

**THE GLJEV BLESSING:  
RUMINATIONS ON CARNIVAL KING OF EUROPE  
HISTORY AND CONTINUITY  
(a final overview)**

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- please do not quote -

It will not probably strike many in this audience as anything new if I say that serendipity is very much the hallmark of fieldwork. Fellow researchers have confirmed time and again that there are in fact events in the field which not only open up at once a whole new perspective on the events concerned but also throw a new light on the entire line of the horizon, for as far as this might be. I am talking about those sudden, unexpected, often incidental, apparently peripheral but invariably – be sure – *damningly short* which are nevertheless the synthesis of a whole set of problems concerning the event in which they play a deceptively menial part **as well as** the key to start unraveling them.

One such epiphany occurred in the village of Gljev, district of Sinj, in the hinterland of Split, Croatia, on the first slopes of the Dinaric Alps as they slide into the Adriatic on the frosty and bright morning of January 28 this year. The masks had gathered in the yard by the house of their leader. The usual exchange of greetings and horseplay between friends accompanied early rounds of drinks in an atmosphere of heightened spirits, merriment and excitement. The masks slowly began to line up in the quasi-military formation that they were to keep all day long. Suddenly an old woman appeared carrying a small pewter container in her hand. Moving twice back and forth along the line of masks she dipped a twig in the holy water and began sprinkling them with blessing motions. She then brought her blessing to all the other masks milling about the place. Finally, she signed herself with the sign of the cross in the Roman Catholic guise and disappeared back to her house. The event was so swift and marginal to the action that I consider myself lucky to have witnessed it at all – or is it the consummate, old fieldwork hound in me !? Be what it may: that apparently marginal and certainly minor gesture in the general economy of the event carries implications and bears consequences which are in my view crucial for the entire spectrum of Carnival celebrations from the Black Sea to the Atlantic.

The inhabitants of Gljev belong – or perhaps is more accurate to say *belonged* – to the ethnic group known in Croatia as *Morlaci* (Morlachs in English, Morlacchi in Italian) or *Vlaji* (Vlachs or Valacchi) whose main occupation was (and still apparently is to an extent in Gljev) sheep and cattle breeding. The issue of who exactly the Morlachs have been originally is as difficult to answer as it is to answer to the question of who they are for others – or consider themselves to be – nowadays. It is perhaps safe (if admittedly equal to begging the question) to say that they are the result of an admixture of Romanized indigenous populations variously mixed with Slavs running into the mountains away from the invading Turks and a substantial component of shepherding populations from Wallachia (or

Basarab), the region of Romania North of the Danube. During the Thirteenth and Fourteenth century their Latin names became increasingly Slav. Gradually both Latin and Vlach idioms died out, until only the name Moro-Vlachs (Black Vlachs, possibly because for the Turks 'Black' is name of the North, whence many migrated) – hence Morlacchi remained. In the Sixteenth century a substantial section of the Morlachs converted to Islam and form nowadays an important part of the Muslim Bosnjaks of Bosnja Hercegovina, while a minority of Morlachs belong to the Orthodox Church. Overall, the Dinaric Morlachs have historically been perceived by early travellers to the region as 'natural', 'untouched by civilization and unspoiled', 'old', 'original', 'uneducated' and so on along an array of definitions worthy the kind of domestic primitivism which affected European literature and ethnology from the XVII century onwards. This is to put forth, for the purposes of my presentation today, three main points.

In the first place, the masquerade in Gljev is amongst the most conservative both from the regional and the wider European perspective. Namely, it belongs to the class of 'pastoral masquerades', masquerades, that is, centered around pastoral imagery and symbolism with annexed military overtones. In the second place, the part played by the Vlach shepherds during their transhumance through the mountainous regions along their ridge-system should not be overlooked. As a sign of the importance of this population – relatively independently of the question of the 'origins' – are the ethnographic facts that both in the region of Mohacs (Southern Hungary) and Sopotnia Mała (Żywec County, Southern Poland) evidence was collected during fieldwork that Vlach shepherds were responsible for winter masquerades similar in imagery and symbolism to those of the 'pastoral Balkans', as it were.

'I blessed the masks because they are doing a dangerous thing'. This was the characteristically sharp, conclusive and 'no more questions, please' – answer that the old woman gave when asked the reason of her blessing. Masks are 'dangerous' for all sorts of reasons. Not only they are often violent towards villagers, but more often than not they fight when they cross each other's path on their errands: judicial reports from former centuries testify to the propensity of masks to fight to death. Still nowadays little memorials celebrate the death of *kukeri* during fights between rival masked groups in Eastern Bulgaria, while amongst the Ladins of the val di Fassa specific routes had to be followed by masked parties so as never to come face to face with rival companies. But 'masks are dangerous' also in a more abstract, symbolic sense. The Romanian *Calusari* had to observe a period of sexual purity before donning the masks – a condition observed by masks all over

Africa – while women who dared wearing masks were said to be open to barrenness and madness (a condition, the latter, well known also in many Medieval *exempla*). There is however, in the words and deeds of the old woman from Gljev, a further, paradoxical, implication. There is little doubt that the Balkans carry probably the most conservative tradition of winter masquerading in Europe. The history of the Christianization of the area has so far produced nothing comparable to the systematic attempt produced in the West by the Latin Church to suppress masking practices. This is due in my view to the fact that the close identification of the Church with the Imperial apparatus on the one hand, and the centrifugal tendencies of the national churches on the other always militated against the formulation – let alone the implementation – of tight cultural policies of inculturation. To this must be added that the Ottoman contempt (and tolerance) of practices perceived as part and parcel of Christian impiety not only allowed masking to carry on ‘business as usual’ for centuries but even to become – as in the case of Bulgaria – a token of ‘cultural resistance’ to assimilation *ante litteram*.

What is therefore the moral of the story? The project Carnival King of Europe has grown to include, finally, a number of countries which stand at the heart of what we might call ‘the Historical Carnival’. The Carnival, that is, which is known from the end of the XIII century when it began to be celebrated in the towns by guilds and later burghers who shaped much of its current features also – by return – in the rural areas at large. At the end of a paper which I gave at the House of the Masks in Imst, Austria, at the start of the last Imster Fasnacht, an Austrian colleague contested the view of winter masquerading as an event to be understood along the lines of *très longue durée* by arguing that Carnival is a ‘recent’ invention and only dates to the Early Middle Ages. Strictly speaking – or, rather, ‘historiographically’ speaking – that is certainly true. But the perspective of CKE is slightly more ambitious and looks at a deeper perspective. We may certainly argue that as we move from the Balkans up North and West we have to be increasingly more aware of the interplay between the relative conservativeness of folk practices and their imbrications with historical events. But the reverse is also true: that we have to be aware that – more often than not – the mould in which ‘the historical’ is then cast within popular culture is as often cast in folk mythologies – for want of a better word.

After all, if we calculate a generation every 20 years as average, there are only 500 generations separating us from the beginning of the Neolithic. Myself – like most of you, I believe – would by all means be able to recall the common features of some crucial events – such as masquerading – witnessed once a year through a

lifetime and pass them on to the next generation. What militates then against a long-term view of cultural continuity?

As case of the Gljev Blessing certifies – against the grain of history – in popular culture masquerading too is a Christian practice – *though of a sort*. That history too is the result of an odd compromise between the forces of change and the stubborn persistence of the old (and the odd) is an additional piece of equipment worthy carrying in the field for the next leg of our endeavor.

Thank you.