

People – Masks – Europe
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‘Taming the Herd, Civilizing the World’

pastoral symbolism in Sardinian winter masquerades

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Summary

Sardinia is a Mediterranean island characterized by a distinct cultural and linguistic identity. Lately, the revival of traditional masquerades is carried out alongside similar rituals with an uninterrupted record of continuity with a particularly conservative past. Pastoral activities, and especially sheep farming, are still carried out by a large sector of the populace, while the ethos resulting from herding and shepherding – from music and legal codes to cuisine and gender relations still permeates important sectors of Sardinian society –. Within this context, the symbolism pertaining to the relationship men-animals dominates some – but by no means all – of the most interesting performances.

This contribution will start with a description of a selection of masquerades in which the Bear – *Urtzu* – features at the centre of the action. Although properly a wild boar, of which Sardinia is rich, the Bear is either made the subject of a ritual hunt or else he is displayed as a tame animal by his trainer/guardian very much in the line of similar ritual sequences across Europe. A scheme referring to the hunt of a deer by a group of characters armed with shotguns is also the masquerade of *is cerbus* (the Deer), in the South of the island. Along similar lines, the ritual the *Mamutzones* of Samugheo, in the Western region of Oristano, features dark characters carrying bells and goat horns threatening to kill a bear spurred along on a chain by its tamer, *s’Omadore*, tellingly defined on the official site of the masquerade as ‘the Shepherd’.

Dark, hooded masks carrying bells are the *Thurpos* of Orotelli, in the Northeastern region of Nuoro, possibly culturally the most conservative area of the island. *Thurpos* – meaning ‘a blind man’ due to their dark hoods covering their

darkened faces – try to catch one another by means of a lasso whenever one of them tries to run away from the parade –. Two of them are tamed and finally made to pull along a plough for the duration of the masquerade. Other *thurpos* perform all sorts of tasks related to the agro-pastoral economy of the area. Alongside the *thurpos* walks the *Eritaju* (from ‘*erittu*’, the hedgehog). Clad in white, the character wears hedgehog skins and tries to embrace women, with the obvious ensuing discomfort.

The masks which have been associated with Sardinia almost by definition are the Mamuthones and Issohadores of Mamoiada, also in the region of Nuoro and more precisely in the Barbagia, possibly the most conservative area of the island. The linguistical root of *mamuthone* points *prima facie* in the direction of ‘a scarecrow’, ‘a straw-filled puppet’ or something in that region. However, the etymology of the term is the subject of hot debate amongst linguists, if only because it is spread over a vast semantic field in all ‘Indeuropean’ languages – e.g. ‘mummers’ in the British Isles –.

The *Mamuthones* of Mamoiada been wear a very distinctive dark mask, which has been described by many as ‘a tragic mask’. They carry on their a heavy assemblage of bells which are made to resound to the *mamuthones* distinctive pace. This is characterized by an almost funereal rhythm, evocative of a funeral march ‘in the folk style’. *Mamuthones* are always in the number of twelve, a reference to the twelve months of the year and possibly related to the character of the *Filonzana* to be discussed later.

The *Mamuthones* are shepherded along by the *Issohadores*, chatecters wearing read clothing and a white, expressionless mask. They flank the *Mamuthones* so to keep them restrained within a tight ritual space, as if both guarding their march and preventing them from running away. The *Issohadores* carry a lasso (*soca/soga* in Italian dialects) by which they try to catch women and girls as the parade moves along.

Much has been written about ‘the meaning’ of the Sardinian masks presented. Consensus seems to revolve around the fact that they are concerned with the relationship between men and animals. Recent research carried out by the team of the EU sponsored project *Carnival King of Europe* – led by Giovanni Kezich and including a number of colleagues from across Europe – suggests not only that this maybe indeed the case, but also allows to be more specific concerning the cultural horizon which gave origins to the masquerades in the first place.

While taking full responsibility for the views I am going to put forward, field research has certified that a number of winter masquerades across Europe have as a

central theme what I wish to term as ‘the taming of wild animals’ compounded and elaborated upon as ‘the taming of the flock’.

This is most clearly the case with the masquerade of the *Kukeri* in Vresovo, a small village in Eastern Bulgaria where it is legitimate to think that masking traditions are most conservative. Here, the sequence to be detected elsewhere from Croatia to Sardinia but – *mutatis mutandis* – also elsewhere, shows a wild, unruly, riotous and violent horde of animal-like characters (mostly however nearing sheep and goats in their symbolism) being progressively brought to a domesticated, ‘herd-like’ behavior by a variety of symbolically highly significant characters.

This brings to the discussion of the *Boes* and *Merdules* Sardinian masquerade of Ottana, also in the region of Nuoro. The masquerade is clearly a reference to the process of ‘taming oxen’ (*boes=oxen*), arguably ‘the tamest of the tame’, by the ‘*merdules*’, literally ‘those who are full of dung’, i.e. those who tame/train the oxen and – in so doing – somewhat ‘revert back’ to an animal condition.

The thesis suggested will be that masquerades of the ‘taming/domesticating’ kind –from Sardinia to the rest of Europe – constitute a double-way reflection in symbolic terms upon both ‘the humanizing of animals’ and ‘the bestializing of humans’. A reflection, in other words, about the ambiguities and interfaces of the process of civilization, in need of both ‘freedom’ and ‘restraint’.

This will be finally discussed in relation to the character of the *Filonzana*, a character who ends the parade in Ottana. As ‘the Old Spinner’, a central figure of the Neolithic civilizing process, she is both a Cultural Hero (‘Spinning Supervisors’ are known in European folklore from the German goddess *Berchta* to the Romanian *Iele*, the Italian *Befana/Redodesa* and ultimately the Graeco-Roman *Parcae/Moire*), but also a socially ambiguous and potentially dangerous lonely widow/unmarried/barren woman (e.g. the English ‘*spinster*’= ‘she who spins’).

Sardinian masks – like all masks – ultimately propose a reflection upon the meaning of civilization in the uneasy and yet necessary compromise needed to overcome the ever-haunting relationship between Nature and Culture.