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Ritual Continuity and “Failed Rituals” in a Winter Masquerade in the Italian Alps

Lia Zola

- 1 It is a matter of fact that rituals pervade our social interactions and religious practices. Few of us could identify all of our daily and festal ritual behaviours, much less explain them to an outsider. Similarly, because of the variety of activities that qualify as rituals and of the many mutually contradictory – yet in a way all equally legitimate – interpretations they are open to, rituals would seem to elude any systematic historical and comparative scrutiny.
- 2 Given the complexity of providing any single definition, anthropology has broadly examined the issue of ritual from different and sometimes contrasting perspectives. Anthropologists like Malinowski, for instance, have underlined the psychological functions of rituals (Malinowski, 1931). Others, like Robertson-Smith, Durkheim, and later Geertz, have claimed that ritual provides a legitimation of collective values. Ritual, in this respect, strengthens and regulates the social ties among individuals (Durkheim, 1912; Robertson-Smith, 1889; Geertz, 1973). Some anthropologists have focused on the efficacy of rituals as a means of solving social conflicts (Gluckman, 1962; Isambert, 1979). Other authors, have instead investigated the linguistic, semantic and symbolic aspects of rituals (Turner, 1967; Leach, 1966; Tambiah, 1979).
- 3 If the definition and the function of rituals are still open to debate, most authors agree that ritual is a flexible process subject to change, which tends to lose certain features and gain others. Rituals are unique because they are situated in particular times and places. As Stanley Tambiah states, «they are never pure replications of previous performances or anticipations of future ones» (Tambiah, 1979, p. 115).
- 4 My paper aims to explore issues of ritual continuity and ritual failure through a specific case-study, that of the carnival masquerade in Salbertrand, an alpine settlement of 485 inhabitants in the upper part of the Val di Susa, in the Italian western alpine chain. In doing so, I will adopt a symbolic approach: as Mary Douglas suggests, rituals may be

seen as symbols, as «by their means, symbolic patterns are worked out and publicly displayed. Within these patterns disparate elements are related and disparate experience is given meaning» (Douglas, 1966, p. 3). In this perspective, also followed by Martine Segalen and François André Isambert, ritual is inevitably linked to a specific social context and deals with particular symbols which are collectively identified; ritual is also to be conceived in its collective essence: it makes sense for those who take part in it (Segalen, 1998; Isambert, 1979).

- 5 My paper also wishes to explore the issue of collective symbols: how they are shaped, how they are used and which controversies emerge in a local arena like Salbertrand: in doing so I will start by introducing the main features of Alpine carnival masquerades, I will then illustrate how carnival celebrations were in Salbertrand, how they went on and, eventually, I will take into account the issue of ritual failure.

Carnival masquerades in an Alpine context

- 6 Alpine winter masquerades, also known as carnival masquerades, may be regarded as one of the most complex phenomena within the field of study of cultural anthropology and folklore.
- 7 The etymology and social significance of carnivals are long debated issues. Most scholars agree, however, that more than any other traditional celebration, carnivals represent an open structure which, from time to time, includes new elements and expresses new meanings.¹
- 8 Up to the 1940s, in Italian alpine society, as well as all across Europe, the celebration of carnivals was connected to a particular period of time between the winter solstice (21st December) and the Epiphany (6th January). In this respect, carnival was conceived as a natural marker between winter and spring, indicating the return of light after darkness and the re-awakening of nature.
- 9 In a European context, carnival celebrations may be linked to a period of time often referred to as "the twelve nights": in Italian rural society, these twelve nights – extending from Christmas day to January 6th – were believed to be symbolic dates marking the passage from one agrarian cycle to another (Sordi, 1982).
- 10 Specific times of passage were thus considered to be endowed with deep cosmic symbolism, in accordance with a cyclical understanding of time as constantly wavering between death and the regeneration of nature and human beings. This worldview found expression in specific symbolic representations. In Italian rural society it was commonly believed that in given time frames – such as the carnival period – marking a seasonal passage, the souls of the dead would visit the earth carrying wealth from the underworld with them.
- 11 Most of the beliefs associated with the dead share common features: on the one hand, the deceased were considered to have a huge power, enabling them to cause death, illness, and famine. On the other, if the living showed awe and respect, then the dead could foster the fertility of the fields and of the kin. As a consequence of this ambivalent attitude towards the dead, the living used to wear masks: masks represented the powers of the underworld, and wearing them was a way of protecting people, cattle and houses from those ill-omened creatures.

- 12 The very etymology of the words for mask reveals this particular function it served: Greek *deikèlon* (ghost, spirit, phantom, mask), Latin *larva* (referred to *larvae demonum*: evil spirit of the dead, mask), and Longobard *masca* – a synonym of the word *striga* (a spirit fond of gutting human beings) – all recall the realm of the dead and broaden our understanding of the ambivalent aspect of carnivals: just like death and the dead, carnivals tantalize the living (Sanga, 1982).

"We've always done things this way..." the Carnival in Salbertrand through the villagers' narratives

- 13 "We've always done things this way" was what I was usually told when, during my fieldwork, I made questions on how Carnival was before World War II. What follows is an account illustrating several common features resulting from a number of interviews made to aged inhabitants of Salbertrand.²
- 14 Most of the villagers I spoke to during my fieldwork recalled that in Salbertrand, starting from the day of the Epiphany, groups of young unmarried men in disguise used to visit neighbouring houses and stables. They were followed by three or four musicians, or personally played various musical instruments or used other tools – such as whips, cowbells, and rattles – to make noises. Once inside a house, they would try to conceal their voices or wouldn't speak at all, communicating only by gestures. The men would usually improvise comical sketches; they would touch and stroke the household inhabitants and attempting to dance with the women. As a countergift for their performance, the landlords would often give the masked groups eggs or other food. Their visits were above all a pretext to get in touch with the women, from whom they normally led almost separate lives.
- 15 On the Wednesday before Shrove Tuesday (Mardi Gras), Salbertrand came alive as a bunch of male villagers visited houses and stables to collect food. Pancake Wednesday (*Mercr du turtiùu*), as it was called, was the day on which pancakes made of eggs and milk were cooked on an makeshift wooden stove set up on a cart. The cart carrying the stove and the pancake-makers would move slowly across the village, stopping at every house for the distribution of pancakes. Once they had received a pancake, the landlords would give back a few eggs or some milk, wine, or even money: all the countergifts would then be cooked and eaten by the villagers once carnival celebrations were over. This communal eating was also an occasion for the poor to enjoy a decent warm meal in a cold season like winter.
- 16 During the food collection two leading masks would bustle around the cart: *lu-z-arlekìn* and *lu siřingäři*. The former were Harlequins who – in keeping with their original devilish character – would sneak into houses and try to steal some wood with which to feed the stove on the cart. The latter, *lu siřingäři*, were equipped with a big syringe (of the kind normally used to administer enemas to livestock) with which they sprinkled ice-cold water under the women's skirts.
- 17 The carnival celebrations went on with another performance, the Plough masquerade, which took place on Fat Thursday³ and was acted out, once again, by a group of men. The plough was drawn by two young men disguised as a couple of oxen and driven by a ploughman who mimed the act of ploughing and harrowing the snow. According to my informants, the scene was rather comical, as the oxen would try as hard as they could

to set free from their master and to find their way to the nearest tavern. The group was followed by a man dressed in female clothes and sowing ashes.

- 18 The carnival celebrations ended on Shrove Tuesday with a big fire and the burning of the personification of Carnival itself: a puppet made of straw, cloth or other materials sewn together by village youths. First, however, the puppet – called *Pagliaccio* (clown) – was put on trial and sentenced to death. The *Pagliaccio* ended its brief life after a public reading of its will. Here satirical accounts and denunciations were made of all that had happened over the past year in Salbertrand. At this point, Lent – a dowdy woman in rags – would arrive to smother the fire. Walking around it and performing one last dance, Lent would announce the beginning of a period of fasting and the return of the village to ordinary life.

Carnival conversions, carnival diversions

- 19 The most relevant and visible changes in carnival celebrations in Salbertrand occurred just after World War II. As is sometimes the case with ritual contexts, certain parts of the celebrations continued, such as the distribution of food and the making and putting to death of the carnival puppet. Other features inevitably died out.
- 20 Carnival celebrations and their partial decline mirror a common situation in Italy, represented not only by forms of ritual decline, but also by significant and deeper socio-economic changes. The 1950s and 1960s witnessed the birth and development of large-scale industrial parks, such as those in Milan and Turin. As a consequence, younger generations abandoned Salbertrand in order to move to either Turin or the lower valley. This meant the decline of the local agropastoral economy, combined with seasonal migration of the male population. Most importantly, it also brought an end to all other sources of economic income for the village, such as its timber and mining industries, quarries, and the cod-processing factory.⁴
- 21 For the younger generations, who had always lived and worked as farmers or cattle-breeders, moving to Turin offered a new life perspective: wage labour, comforts, paid holidays – in others words, modernity. This represented a new opportunity for them, a form of social compensation enabling them to escape their destitute living conditions.
- 22 As one of my informants recalled: «After the 1957 flood, the cod-processing factory closed and within ten years Salbertrand lost half of its inhabitants. Some moved to the lower valley and started working for *Magnadyne*,⁵ while others went to Turin as factory workers for FIAT».
- 23 Salbertrand had already witnessed forms of permanent emigration, mainly to France and Argentina, at the turn of the XX century. But the emigration flow in the 1950s and 60s affected the social system of the village in an unprecedented manner. This is also confirmed by the fact that the people who settled in Turin tended to view those who stayed behind as old-fashioned; similarly, rural life was looked down upon as primitive and inadequate to meet modernity (Boissevain, 1992).
- 24 This situation persisted until the end of the 60s and began to reverse at the beginning of the 70s, with an unprecedented interest towards tradition.
- 25 As Jeremy Boissevain points out, however, «the reappraisal of the “traditional community”-centred rural way of life which was abandoned for the quest for modernization, began to be rediscovered and idealized» (Boissevain, 1992, p. 10).

Interest towards tradition did not lead to a return to the previous agropastoral life, but rather took the form of a nostalgic feeling for unspoilt nature and a simple and “genuine” way of life.

- 26 Most surprisingly, those who revived tradition were, in many cases, people who had previously moved to Turin, or individuals who regularly travelled from Salbertrand to Turin for work. These included an urbanized elite and some local intellectuals.
- 27 The carnival in Salbertrand, while never interrupted, was revamped in the 1970s thanks to the interest of a new group of villagers – many of them members of the younger generations – who organised the performances. One of my informants recalls: «When we started celebrating our carnival “as it was”, there were very few people who could remember it, so we started to show the kids how to act: everything changed, of course! We replaced the cart with a truck, we put loud music on during the parade, we introduced modern masks such as the cook and so on... those kids are now grown-up men and women who can teach their children how to do it».
- 28 The way this celebration has evolved is suggested by the fact that over time there have been more losses than additions: the villagers who started celebrating it in the 1970s are no more in charge of the event, which nowadays is organized by the younger members of the village band. The celebrations take place on Sunday and on Shrove Tuesday and for the most part feature young masked people walking through the village. A few girls and boys on a big truck cook pancakes (*turtìdu*) which they distribute to the audience. The truck is preceded by members of the band playing some tunes; it is followed by another tractor from which more loud music is sounded, and which carries a good number of children in disguise. The carnival puppet (*Pagliaccio*), meanwhile, passes from hand to hand. When the procession reaches the square by the railway station, the carnival puppet is sentenced to death and burnt.
- 29 Over the past twenty years, Italian rural celebrations – including the carnival in Salbertrand – have stirred the interest of cultural anthropologists, theatre performers, and various intellectuals. In most cases, as we shall see, these forms of cultural renewal – which Claude Lévi Strauss would probably describe as examples of cultural bricolages – have witnessed forms of the so-called invention of traditions, as we will see.

Doing things “the old way”: carnival revives

- 30 In 2006, the carnival in Salbertrand was re-enacted by a local theatre association as it used to be performed before World War II. In order to stage the carnival “the old way”, the performers consulted some elders of the village who still remembered the former carnival customs. One elderly gentleman, in particular, who is regarded as “the living memory of Salbertrand”, had a crucial role in this process; so much so, in fact, that in the revival he played himself as a symbol of the living memory of the past.
- 31 In their theatrical performance, the actors chose to emphasize two particular moments that emerged from the elders’ accounts: the male practice of visiting private houses and the Plough masquerade.
- 32 Some characters were brought to life again. This was the case, for instance, with the *siringäri* and the *arlekìn*. The Plough scene was acted out by two young men disguised as a couple of yoked oxen and by a ploughman. A few new characters were introduced, such as the village mayor, his wife, a doctor, two lawyers, a priest and a person

embodying Carnival itself. Since there are no pictures showing how carnivals were celebrated before 1950, the theatre association created the costumes and wrote the script. Its actors learnt the lines by heart, as most of the performance was in Provençal, which was simultaneously translated into Italian by two characters.

- 33 The carnival cortège moved through the village streets, wreaking havoc upon the public. As the director of the theatre group reports: «the doctors offered their medicines, the harlequins played tricks on the audience, upper-class characters put on airs, Carnival danced with the people in the street, making fun of them, the oxen tried to run away, and so on...».
- 34 The masked group reached the main square of the village, where the Plough masquerade was acted out. The performance came to a close in the square by the railway station. Here Carnival was put on trial, sentenced to death and finally replaced by the carnival puppet, which was burned at the stake. As actors and audience gathered around the fire, Lent made its appearance: a masked figure in chains and dressed in white, who announced the death of Carnival both as a character and a celebration, and the beginning of spring.

Problems in ritual failure

- 35 The carnival of *Guéini* – this is how the villagers are known in the Valle di Susa⁶ – reflects a pattern common to other European ritual celebrations: after a period of decline following a heavy emigration flow and a process of “modernization”, the carnival in Salbertrand was revitalized.
- 36 This renewed festive impulse has its plus and minuses. On the one hand, the effort of bringing the carnival to new life was particularly praised and appreciated by the mayor and the village administration. On the other, it raised doubts and caused dissatisfaction among the villagers for at least two reasons.
- 37 The first reason concerns the active participation of the elders. As previously mentioned, before staging the revitalized carnival, the theatre association consulted elderly members of the community in order to faithfully reconstruct the performance. One aged man in particular helped the actors by sharing his personal memories and views on what the carnival was like when he was a child. Most of the elders who watched the performance, however, argued that they did not recognize the performance – they probably had different memories about it. The revitalized performance struck them as something artificial, something stripped of its naturalness.
- 38 The second reason for villagers' discontent was chiefly a matter of bad timing: the theatre performance took place exactly during the “ordinary” carnival parade organized by the youths of Salbertrand, who had not been previously informed. These young members of the community failed to recognize the performance as a part of their history, as they had never witnessed what the “old” carnival looked like. They also felt that their annual duty of organizing the carnival had been usurped: they took the revived performance as a sort of “pitch invasion”. The audience, on the other hand, was quite astonished at the whole show: they had gone to Salbertrand to watch one carnival but had ended up with two, without really understanding what was going on.

- 39 The problems caused by the desire to restore the old carnival celebrations discouraged their repetition the following year, so that the 2006 edition was the first and only which attempted to revitalize the carnival in Salbertrand.
- 40 The case of Salbertrand is thus an example of revitalization which turned out to be unsuccessful and became a ritual failure. But what is it that makes a ritual a failed ritual?
- 41 In order to broaden our understanding of failed rituals and their implications, I will return to the beginning of this paper and sum up the main points of my theoretical perspective on rituals.
- 42 According to Mary Douglas, François André Isambert and Martine Segalen, rituals deal with particular symbols which are collectively identified (Douglas, 1966; Isambert, 1979; Segalen, 1998). It seems, however, that that the attempt to revitalize the carnival brought out contradictions between different historical experiences, whereby the performance created a context in which different understandings of tradition among villagers and the lack of an all-encompassing symbolic content became apparent.
- 43 On one side, if anthropological critique has proved that tradition is an artifact of the anthropological process itself, and, as such, it is always invented and liable of being endowed with different meanings according to specific social and historical contexts, on the other tradition still entails both claims about identity and renderings of history.
- 44 As Fienup-Riordan recalls, the phenomenon of invented traditions «may be in part attributed to the contrast between the constant innovation of the modern world and an attempt to find some part of it invariant» (Fienup-Riordan, 1988, p. 452).
- 45 The clash between the authentic and the fake recalls the long debated issue of folklorism. In Hans Moser's perspective, one of the three forms of folklorism he identified, refers to a set of folk materials (costumes, festive performances, music and art) which are extracted from their initial context and put to new uses for a different and larger audience (Moser, 1962).
- 46 In a 1964 paper he went on, focusing on the concept of *Rücklauf*, or "feedback" whereby scientific or pseudo-scientific insights are incorporated into the tradition bearer's conscious knowledge. In other words, folklore is returned to the folk (Newall, 1987; Moser, 1964).
- 47 Hermann Bausinger drew a response to Moser's work, stating «that which is genuine is not just the postulate of the observer, it is also a proclamation by the actors» (Bausinger, 1986, p. 27).
- 48 Moser and Bausinger's approaches prove to be very fruitful for the understanding of how, in our case-study, the issue of authenticity was acted out by the theatre group and supported by the local administration on the basis on one elder's memory. This was taken as a mirror image of the memory of the tradition bearer himself, thereby validating his creation as authentic and historically accurate.
- 49 Still, the authenticity claimed by the other elders, the villagers and the audience didn't really "return to the folk" and was not even perceived as such.
- 50 In this respect, the history of the carnival in Salbertrand reveals that ritual meaning was forged in an arena infused with discontinuous layers of collective symbols, which, ultimately, were not collective at all. These symbols reflected divergences and the stratification of different perceptions, selected memories and fragments of the past

crystallized in an idea of naturalness which inevitably contrasted with the processual essence attributed to rituals.

Conclusion

- 51 In order to draw to a conclusion, how can this case-study contribute to the analysis of ritual failures? Emily Chao argues that anthropological analysis has privileged rituals that are routinely performed and dramatize shared meanings and visions of reality. Failed rituals – rituals associated with either the successful reassertion or transformation of social order – are often not taken into sufficient account. Chao then goes on to suggest that «examining failed ritual redirects our analytic gaze to local processes of legitimation and authentication, while it simultaneously avoids accepting merely temporary arrangements of power as a timeless cultural essence. Understanding the failure of ritual draws us into the complex arena of conflict and contingency, where social dynamics enable new identities or create marginal ones» (Chao, 1999, p. 505).
- 52 The issue of failed rituals, as we have seen, is still an open debate which deserves attention. Therefore, a theory of ritual must allow for the inclusion of rituals regardless of whether they are successful, as all rituals are man-made and inevitably time-bound.

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NOTES

1. As this is not an essay on carnivals but on the implications of failed rituals in an Alpine carnival, I will just mention some of the main works on carnival, illustrating the various interpretations given of the phenomenon. Thus Bachtin (1984) and Baroja (1965) describe carnival as a site of cultural subversion. Burke (1978) interprets it as a time of waste opposed to everyday life, a time of savings. Italian scholarship on carnivals may be roughly divided into

works which focus on interpreting the origins and etymology of carnivals (see, for example, Toschi, 1957 and the review *La Ricerca Folklorica*, n. 6, 1982) and works which compare aspects shared by different carnivals in a wider European, Alpine area. This is the case of the collective work *Carnevali della Montagna*, edited by the Bureau Régional pour l'Ethnologie et la Linguistique (2003), and of the project *Carnival King of Europe*, promoted by the Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina (www.carnivalkingofeurope.it). A good number of empirical data, specifically referring to carnivals in Piedmont, may be found in Piercarlo Grimaldi's works (1997, 2003, 2007).

2. Still, it is relevant to state that their narratives reveal contrasting views on how Carnival was celebrated, probably due to different backgrounds, social conditions and so on. As the focus of my paper is to analyze the issue of collective symbols in ritual continuity, I chose not to report all the contrasting elements emerging from my informants' accounts. However their divergencies show that probably collective symbols were not collectively identified even then.

3. In Italy Fat Thursday is a feast marking the last thursday before Lent.

4. In Salbertrand, one of the sources of economic income was represented by the processing of frozen cod. The fish came from the northern ports of France and was mainly directed to the Italian market.

5. The *Magnadyne-Radiomarelli* factory produced televisions and radio equipment.

6. *Guéini* probably derives from the Provençal verb *arçuéinā*, which refers to cows' euphoria when they leave the stables at springtime. *Guéini*, in a more general sense, stands for the well-known custom of Salbertrand villagers to live it up.

ABSTRACTS

Alpine winter masquerades, also known as carnival masquerades, may be regarded as one of the most complex phenomena within the field of study of cultural anthropology and folklore. In the Italian alpine chain some of them have been brought to a new life two decades ago after a long period of decline; since then, alpine winter masquerades have been the focus of a great interest by cultural anthropologists, theatre performers and other intellectuals. In some cases bringing a winter masquerade to new life has proved to be successful; in others, after a first, "reborn" performance, some celebrations abruptly stopped. My paper aims to explore issues of ritual continuity and ritual failure through a specific case-study, that of the carnival masquerade in Salbertrand, an alpine settlement of 485 inhabitants in the upper part of the Val di Susa, in the Italian western alpine chain.

Les mascarades alpines d'hiver, aussi connues comme mascarades de carnaval, peuvent être considérées comme l'un des phénomènes les plus complexes dans le champ d'étude d'anthropologie culturelle et du folklore. Dans la chaîne alpine italienne, certains d'entre eux ont été amenés à une nouvelle vie il y a deux décennies, après une longue période de déclin. Dès lors, les mascarades alpines d'hiver ont été sujet d'intérêt majeur pour les anthropologues culturels, les acteurs de théâtre et d'autres intellectuels. Dans certains cas, réactiver une mascarade d'hiver s'est soldé par une réussite; dans d'autres, après une première manifestation "renaissante" quelques célébrations se sont brusquement arrêtées. Mon article aspire à explorer les phénomènes de continuité et d'échec rituel à travers une étude de cas spécifique, celui de la mascarade de carnaval de Salbertrand, une localité alpine de 485 habitants dans la partie supérieure de Val De Susa, dans les Alpes occidentales italiennes.

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Keywords: carnivals, ritual failure, ritual revitalization, ritual theory

Mots-clés: carnivals, echec du rituel, régénération du rituel, théorie du rituel

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