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**“Carnival King of Europe”.**

**Towards a new interpretation of European winter masquerades.**

A long proximity, from the vantage viewpoint of a regional so called “ethnographic” museum, and an acquired taste for the Alpine carnival in its many diverse forms slowly compelled me to the search for a possible synthetic interpretation of it. Quite remote from the flamboyant pageants that take place in a great number of Italian cities, heralded of course by Venice, rural Alpine village carnivals are often still rather subdued and almost secret local events, that involve the tightly close sector of the long-standing resident hardliners in what often tantamount to a rather ragged mumming tour of the village compound, stopping at every household begging for foodstuffs and wine in exchange for good wishes: often, at least prior to recent revival times, a kind of minor tongue-in-cheek self-styled folklore event, which is done away with in the space of one afternoon without much further ado.

Still, in this context, a few strange masks make their appearance, impressive, even in the most shabby of circumstances, for the exotic, oriental or be it mock-military nature of their attire, the sheer hieratical elegance of their bearing, and the specific nouns that attain to them, which seem to be drawn, even across wide distances, to the same basic glossary of unheard-of-words and half-forgotten meanings.

This sort of local survivals have of course long attracted the attention of folklorists, ethnographers and anthropologists, the latter of which have for the most part, in recent years, devoted their attention to the manifold ways in which the minute organization of such rituals intersects and reveals the underlying social structure of what Eric R. Wolf has called the Alpine “closed corporate community”, in particular as far as the process of coming of age of the youth is concerned. Young males, in fact, as extensively shown by Cesare Poppi in a number of seminal works, take upon themselves the organization and the ruling over the performance of the ritual, as a way to demonstrate, by way of a fitting ritual antiphesis, their achieved full integration within the ranks of the community’s fold. Along the same lines, on the different yet closely comparable scenario of winter masquerades in the Balkans, Gerald Creed has shown how the mumming rituals, in post-communist times as much as before, have become a constituent part of the discourse of community reconstruction, along processes which are directly fed back into the village politics of kinship, neighbourhood and identity.

It is in fact out of a rather casual venturing into the world of Balkan winter masquerades, at the great biennial festival of Pernik near Sofia in 2006, that we began to foresee the possibility of a

new investigation onto a field that in anthropology seems to have been left unplundered at least since the times of Frazer, i. e. the idea that there might be some scope in taking at face value the ethnographic evidence, so as to try and infer, on the basis of evident similarities and connections, some new idea as to the origin and nature of such rituals.

Of these similarities and connections, the field of winter masquerading seems to be singularly rich, once we unscrew the local macro objective and chose to put on instead a wide angled lens, wide enough to embrace the whole continent. In fact, if on the narrow local scale the gamut of variability of winter masquerading will be bafflingly wide, on a larger continental scale, some equally amazing connections and similarities will be found across very long distances, not only in the general pace of these events, which can be generally described as peaceful invasions of strange creatures that go round the village asking for alms in exchange for blessings, but much more specifically in the shape and costume of these creatures, which seem fit into not many more than half-a-dozen stereotype characters, in the specific actions which they perform and, which is most important, in the general structure of the drama in which such characters and actions are made to fit.

On these grounds, a European research project was launched in 2007 as a way of establishing some effective communication between ethnographic museums which on the topic of winter masquerades may have gathered, in the course of their existence, documents, data, expertise, photos and films.

The project, led by our own Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina of San Michele all'Adige near Trento, which is a large regional institution of the Italian alpine North-East, was joined by the national ethnographic museums of Bulgaria, Macedonia, Croatia and France, and it has led to extensive field research in the five countries, with the addition of Spain, particularly focused at the collection of video materials. The project also led to some seminars and conferences (the last of which is to be held as a closing event from 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> November, 2009), one itinerant exhibition that travelled from San Michele all'Adige to Zagreb, Sofia, and Skopje, where it is currently running, a film, and a rather rich website [www.carnivalkingofeurope.it](http://www.carnivalkingofeurope.it) which you are all invited to look up.

In parallel, some interesting connections were established as towards a new interpretation of the object in hand, in the context of the general framework of European culture history. As a starting point, we shall use Frazer's suggestions as to the direct link between the Carnival mummers of his day and some ancient roman religious brotherhoods such as the *Arval* brethren and the *Salii*, which, within the general frame of the cult of god Mars were specifically appointed, since the times of the earliest Roman kings, to the yearly atonement which in the darkest night of winter marks the renewal of time, and the onset of the new agrarian year.

In his precious and largely un plundered commentary on Ovid's *Fasti*, of 1931, Frazer writes (pp. 402-403):

In harmony with this theory of the *Salii* we may conjecture that the leaps from which the *Salii* took their name were supposed to promote the growth of the crops by sympathetic magic; it cannot be without significance that in their hymns these dancing priests named, and probably invoked, Saturn, the god of sowing. We may surmise that the people in the streets, and especially farmers from the country, watched their dances with eager curiosity and prognosticated the height of the corn at the next harvest from the height of their leaps into the air. In some parts of Europe, especially in Germany and Austria, it is or was till lately customary to dance or leap high for the express purpose of making the crops grow correspondingly tall; the leaps are executed sometimes by the sower on the field, sometimes by other persons, at certain seasons, such as Candlemas and Walpurgis Night (the eve of May Day), but especially on Shrove Tuesday. Indeed in some places men used to assemble in bands for the purpose of thus fostering the growth of the crops by their leaps and antics. This was the case, for example, at Grub in the Swiss canton of the Grisons. The peasants there "assembled in some years, mostly at the time of the summer solstice, disguised themselves as maskers so as to be unrecognizable, armed themselves with weapons defensive and offensive, took every man a great club or cudgel, marched in a troop from one village to another, and executed high leaps and strange antics. They ran full tilt at each other, struck every man his fellow with all his might, so that the blow resounded, and clashed their great staves and cudgels. These foolish pranks they played from a superstitious notion, that their corn would thrive the better." These Swiss *Stopfer* correspond exactly to the Roman *Salii*, if my view of that ancient Italian priesthood is correct.

Frazer ideas as to the link between the act of leaping and jumping, and the purported impulse given to the shoots that lay underneath the soil, can be corroborated on the grounds of the same basic understanding of agrarian sympathetic magic by a number of very specific ethnographic instances. First and foremost of these, as we shall see, is the recurrent appearance in Carnival of the plough and ritual ploughing, which is very well reflected in the ubiquitous notion of the *arvum* – the ploughed field – a word which we find at the core of the ancient roman *Arval* brotherhood but also, when we think of it, at the core of *Carnival* itself.

Some completely new interpretation as to the very meaning of the word "carnival" is certainly called for at this point. In fact, the obscure Medieval Italian twin words that refer since early medieval times to winter fertility rituals, *carnevale* and *carnasciale*, which were to give birth, according to authoritative Spanish folklorist J. Caro Baroja among others, their correspondents in all other European languages, and which are conventionally explained away with reference to a bizarre elocution as to "saying goodbye to meat" that hints at the forthcoming Lenten fast, could much more significantly be interpreted as the natural Italian follow-up of "*Carmen Arvale*" – the ritual song of the *Arvales* – and "*Carmen Saliare*" – the ritual song of the *Salii*.

Let's then listen to what the *Carmen arvale* says, in a celebrated text that goes back to the VI C. BC, known to us thanks to an epigraphic document of 218 AD, fortuitously excavated in

Rome in 1778, richly endowed ever since by whole volumes of stern philological work, from Theodor Mommsen onwards:

*Enos Lares iuvate! Help us o Lares, o good spirits of the dead!*

*And you, father Mars, cast away the ruin from our fields!*

*Sit quiet on the limits of our land, watch over it!*

*Blow over it the breath of germination!*

*Hey! Help us Mars! Let there be glory! Amen*

Bearing in mind the general sense of this ancient invocation to the ancestors as supreme granters of the fertility of the soils, we shall now turn to the current ethnographic evidence of general structure of the liturgy which is almost ubiquitously displayed in Europe village carnivals. This can be conveniently, and almost unmistakably be divided into three completely separate acts, plus one epilogue.

The first act is usually staged as the imaginary invasion of the village by a troop of wayward supernatural figures, fully masked, which are specifically purported to come from the wilderness, from the “dark of the wood”, “behind the Ocean”, the “valley of the Ogre”, etc. According to local traditions, these characters can in turn be conceptualized as an assorted herd of wild animals, a flock of goats or sheep, a band of devils, but also as the returning dead or the ancestors, dubbed as the “old ones”, and seen as a marauding bunch of old dossers...

Almost invariably, these figures wear a waist-piece of clanging bells, and leap high in order to make the most noise as to summon the villagers to a kind of awakening: the same awakening which is imposed upon nature, on the seeds that want to start sprouting. Once the fright is given and the bells have been made to sound as loud as possible, the group may settle to his second task, which is that of going round the homes asking for alms.

The second act contains the core of the ceremony, which can be seen to by the very same characters that featured in the first act or, rather, by entirely new ones. In this second case, these new characters would tend to be unmasked since they represent priestly, i.e. hieratical rather than supernatural figures, which are therefore, as true priest would be, serious, not clownish, not jocular characters. A pointed mitre, i.e. a conical cap usually white and adorned with ribbons is the most specific feature of these new characters, often dubbed as “harlequins” in the Alps, who tend to form a merry-go-round, i. e. to define a sacred circle where the ceremony proper takes place.

This ceremony usually entails a nuptial cortege followed by a mock wedding, often combined to the driving of a real plough onto the scene, and to the ritual ploughing of the village square, which is often the pivotal moment to the whole ritual pantomime, and is found in an incredibly wide gamut of distant circumstances, from the kukeri of Thrace on the shores of the

Black Sea, to Macedonia, to Southern Italy, the Alps, Sardinia, to end up in Derbyshire, Lincolnshire and Northumberland, where the “plough boys”, “bullock lads”, “plough jack”, were and perhaps still are necessary complements to the performance of the sword dance, whilst one cannot refrain to point out the close connection that there is between the ploughing ceremony as it is currently performed in carnivals, and the legendary rendering of the foundation of the city of Rome.

Given the overt sexual significance of the plough breaking into the earth that will be filled with seed, it can safely be said that the two ceremonies – wedding and ploughing – are very closely intertwined in a common basic understanding of the appropriate means of enhancing fertility by the way of sympathetic magic. In the very same perspective, other accessory performances may be made to fit at this point, such as mock parturition, ritual harrowing and sowing, and significantly the loud chanting of a formula of good wishes – a proper *carmen*, in fact – that embrace all who attend.

Once the ceremony is over, a third act ensues, which is however completely different in pace. All of a sudden, the stage is taken by a marauding crowd of caricature peasant villagers, ridiculized for their unsavoury senility, infectious poverty, incurable drunkenness, gluttony and lechery. These are followed by a cortege of tramps, thugs and Nazis, ridicule doctors and nurses, zombies and drag queens, in a crescendo of increasingly overt sexual and scatological obscenities, openly directed to the onlookers, which are also physically smerared with charcoal sap, rotten meats, cow dung and other such niceties.

This is usually but a brief, if wild, interlude, which is soon put to an end. One leading character, a straw-dummy, a wandering harlequin, a bear-in-costume, is captured, chained, put under trial, shaved, condemned to death, cut to pieces, hung high upon a pole, drowned or burnt so as to make sure that Carnival is over.

That the workings of this ritual can be found in sheds and splinters, but arranged in this very same threefold sequenced order on a European area that goes from the Black Sea to the Atlantic, and from Apulia to Northumbria, certainly says something about the fundamentals of European culture, and has its own “ethnological” significance at a much deeper level than that upon which discontinuities and discrepancies of the “ethnological” kind, i.e. “ethnicities” or “ethnic identities” with their own specific signals and markers, are usually recognized.

Entirely steeped in a very ancient esoteric doctrine about what is it like to be agriculturalists, on how to perform yearly magic for the renewal of the contract that links local communities to the spirits of the place, Carnival also impersonates that old recurrent theme of European history, that of the frailty of kingship, and may well be taken to be, ephemeral and ubiquitous as it is, and at least as far as ethnology is concerned, as a real “king of Europe”.