saint Didier, Saint-Vincent, Aosta, Jovençon and the Fortress of Bard.

tres, an evocative location that some interviewees said they liked a lot (Bonato 2017). It is no coincidence that guests of “Celtica” are allowed to stay overnight in tents in an area within the forest, so as to encourage direct contact with nature and the surrounding area. As mentioned, it seems that the Celts attached great importance to nature and its elements, and consequently their places of worship were open spaces: clearings, woods, hills, rivers. The wooded area is divided into several zones, each designated for different activities. The most important location is the ‘Big Stage’ clearing, which hosts the main moments of the festival, including concerts by numerous groups, both Italian and foreign, especially Scottish and Irish. The area behind the main stage is reserved for lectures: onlookers are seated on the lawn, gathered in a circle, in the shade of trees sacred to the Celts: elms, oaks and limes that abound in the Peuterey forest. In an adjoining area, a stone menhir is erected, decorated with triskell and various symbols, at the foot of which lectures, poetry readings and Celtic harp performances are held. Participants arrange themselves in a circle around the sacred stone, thus creating the so-called “great circle” of “Celtica”. One of the most important events of the entire event is the lighting of the Druidic fire on Friday evening: this is no ordinary bonfire but a solemn ritual for which wood from sacred trees is used. On Saturday evenings, up-and-coming musicians as well as internationally renowned artists perform, and people dance to the sound of bagpipes, harps and accordions. Every year at the end of this evening, all the artists of “Celtica” take the stage, greet the audience and thank the forest and mountains for their hospitality, then sing the anthem of the Celtic nations, *Greenlands*. It is a solemn and evocative moment of strong emotion, involving and uniting people from various parts of Europe.

Similar to “Celtica” is the ceremonial apparatus of the Beltane festival, which has been celebrated since 1996 in Masserano, in the province of Biella, in May, in the woods of the Arcobaleno Park. Beltane is organised by the “Antica Quercia” association, one of the most convincing historical re-enactment groups on the Italian scene. Set up in 1994 and based in Biella, it started two years earlier as “Legion of the Oath”, an association for role-playing games (tabletop and live) which then evolved into its current form (www.anticaquercia.it from the first artistic and musical events to the organisation of Beltane and the magazine “Vento tra le Fronde”²³. In ancient Beltane, the central element was the fires lit by the Druids for propitiatory and purifying purposes, and so it is in Masserano: Saturday evening is in fact dedicated to

²³ The magazine, which can be purchased at various sales outlets throughout Italy, is a six-monthly publication.

lighting the two sacred fires, thus observing the four cardinal points, as happens in “Celtica”. The spiritual area has four stone altars consecrated to Earth, Water, Air and Fire near which people can pray. The most important altar is the Earth altar, in front of which Celtic weddings take place on Sundays: these, of course, have no legal value, but the ceremony is particularly atmospheric for the bride and groom. There are several concerts to attend, but musical performances are not as predominant here as at “Celtica”: the Beltane festival is in fact centred on spirituality and rituals, the lighting of fires and wedding ceremonies.

More recently established – the first edition was held in 2012 – is “Beltane and the calendimaggio festival” in Valdieri (CN)²⁴, which differ from the events just described in that they particularly emphasise the historical and social aspect of Celtic civilisation. The location is a forest near a Celtic necropolis, presumably used between the 14th and 5th centuries B.C., brought to light by archaeological excavations in 1983 due to the widening of a road²⁵. All ceremonies take place near a Celtic hut that is reconstructed for the occasion, inside which is placed a throne on which sits the *rix*, the king. The festival takes place over two days, on the Saturday and Sunday of the first weekend in May, a period that for the Celts marked the beginning of the fertile season, but not only: the assembly met to make important decisions concerning the entire community, political offices were confirmed and kings and princes were elected, or military leaders in the event of war. The most solemn moment of the entire festival is the Beltane ritual on Saturday evening, which celebrates the most fertile and auspicious time of the year and culminates with the lighting of the sacred fire: the Druid and the *rix* make new alliances with other tribes and at the end Celtic marriages are celebrated. The Valdieri festival, organised by the Terra Taurina cultural association, founded in 2000 by a small group of ap-passionates, also includes demonstrations of sword training, Celtic fencing combat and workshops for children.

²⁴ In 1983, a Celtic necropolis with eleven cremation burials, a cenotaph and a number of ritual burials, presumably used between the 14th and 5th centuries B.C., was brought to light in Valdieri following work to widen a road. The small number of burials and the presence of child burials seem to indicate that this burial ground was intended for people who once played a special role within the community, probably related to the sacred sphere (Gambari 2009).

²⁵ Eleven cremation burials, a cenotaph and several ritual graves were found. The small number of burials and the presence of child burials seem to indicate that this burial ground was intended for persons who once played a special role within the community, probably related to the sacred sphere (Gambari 2009).

The Axa Briga festival²⁶ is held in the park of the same name, in Settimo Rottaro (TO) on the initiative of the Camelot cultural association²⁷, which has been promoting Celtic history and culture, with a focus on handicrafts and ancient trades, for the past ten years or so (axabriga.it). The first two editions of this event, which failed in terms of attendance and public participation, were held in Roppolo (BI) in 2006 and the following year. In 2007, Camelot obtained from the Settimo Rottaro municipality the use of a wooded area – which it later reclaimed self-financed – for the purpose of creating a Celtic theme park in which to propose cultural and educational activities. Since 2011, the association has re-proposed the event²⁸, obtaining a good response, which is characterised by the handicrafts market and the historical re-enactment, staged with the participation of various Celtic groups who present their activities. In the opinion of the organisers, the contribution of the various clans is important to promote the theme park and the future Celtic village, which will host many activities and employ many people in the project.

The thousands of participants – Celtic enthusiasts and non-Celtic enthusiasts alike – at the events briefly described suggest that northern Italy has proved fertile ground for the birth and development of Celtic festivals, which since the end of the last century have appeared one after the other in locations a few hundred kilometres apart²⁹. These festivals mutually and reciprocally influence each other, although each interprets Celticism in its own way, exalting – as noted – some aspects to the detriment of others. The organisational, artistic and cultural quality of many of these festivals is guaranteed by an organisation set up in 2011 called ECQUE, European Celtic Quality Event, a consortium that brings together seven of Italy's main Celtic festivals: its primary objective is the dissemination of Celtic culture and the local culture connected to it. The ECQUE guarantees the absence within the festival of any form of political, party or religious connotation, and ensures the valorisation, respect and preservation of the event venues, paying particular attention to natural sites (www.celtica.vda.it).

²⁶ The name Axa Briga can be translated as "city of water", «inspired by the nearby Lake Viverone and the proto-Celtic pile-dwelling culture that settled there almost 3000 years ago» (axabriga.it).

²⁷ Many of its members are at the same time part of the historical re-enactment group Pobal ap Vaud, which performs at festivals and events related to Celtic culture.

²⁸ It will assume its current name in 2013.

²⁹ There are festivals in the provinces of Turin, Aosta, Cuneo, Novara, Vercelli, Genoa, Imperia, Milan, Pavia, Brescia, Bergamo, Lecco, Varese, Bologna, Reggio Emilia, Ferrara, Forlì, Padua, Vicenza, Treviso, Trento, Udine, Pisa, Lucca, Arezzo, Macerata, Ascoli, Rome. A detailed list can be found at www.celtical.it.

Bibliography

AA.VV.

2006 *I Celti*, 1° ed. 2002. Firenze: Giunti.

Adriano, A.

1998 The world of tradition. In *Roero. A journey of discovery*, Association of Mayors of the Roero ed. pp.113-137. Marene: Astegiano.

Aime, M.

2004 *Eccessi di culture*. Torino: Einaudi.

Apolito, P.

1993 *Il tramonto del totem*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Ariño Villarroya, A.

1997 Le trasformazioni della festa nella modernità avanzata. In *L'utopia di Dioniso. Festa fra tradizione e modernità*, A. Ariño Villarroya and L.M. Lombardi Satriani eds. pp.7-21. Roma: Meltemi,.

Atlan, H.

1979 *Entre le cristal et la fumée*. Paris: Seuil.

Artoni, A.

1997 Il gioco della tradizione, ovvero la rifunzionalizzazione nella tarda modernità della festa contadina di tradizione orale. In *L'utopia di Dioniso. Festa fra tradizione e modernità*, A. Ariño Villarroya e L.M. Lombardi Satriani eds. pp.123-136. Roma: Meltemi.

Bachtin, M.

1979 (orig. 1965) *L'opera di Rabelais e la cultura popolare. Riso, carnevale e festa nella tradizione medievale e rinascimentale*. Torino: Einaudi.

Baldini, E. and Bellosi, G.

2006 *Halloween: nei giorni che i morti ritornano*. Torino: Einaudi.

Barolo, A.

1931 *Folklore monferrino*. Bocca: Torino.

Belpoliti, M.

2000 *Morti pagani*. *La Stampa* 1 November: 45.

Bernini, S. Casalini, M. Rancati, L. and Rancati, C.

2015 *Le vere origini di Halloween*. Sossano (VI): Anguana.

Boissevain, J.

1992 Play and identity: ritual change in a Maltese village. In *Revitalizing European Rituals*, J. Boissevain ed. pp.137-154. London: Routledge.

Bonanzinga, S.

1999 Tipologia e analisi dei fatti etnocoreutici. *Archivio Antropologico Mediterraneo* 1-2: 77-10.

Bonato, L.

2001 Il Bal da Sabre di Fenestrelle. In *Le spade della vita e della morte*, P. Grimaldi ed. pp.209-227. Torino: Omega.

2006 *Tutti in festa. Antropologia della cerimonialità*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

2008 Conoscere e valorizzare il patrimonio locale: il contributo di Casal Cermelli. In *Immaterialità e paesaggio*, L. Bonato ed. pp.7-24. Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso.

2010 Il paradosso: autentiche tradizioni inventate. In *Annali della Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere dell'Università di Torino*, pp.245-255. Torino: Trauben.

2011 *Tieni il tempo. Riti e ritmi della città*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

2015 La danza delle spade tra autenticità e finzione. In *La concretezza e l'immaterialità. Esperienze di ricerca antropologica*, L. Bonato e L. Zola eds. pp.49-65. Torino: Meti.

2017 *Antropologia della festa. Vecchie logiche per nuove performance*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

2020 Una festa "di ritorno": contatti, contaminazioni, travisamenti. In *Halloween. La festa delle zucche vuote*, L. Bonato e L. Zola eds. pp.9-33. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Borra, A. and Grimaldi, P.

2001 La danza delle spade in Piemonte. In *Le spade della vita e della morte. Danze armate in Piemonte*, P. Grimaldi ed. pp.27-107. Torino: Omega.

Bravo, G. L.

1981 Spadonari e festa a Giaglione. In *Festa e lavoro nella montagna torinese e a Torino*, G.L. Bravo ed. pp.35-60. Cuneo: L'Arciere.

1983 Riti nelle società complesse. *La Ricerca Folklorica* 7: 85-95.

- 1984 *Festa contadina e società complessa*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- 1987 Sacra rappresentazione e bricolage, In *Complessità sociale e comportamento cerimoniale*, R. Grimaldi pp.9-27. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- 1993 La riproposta di una cerimonia primaverile, In *Il calendario rituale contadino*, P. Grimaldi pp.15-24. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- 2003 Orso e capra a nuova vita. In *Bestie, santi, divinità. Maschere animali dell'Europa tradizionale*, P. Grimaldi ed. pp.35-43. Torino: Regione Piemonte.
- 2005 *Feste, masche, contadini*. Roma: Carocci.
- 2005 *La complessità della tradizione. Festa, museo e ricerca antropologica*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- 2013 *Italiani all'alba del nuovo millennio*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Buttitta, I.
- 1999 *Le fiamme dei santi. Usi rituali del fuoco in Sicilia*. Roma: Meltemi.
- 2007 La festa delle immagini. In *Feste per un anno*, G. Leone pp.13-17. Palermo: Eidos.
- Carazzone, G.
- 1994 *Il Bal do Sabre*. Savigliano: L'Artistica.
- Castelli, F.
- 1990 Spazio vissuto e cultura tradizionale. La percezione dello spazio dei contadini alessandrini. *Quaderno di storia contemporanea* 8: 31-56.
- 2001 Le danze armate in Italia. In *Le spade della vita e della morte. Danze armate in Piemonte*, P. Grimaldi ed. pp.123-143. Torino: Omega.
- Cattabiani, A.
- 1988 *Calendario*. Milano: Rusconi.
- Centelles Royo, G.
- 1998 *Evolució de un ritual: la peregrinació de Cati a Sant Pere de Castelfort*. Castellón: Diputació Provincial.
- Cerinotti, A.
- 2005 *I celti. Alle origini della civiltà d'Europa*. Milano: Giunti.
- Ciociola, P.
- 2008 Don Aldo Buonaiuto: un appello forte a genitori ed educatori. *Avvenire* 31 ottobre: 15.
- Clemente, P.
- 1981 Maggiolata e Segal-la-vecchia nel senese e nel grossetano. Note sulla festa. In *Festa. Antropologia e semiotica*, C. Bianco e M. Del Ninno eds. pp.46-57. Firenze: Nuova Guaraldi.

- 1993 Palazzo Grassi, I Celti in mostra. *Etnoantropologia* 1: 207-209.
- 2001 Il punto su: il folklore. In *Oltre il folklore. Tradizioni popolari e antropologia nella società contemporanea*, P. Clemente, F. Mugnaini eds. pp.187-219. Roma: Carocci,
- Cocchiara, G.
1956 *Il paese di cuccagna*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Collis, J.
2003 *The Celts: Origins, Myths, Invention*. London: Tempus.
- Conrad, J.R.
1961 *Le culte du taureau: de la préhistoire aux corridas espagnoles*. Paris: Payot.
- Cuisenier, J.
1994 (orig. 1990) *Etnologia dell'Europa*. Milano: Il Saggiatore.
- de Martino, E.
1958 *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico*. Torino: Einaudi.
- di Nola, A. M.
1976 *Gli aspetti magico-religiosi di una cultura subalterna italiana*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Dégh, L. and Vazsonyi, A.
1981, La parola "cane" morde? Dall'azione alla leggenda, dalla leggenda all'azione. In *Festa. Antropologia e semiotica*, C. Bianco e M. Del Ninno eds. pp.58-71. Firenze: Nuova Guaraldi
- Dundes, A.
1989, *Folklore Matters*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Eliade, M.
1954 *Trattato di storia delle religioni*. Torino: Boringhieri.
- Fédensieu, A.
1997-1998 Saint Martin et la châtaigne. A propos d'un châtaignier de saint Martin en Touraine. *Mythologie française* 187: 14-36.
- Ferraro, G.
1870 *Canti popolari monferrini*. Torino-Firenze: Loescher.
- Frazer, J.G.
1965 (orig. 1890) *Il ramo d'oro*. Torino: Boringhieri.

Galanti, B. M.

1942 *La danza della spada in Italia*. Roma: Edizioni Italiane.

Gallino, L.

1980 *La società: perché cambia, come funziona*. Torin: Paravia.

1982 *Della ingovernabilità*. In *Consenso e conflitto nella società contemporanea*, G. Statera ed. pp.69-87. Milan: FrancoAngeli.

Gambari, M.V.

2009 Il ripostiglio del Monte Cavanero di Chiusa Pesio. *Chiusa Antica* 15: 3.

Gerbelle, J.

1985 *Batailles de reines. Chronique et palmares (1946-1984)*. Aosta: Imprimerie E. Duc.

Gerbelle, J., Maccari, P. and Ramires L.

1996 *La valle delle reines*. Quart: Musumeci.

Giallombardo, F.

1999 Il codice della festa. In *Calamonaci. Antropologia della festa e culto dei santi dell'Agrigentino*, G. Giacobello e R. Perricone eds. pp.97-112. Palermo: Bruno Leopardi.

Giardelli, P.

1997 *Santi e diavoli. Le tradizioni popolari valdostane*. Genova: Sagep.

Giglio, P.

2019 *Etnografia visiva di un rituale comunitario nelle Alpi occidentali*, tesi di laurea, Università di Torino, Dipartimento di Culture, Politica e Società.

Giordano, A.

2002 I celti? Un'invenzione (e non di bassa Lega). *Il Venerdì di Repubblica* 30 August: 40.

Gramsci, A.

1947 *Lettere dal carcere*. Torino: Einaudi.

Graves, R.

1948 *The white goddess*. Londo: Faber & Faber.

Grimaldi, P.

1993 *Il calendario rituale contadino*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

1996 *Tempi grassi tempi magri*. Torino: Omega.

2005 Le parole te le dicevano tutte a storie. Navigare la tradizione: la rete comu-

- nitaria e alimentare della questua. In *Le parole della memoria. Il calendario rituale contadino tra Roero e Astigiano*, T. Mo pp.13-34. Torino: Omega.
- 2005 Logiche tradizionali, logiche di umanità In *La complessità della tradizione*, G.L. Bravo pp.7-18. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- 2012 *Cibo e rito: il gesto e la parola nell'alimentazione tradizionale*. Palermo: Sellerio.
- Grimaldi, R.
- 1997 Diffusione e modelli d'azione delle associazioni culturali piemontesi. In *Pro loco, una risorsa per la cultura* G. Negro pp.9-23. Torino: Regione Piemonte.
- Gulisano, P. and O'Neill, B.
- 2006 *La notte delle zucche*. Milano: Ancora.
- Hobsbawm, E. J.
- 1987 (orig. 1983) Come si inventa una tradizione. In *L'invenzione della tradizione*, E.J. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger eds. pp.3-17. Torino: Einaudi.
- Hutton, R.
- 1996 *The stations of the Sun*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kezich, G. and Mott, A.
- 2011 Carnevale re d'Europa. *SM Annali di San Michele* 24: 15-51.
- Kilani, M.
- 1997 (orig. 1994) *L'invenzione dell'altro. Saggi sul discorso antropologico*. Bari: Dedalo.
- Kondratiev, A.
- 2005 *Il tempo dei Celti*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Kruta, V.
- 2003 *La grande storia dei Celti*. Roma: Newton Compton.
- James, S.
- 1999 *I celti, popolo atlantico*. Roma: Newton Compton.
- Le Guay, D.
- 2004 *La faccia nascosta di Halloween: come la festa della zucca ha sconfitto Tutti i Santi*. Leumann: Elledici.
- Leiris, M.
- 1999 (orig. 1938) *Specchio della tauromachia e altri scritti sulla corrida*, Torino: Boringhieri.

Lévi-Strauss, C.

1964 (orig. 1962) *Il pensiero selvaggio*. Milano: Il Saggiatore.

1995 (orig. 1952) *Babbo Natale giustiziato*. Palermo: Sellerio.

Leydi, R.

1988 Spazi antichi e nuovi della festività popolare/Lombardia. In *La festa*, A. Fallasi ed. pp.54-65. Milan: Electa,

Lombardi Satriani, L.M.

1997 Il corpo e il limite. In *Maschere e corpi. Tempi e luoghi del Carnevale*, F. Castelli e P. Grimaldi eds. pp.33-46. Roma: Meltemi.

2009 Perché Halloween è anche italiana. *GorgonMagazine* 2-5, www.gorgonmagazine.com.

Lombardi Satriani, L. M. and Mazzacane, L.

1974 *Perché le feste*. Rom: Edizioni Savelli.

Lombardi Satriani, L. M. and Meligrana, M.

1982 *Il ponte di San Giacomo: l'ideologia della morte nella società contadina del Sud*. Rizzoli: Milano.

Luppi, B.

1983 *I Saraceni in Provenza, in Liguria e nelle Alpi Occidentali*. Bordighera: Istituto Internazionale di Studi Liguri-Museo Bicknell.

Malizia, E. and Ponti, H.

2002 *Halloween: storia e tradizioni*. Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee.

Markale, J.

2005 (orig. 2000) *Halloween: storia e tradizioni*. Torino: Edizioni L'Età dell'Acquario.

Massignan, M.

2001 *La religione dei Celti*. Milano: Xenia.

Matera, V.

1997 Scambio. In *Dizionario di antropologia*, U. Fabietti e F. Remotti eds. pp.653-654. Bologna: Zanichelli.

Mazzoli, G.

1996 *Profili sociali della comunicazione e nuove tecnologie*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Meschke, K.

1931 *Schwerttanz und Schwerttanzspiele*. Berlin: B.G. Teuber.

Milano, E.

1920 *Per un civico Museo di Storia e d'Arte. Relazione all'On. Giunta Comunale*. Cuneo: Scuola Tipografica Beato Cottolengo.

1929 *Piccole note di folklore. Tradizioni popolari della provincia di Cuneo. Comunicazioni della Società degli Studi storici, archeologici ed artistici della Provincia di Cuneo* 2: 3-16.

Montanari, M.

2002 *Storia medievale*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.

Mugnaini, F.

2001 *Hallowitaly. Vom Kult der Toten zur Karnevalisierung des Todes. Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 2: 216-227.

Mussapi, R.

2008 *La disfida delle zucche. Avvenire* 23 October: 31.

Niola, M.

2000 *Halloween, il McDonald's della paura. Il Mattino* 31 October.

2007 *Halloween. Una festa nel nome dei morti. La Repubblica* 30 October: 37.

2012 *Miti d'oggi*. Milano: Bompiani.

Panero, P.

2006 *Il popolamento alpino in Piemonte: le radici medievali dell'insediamento moderno*. In *Le radici medievali dell'insediamento alpino in Piemonte*, D. Lanzardo e F. Panero eds. pp.5-32. Torino: Consiglio Regionale del Piemonte.

Percivaldi, E.

2003 *I Celti: una civiltà europea*. Firenze: Giunti.

Pola Falletti di Villafalletto, G.C.

1937 *Le gaie compagnie dei giovani del vecchio Piemonte*. Casale Monferrato: Miglietta.

1939-1942 *Associazioni giovanili e feste antiche: loro origini*. voll.I-IV. Torino: Comitato di Difesa dei Fanciulli.

Rivoallan, A.

1957 *Présence des Celtes*. Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Celtique.

Rutherford, W.

2004 (orig. 1993) *Tradizioni celtiche. La storia dei druidi e della loro eredità culturale*. Milan: Tea.

Sachs, C.

1933 *Eine Weltgeschichte des Tanzes*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer.

Sahlins, M.

1976 *Culture and Practical Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Santino, J.

1994 *Halloween and other festivals of death and life*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.

Satta, M. M.

1988 Santi, cavalieri e pastori/Sardegna. In *La festa*, A. Falassi ed. pp.202-211. Milano: Electa.

Schmitt J.-C.

1988 *Religione, folklore e società nell'Occidente medievale*. Bari: Laterza.

1995 *Spiriti e fantasmi nella società medievale*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.

Settia, A.A.

1987 I Saraceni sulle Alpi: una storia da riscrivere. *Studi Storici* 1: 127-143.

2009 Liutprando, l'avvocato De Canis e i Saraceni di Malamorte. *I quaderni di Muscandia* 8: 81-89.

Shannon, C.E.

1948 A Mathematical Theory of Communication. *Bell System Technical Journal* 27: 379-423.

Smith, A.D.

1984 (orig. 1981) *Il revival etnico*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Spineto, N.

2015 *La festa*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.

Tabacco, G.

1966 Dalla Novalesa a S. Michele della Chiusa. In *Monasteri in alta Italia dopo le invasioni saracene e magiare*, Relazioni e comunicazioni presentate al XXXII Congresso storico subalpino. pp.482-526. Torino.

Taraglio, R.

2014 *Il vischio e la quercia. Spiritualità celtica nell'Europa druidica*. Grignasco: Edizioni L'Età dell'Acquario.

Telmon, T.

2001 Appunti sulle danze di spade nelle Alpi Occidentali. In *Le spade della vita e della morte. Danze armate in Piemonte*, P. Grimaldi ed. pp.109-118. Torino: Omega.

Teti, V.

2018 *Il vampiro e la melanconia. Miti, storie, immaginazioni*. Roma: Donzelli.

Tiberini, E.S.

2008 *Treat or trick? San Nicola Santa Klaus Halloween*. Roma: CISU.

Toschi, P.

1955 *Le origini del teatro italiano*. Torino: Boringhieri.

Verdone, M.

1955 *La tauromachia in Italia*. Roma: s.e.

Vidossi, G.

1936 Il ballo delle spade. *Lares* 1: 65-67.

Vitali, D.

2012 *I celti*. Novara: White Star.

Vuchez, A.

2006 *La spiritualità dell'Occidente medioevale*. Milano: Vita&Pensiero.

Wolfram, R.

1936 *Schwerttanz und Männerbunde*. Kassel: Bärenreiteir.

axabriga.it

www.antiquaqueria.it

www.celtica.vda.it

www.celtical.it

www.codacons.it

www.festival-interceltique.com

www.nrf.com

www.repubblica.it

www.tivoligardens.com

www.unicefusa.org