

SICILIAN FOLKLORE – A REEVALUATION OF LOCAL CULTURE AND IDENTITY

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Abstract: *Sicilian folklore - a reevaluation of local culture and identity.* The aim of this article is to focus on Sicilian folklore as a reevaluation of local culture and identity promoting the importance of *Sicilianity* as a value. We live in a time which refuses memory. The culture of a people remains because memory supports it by passing from a generation to the other. The aim of the work is to maintain alive those links allowing us to rebuild our historical background. In the global village people don't have to homologate to different stories and models which are not belonging to their own culture. Every community must maintain their own cultural heritage, their own diversity, their own cultural background, experience, education, events and distresses which have characterized people far away one to another. The multiplicity of different peaces is able to draw the big mosaic of humanity people. Folklore is variously subject matter and critical discourse, amateur enthusiasm and academic discipline, residual agrarian culture and popular urban culture of the present Folklore is both conservative anti-modernist and radical counter-culture, the sphere of dilettantish provincial intellectuals and of committed nation-builders, transmitted by word of mouth in intimate setting and negotiated electronically in the public domain. Locating Sicilian Folklore is the task of situating folklore within Sicilian history, geography and traditions. The incredible island of Sicily is a melting pot of heritage, culture, palaces, countryside and festivals. Sicily is not just a land of myths, history, and nature. Art treasures or monuments of its past in Greek, Roman, Arab, and Norman style the memory of the trades of the past, in close contact with the sea (such as that of the salt man miner and the tuna fisherman) the mining society and an explanation of labor division miners' efforts and risks, working condition and other information that represents the knowledge of a community that has completely disappeared, apart in people's minds. Technology runs so fast that it lets (makes) traditions die and sweep away. The rediscovery of traditions underlines the importance of values and life styles continuity opposing the idea of temporary, of "pure present".



Rezumat: *Folclorul sicilian – o reevaluare a culturii și identității locale.* Scopul acestei lucrări este de a analiza folclorul sicilian prin filtrul reevaluării culturii locale și de a promova importanța „sicilianității” ca valoare culturală. Trăim într-un timp care refuză memoria. Cultura unui popor persistă deoarece este păstrată în memoria colectivă prin intermediul trecerii sale de la o generație la alta. Obiectivul acestui articol este de a conserva legăturile care ne permit reconstrucția moștenirii istorice. În satul global contemporan oamenii nu trebuie să asimileze diferitele modele care nu aparțin propriilor culturi. Fiecare comunitate ar trebui să păstreze propria moștenire culturală, propria diversitate culturală, experiențele și practicile care oferă distincție unei culturi față de celelalte. Multiplicarea elementelor culturale este în măsură să genereze un mare mozaic cultural al lumii. În acest context, folclorul devine subiect de cercetare, discurs critic, domeniu academic, cultură agrară dar și cultură populară urbană. Folclorul este anti-modernist și conservativ, transmis prin viu grai. Localizarea folclorului sicilian presupune poziționarea acestei componente culturale în însăși istoria, geografia și tradițiile Siciliei. Mirifica insulă a Siciliei cuprinde un amestec de moștenire, cultură și festivaluri. Sicilia nu este doar un loc al miturilor, istoriei și naturii. Comorile artistice și monumentele în diferitele stiluri arhitecturale (grecesc, roman, arab etc) memoria activităților comerciale trecute generate de prezența mării, toate s-au diluat din percepția și mentalul colectiv. Tehnologia se dezvoltă atât de repede iar unele valori dispar odată cu aceasta. Redescoperirea tradițiilor subliniază importanța valorilor culturale și, de asemenea, a modurilor de viață contracarând ideea temporalității prezentului pur.

Key words: *folklore, memory, culture, traditions, Sicily, Italy.*

Cuvinte cheie: *folclor, memorie, cultură, tradiții, Sicilia, Italia.*

1. INTRODUCTION

“Folklore” was conceptualized towards the end of the eighteenth century, coined as a word in 1846¹ and institutionalized from the end of the nineteenth century on. “Folklore” was more an ideological than a scientific concept. To seek antecedents is an ambiguous task: primarily it is to look for early evidence of interest in the cultural elements which were later called folklore. These cultural elements have been variously known as “popular superstitions”, “popular tradition”, “popular antiquities”, “folklore”, “survivals”, “popular culture” or “subaltern culture”. Folklore, folk life, folk culture, popular culture, and subaltern culture can be more or less synonymous, though on a sliding scale which goes from the philological towards the sociological and from the conservative towards the radical. The same applies to folk, peasantry, (common) people, masses, popular and subaltern classes. The word “Folklore” (a good Saxon compound) spread quickly into other languages, to a large extent through the influence of the pioneering Folk-lore Society, founded in 1878

¹ In a letter to the English intellectual magazine *The Atheneum* on 22 August 1846, the antiquary William John Thoms, writing under pseudonym Ambrose Merton, suggested his own coinage “Folklore” in place of “Popular Antiquities, or Popular Literature, though by-the-by it is more a Lore than a Literature...”. Thoms asserts that two conclusions can be drawn by anyone with an interest in “the manners, customs, observance, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc., of the olden time”: that much “is now entirely lost” and that “much may yet be rescued by timely exertion”. Thoms use the word “folk” instead of “popular”. The word “popular” itself has its origins as a legal and political term belonging meaning “belonging to the people” (Cirese, 1979).

in London. “Lore” originally had a semantic range which included teaching and education but particularly from the eighteenth century onwards it had become limited to referring to the past, included the connotation of “traditional”.

2. LOCATING ITALIAN FOLKLORE

In Italy *Storia delle tradizioni popolari* became the accepted denomination of the research field, although *demopsicologia* was used by the great pioneer Giuseppe Pitrè in his courses at the University of Palermo from 1911 to 1915 (Pitrè, 1989). Early in the twentieth century, particularly in Italy “folklore” and a word of early nineteenth-century origin, “ethnography”, used much the same perspective and methodology with the difference that the first term applied to the folk culture of Europe and the second to the so-called primitive culture of the colonies (Cirese, 1979, p. 61). In pre-unification Italy, folklore was understood as a specifically national inheritance, its interpretation following the Romantic perspective. The “*popolo*” were more or less defined as people immune to any form of cosmopolitan culture, as speakers of one of the dialects of the peninsular language, and as creators of a communal and traditional culture. In this perception, the *popolo* embodied the essence of what it was to be Italian, the essence of that spirit of nationality that survived and prospered apart from the cultural internationalism of many Italians and in spite of the presence of foreign rulers in the peninsula for so many centuries [...] The nationalist impulse drove the folklorists to the cause of unification, and in the folklore of the peninsula they found one of the important repositories of whatever national sentiment did exist. As Lombardi Satriani and Meligrana express it, interest in folklore sought “a cultural matrix capable of sustaining the aesthetic concept of creativity and the political [concept] of the people-nation” (Satriani, Meligrana, 1995).

Folklore interest developed conservative tendencies as the idealization of the people outlived its usefulness in the post-unification period. The Romantic notion of the creativity of the people became problematic in the light of the difficulties that seemed to threaten Italy’s unity, especially the southern question, which attained a central importance. A governing alliance had been formed between northern capitalists and southern land-owning aristocracy, leading to the political isolation of an impoverished and discontented southern peasantry, their malaise substantiated in rebellion and brigandage (which were tying down over 100,000 regular troops in 1862). Besides the repressive use of the military and police, scientific methods were developed to investigate the problem, and criminal anthropology developed an interest in folklore. The earlier interest in popular poetry began to wane as the contemporary “people” became an object of dread: ‘the “people” is identified with the nascent bourgeoisie and there is a refusal to recognize it in the modern peasants’ (Cirese, 1979). After unification, ethnography grew with the need of the state to know the inhabitants of the new national territories. Between 1870 and 1873, the parliament carried out various enquiries following the precedent of the agrarian enquiry of 1869. De Sanctis, the minister of education, insisted on the necessity of overcoming particularisms in order to establish the national idea and to forestall the danger of anarchy. The problem was to channel the centrifugal tensions of the masses into the life of the state. D’Azeglio’s famous statement of 1867: “s’è fatta l’Italia ma non si fanno gli Italiani”², memorably presented the problem.

² This quote is translated by the author: “Italy is made but the Italians are not being made”.

The contradictions between the new state legal system based on the Napoleonic code and customary notions of right and wrong were the reason why an interest in “juridical folklore” became a notable tendency in folklore research in the South, and why a link between popular culture and delinquency came to be implied. The aim was to understand the “anomalous” nature of southern society, but also to eventually harmonize custom and current legislation. The contemporary conception of “survival”, derived from Tylor, helped to make sense of southern folklore and explained the South’s backwardness while at the same time isolating folklore as something specifically southern. There was a “folklorization” of the South, as Lombardi Satriani and Meligrana term it, and it became one of the privileged fields for folklorists after unification, as for journalists, dialectologists, criminal anthropologists, psychiatrists, political theorists and travel writers. With Italian colonial expansion, a link was established between colonial ethnography and folklore research, both providing information of administrative use. This was pointed out by Lamberto Loria, editor of the folklore journal *Lares*, in 1912 in an article entitled: “L’etnografia strumento di politica interna e coloniale”³.

The paradox of Italian folklore was that it supposedly reflected the spiritual unity of Italy – the Romantic and the Risorgimento perspective – while at the same time in its obviously local and regional character it reflected the historical disunity of Italy – the post-unification concern. The state, of course, was interested only in the former and its efforts inspired Mussolini to claim that D’Azeglio’s project of “making Italians” had been finally accomplished under his regime. The fascist regime actively supported folklore, but this interest was informed by the concern that should help to consolidate national unity. A national congress held in Florence in 1929 was attended by King Victor Emmanuel III and led in the following year to the re-establishment of the folklore journal, *Lares*, originally published from 1912 to 1915. *Il Folklore Italiano* had been already founded in 1925 by Raffaele Corso, an enthusiastic supporter of the regime. Both journals became openly propagandistic during the war years. Corso had, after some consideration, opted for “folklore” in the title of his journal, but with *tradizioni popolari* as the subtitle. The word “Folklore” itself, well established in Italian, was banned in 1933 as a foreign word and the word *popolaresca* ordered in its place.

The Comitato Nazionale Italiano per le Tradizioni Popolari sought, in the words of its chairman, “to frame the traditional arts and folklore of various provinces of Italy into unified vision”. He added that the regime wished “to cancel all forms and all forms and all vestiges of the ancient regional divisions from the context of national life”. Mussolini himself inaugurated provincial exhibits of traditional arts. The Comitato Nazionale was instructed to establish provincial committees and to provide them with whatever assistance they required, but any publications by them had to be authorized by its chairman. The Museo Nazionale delle Arti e Tradizioni Popolari was established by the regime in Rome 1941. an official interest in “juridical folklore” – long established in the South – was in part a reflection of the concern of the Minister of Justice that customary law was often stronger than that of the state. In 1930, a royal commission was established under the ministry to collect juridical customs and uses. At its inauguration the minister made clear that this was not meant to call the state legal system into question. An initial project to collect legal customs from Tuscan farmers was begun. Reminiscent of officially sponsored Greek

³ This quote is translated by the author: Etnografia as an instrument of internal and colonial politics.

folklore research, the Italian folklorists also sought to prove continuity with the admired culture of the past. “Rome”, according to Corso, “which took its power and civilization to so many countries, imposes on our folklorists the noblest duty to trace the vestiges of the great mother...” It was not only at home that such evidence was sought. Folklorists too supported the Italian claims to Corsica, Malta and Dalmatia (with its minority) on cultural grounds.

The intellectual Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was squeezed out of the world of folklore. Born into an impoverished family, he was a hunchback as the result of a childhood accident and as such the object of fear and persecution. His own background can help to explain the centrality he attached to the question of the impoverished South in Italian politics as well as “the importance of understanding a backward, subordinate folk culture”. Gramsci’s interest in folklore can be traced to his background. His home district was “riddled with witch-craft, spell-casting and belief in the supernatural”. He was both critical of popular ideology and at the same time felt solidarity with subaltern social classes. He wished to see a new culture arise among the people, which would bridge the divide between modern culture and folklore. One of the key elements of his thought was the connection between the people and the intellectuals and specifically their negative relationship in the Italian context.

The key passage in which Gramsci defines folklore is complex: “Folklore should be studied as a conception of the world and life” implicit to a large extent in determinate (in time and space) strata of society and in opposition to “official” conceptions of the world that have succeeded one another in the historical process (Gramsci, 1991). At first glance Gramsci’s references to folklore seem negative. Alberto Cirese has given a close reading of Gramsci’s text (Cirese, 1972). Gramsci contextualizes folklore “in the framework of a nation and its culture” but opposed to official conception of the world. Gramsci’s work has influenced many scholars working on folklore and popular culture (Gramsci, 1991).

3. GLOBALIZATION

Globalization is a product of the transformation in communications which are central to the experience of modernity. From the mid-twentieth century on, telecommunications, rapid international transportation and computerization have undermined the spatial basis of tradition and of community in an absolute way. Community today may not be tied to a specific place, the population of which may be constituted by members of a variety of different communities, publics if one will.

The “average exoticism” of daily life in towns and villages today exemplifies the de-spatialization of community where the person who is curiosity in a particular locality can no longer be judged as odd but simply as a member of a different community. Globalized cultural references are today a part of consumer society. Celebrities, images and situations are made known through magazines, television and film, creating an “international-popular memory”, especially among the youth. Unfortunately young people lost the name of things, values and history. Technology runs so fast that it lets (makes) traditions die and sweep away.

4. PRESERVING FOLKLORE

In the global village people don't have to homologue to different stories and models which are not belonging to their own culture. Every community must maintain their own cultural heritage, their own diversity, their own cultural background, experience, education, events and distresses which have characterized people far away one to another. The multiplicity of different peaces are able to draw the big mosaic of humanity people. Folklore and popular culture does not disappear, indeed is constantly being created, but less and less offers alternative to modernity from an experience outside of it. According to an investigation of the UNESCO the sixty per cent of the cultural world patrimony is held by Italy. Investing on this patrimony, as a treasure to be preserved, but also as a resource to valorise and make more enjoyable helps civil and social growth, sense of affiliation and identity together with the growth of new occupation. UNESCO approved an international recommendation on the safeguarding of folklore and traditional culture at its General conference in Paris in November 1989.

5. FOLKLORE IN SICILY (ITALY)

Folklore (or traditional and popular culture) is the totality of tradition-based creations of a cultural community, expressed by a group of individuals and recognized as reflecting the expectations of a community in so far as they reflect its cultural and social identity. Its standards and its values are transmitted orally, by imitation or by other means. Its forms include, among others, language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts, architecture and other arts. Locating Sicilian Folklore is the task of situating folklore within Sicilian history, geography and traditions.

The incredible island of Sicily is a melting pot of heritage, culture, palaces, countryside and festivals. Sicily is not just a land of myths, history and nature. Art treasures or monuments of its past in Greek, Roman, Arab, and Norman style the memory of the trades of the past are in close contact with the sea (such as that of the salt man miner and the tuna fisherman). The mining society and an explanation of labour division, miners' efforts and risks, working condition and other information represent the knowledge of a community that has completely disappeared, apart in people's minds.

The arduous work of the miners in the heartland of the island, far from the dazzling light of the sun recall to us aspects of the island that are perhaps less well known, but, none the less, indispensable for a full understanding of the soul of this land. For this is a land that does not forget but jealously conserves in special ethnographic museums the tools and implements of everyday life related to popular traditions, together with veritable works of art, such as the *puppets* and *marionettes* used for centuries to celebrate the legendary tales of epic events. Without doubt one of the most renowned and unique features of Sicilian folklore are the marionettes, puppets which derive from the Norman-Arabian courtly tradition and from the French Paladins, and which for centuries have been the most important feature of a fascinating and highly popular form of entertainment.

6. AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE SOUL OF SICILY LAND

This is a land that does not forget but jealously conserves in special ethnographic museums the tools of everyday life related to popular traditions, (such as the puppets and marionettes in the Pitre's museum in Palermo). The Puppet Theatre (in Palermo) keeps this ancient tradition alive (photo 1).



Photo 1: The Puppet Theatre (Palermo)
(source: author's personal photos, 2012)

The same cultural institution also preserves and fosters the art of the ballad singers who relate the acts of heroes and historic events, illustrated by brightly coloured paintings whose simplicity and naivety are quite charming (photo 2).



Photo 2: Carts: highly colourful chivalry battle scenes
(source: author's personal photos, 2012)

Scenes from days of chivalry (for example: highly colourful and animated battle scenes) also decorate the traditional Sicilian carts (photo 3, photo 4).



Photo 3: Sicilian cart
(source: author's personal photos, 2012)



Photo 4: A detail of the cart.
(source: author's personal photos, 2012)

7. FAITH NEEDS TRADITION

7. 1. General aspects

In Sicily there are almost 400 religious manifestations of EASTER, we already know the Christ Passion is an important (theatrical) performance. The occasion of Easter is very auspicious and holy. It was on this day that the Jesus Christ resurrected after crucifixion. This day is thus renowned as a day of hope and happiness. Easter is celebrated in almost all parts of the world where the people of Christian community reside. The preparation for Easter begins from the day of Palm Sunday when Jesus Christ entered the city of Jerusalem; from the Palm Sunday to the Holy Wednesday is a time of penitence, the Maundy Thursday to commemorate the Last Supper. The holy Friday expresses the maximum communicative force of the Easter celebration. Then the actual festival begins.

On the day of Easter, the morning church service and grand Easter feast mark the religious as well as social significance of the festival. Traditional festivals and the production and sale of craftsmanship now are no longer the exclusive property of popular groups, but government ministries, private foundations, private companies, and radio and television also play their part in organizing them. Folk or traditional cultural facts are today the multidetermined product of actors that are popular and hegemonic, peasant and urban, local, national, and transnational.



*Photo 5: A votive place S. Agatha (Catania).
(source: author's personal photos, 2012)*

7. 2. S. Agatha festival (Catania) The diffusion of the cult for Agatha

Other suggestions on the meaning that S. Agatha's martyrdom assumes for Christian believers may be inferred from the etymology of the name (photo 5). It is known that in Greek language "agathos" means "good", and Agatha was exemplar for her goodness. But the golden Legend suggests also other meanings, among which: from "aghiós" and "theos", holy of God, owing to the purity of Her heart, Her docility to the Holy Spirit and the abundance of Her good deeds. The cult devoted to Agatha spread soon in Sicily as well as in other zones of Christianity. The fame of Her martyrdom has been spread also by the miracles and the prodigies attributed to Her. Catania has recognised to its holy fellow countrywoman the role protectress since the year following Her martyrdom: The people of Catania attribute their being freed from a violent lava flow to the merits and the intercession of Agatha, whose veil was then taken in Procession in front of the devastating fire. As to the tradition, Agatha's relics are taken to Constantinople, by George from Maniace in 1040, wherefrom they are brought back on 17th August in 1126. This date marks the protective reappropriation of the holy fellow countrywoman and the definition of the civic identity and the christian physiognomy of the town.

The anniversary of S. Agatha's death has been uninterruptedly celebrated by the people of Catania since 252 A.D. assuming a meaning both religious and civil. Cavalcades, dances, fireworks have always taken place on the first five days of February for centuries, until XVI century, when don Alvaro Paternò, Apostolic Legate in Catania at the royal court, prescribed the ceremonial of public manifestations in S. Agatha's honour. The performance survived in Catania until 1900. As to the religious and penitential aspect, the cart with the holy relics of S. Agatha was taken out of the Church through the Iron Door for the first time on 4th February 1379, and the same procedure was observed until 1518. On February the 5th, anniversary of the saint's death prevail the use of placing the simulacrum on the main Altar sumptuously vested.

The celebrations have undergone several innovations and modifications until 1939 owing to problems relating to the expansion of the town and to political events. Today a simpler tradition has been resumed which could answer the educational aims of young people and all the people variously biased. It is a tradition observed with special solemnity on 3rd, 4th and 5th February, with an enthusiasm and faith growing more and more, because S. Agatha's Feast evokes in the people of Catania feelings of hope and regeneration.

8. CONCLUSIONS

We live in a time which refuses memory. The culture of a people remains because memory supports it by passing from a generation to the other. The Sicilian dialect, which is considered as a spectre of a cultural backwardness past that people want to forget on behalf of the social rise of popular classes. Folklore is variously subject matter and critical discourse, amateur enthusiasm and academic discipline, residual agrarian culture and popular urban culture of the present. Folklore is both conservative anti-modernist and radical counter-culture, the sphere of dilettantish provincial intellectuals and of committed nation-builders, transmitted by word of mouth in intimate setting and negotiated electronically in the public domain.

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