ESTRATTO


*Chapter 8*

*Tarantism and the politics of tradition in contemporary Salento*

Giovanni Pizza

The Salentine peninsula in southern Italy is a sort of “memory site” in the history of Italian religious anthropology. It is the part of Apulia which is home to “tarantismo”, the spider bite possession ritual linked to the cult of Saint Paul, and the location of the 1959 ethnographic study conducted by Ernesto de Martino (1908-1965), and documented in his classic book, *La terra del rimorso* (*The Land of Remorse*, de Martino 1961). The first part of de Martino’s book, the ethnographic study, is entitled *Salento 1959*. In the Salentine villages in which de Martino did his fieldwork, women called *tarantate* claimed to be bitten by tarantula during their work in the fields. On the 29th of June, Saint Paul’s day, they went to the city of Galatina. Inside and outside the church of St Paul they performed convulsions, which medical scientists classified as hysterics. The women were possessed by the spider spirit, and asked Saint Paul to help them recover. Previously, de Martino had observed possession and healing dance performances of some “tarantate” in their own homes. They were cured through music, dance and colour symbolism. This ritual has long historical roots, and has been the subject of argument between medical and catholic discourses since the Middle Ages. The medical profession classified the female bodily perform-
ances in three ways: as a disease caused by the venom of the tarantula; as an hysterical mental disorder; and as female fiction. Catholicism on the other hand introduced the figure of Saint Paul and progressively transformed a possession cult into a catholic cult of the saint. De Martino showed that the medical approach reduced the “symbolic autonomy” of tarantism, that is, it ignored its ritual function. He also argued that local bodily performances of spider-spirit possession should not be considered “subversive” to either medicine or official Catholicism. They were ritual performances in which ceremony and suffering were interwoven. Tarantism then was no longer understood as a mental disorder but rather as a ritual aiming to give a cultural meaning to female existential and social suffering.

During the 1960s and 1970s, two decades after De Martino’s fieldwork, his book had a strong impact on the Italian public, newspapers, and television. Several scholars went back to Salento in order to restudy tarantism (Rossi 1970; Castiglione 1977; Seppilli 1995; Lombardi Satriani 1996; Gallini-Faeta 1999; Pizza 1999). In the 1980s the French anthropologist Georges Lapassade did fieldwork there, in collaboration with theatre performers. In a sort of research action, musicians and healers of tarantism were engaged to collaborate in experimental works of theatre (see Blasi 1994; Lapassade 1994).

De Martino’s book was translated into French and, more recently, into Spanish. It has not yet been translated into English, however, English readers have a good abstract written by George Saunders. Here I quote a part of it: “This book is fascinating, and deserves translation on its ethnographic merits alone. After an introduction, the first section details the work of the research team in Salento in 1959 and describes the symbolism of the tarantula bite and of the rites, the relationship between tarantism and the economy, and the rapport of the cult with official Catholicism. The second part focuses in considerably more depth on the symbolism of the music and dance. The third part, the longest and most theoretical, is entitled Historical Commentary. Here de Martino (a historian of religion by training, after all) reports on its historical investigation of the origins of tarantism, on its relationship to other forms of magic and to the Enlightenment, and (...) on the reactions of scholars and the bourgeoisie to the phenomenon. (...) For example, he notes the first attempts by a group of Neapolitan doctors in the early 18th century to develop a scientific analysis of tarantism. In their report, they argued the tarantism was, on the one hand, an “institution” (founded in culture), and on the other, a disease, and particularly a psychic disorder. Over the next century, the analyses of tarantism became more “professional and specialised”, and, according to de Martino, the cultural dimension was ignored as the “scientific” judgement of the phenomenon came to emphasise pathology – that is, to medicalise it” (Saunders 1993: 885). For a discussion of de Martino’s book see also Lewis 1991.
In the 1990s there was a rediscovery of de Martino’s thought in Italian academic culture (Gallin-Massenzio 1997). A parallel revitalisation and transformation of “tarantism” occurred in the local politics of culture and tradition in Salento (Di Mitri 1999). After the popularisation of de Martino’s anthropological research, many academic and self-proclaimed anthropologists, tourists and students began to visit Galatina, in order to see the ritual performances of the “tarantate”. Today tarantism healing performances are no longer visible, and “tarantism” is now a complex field of cultural production. Observing contemporary “tarantism” means coming to terms with a complex interweaving of various practices of writing, art, cinema, philosophical reflection, academic anthropology and cultural politics put into play by local institutions. I began my own fieldwork in contemporary Salento in 1998.

Since the first moment of my fieldwork I was aware of the involvement of the ethnographer in this kind of fieldwork. As an “academic anthropologist” I was immediately considered “de Martinian”, and I was asked to participate in local debates and conferences on tarantism, and to write articles for local journals.

In its popularised form, contemporary anthropology has now entered into this process, in Italy as well as elsewhere (see Battaglia 1995; MacClancy and McDonough 1996; Pizza 1999; Mahon 2000), offering the instruments that enable its conception, objectification, and finally, its embodiment. Ernesto de Martino himself is being transformed into an embodied symbol, to be recalled or rejected, evoked or repressed. He has now become identical with Saint Paul, as the guiding spirit both for anthropologists and local experts. He is the agent (and in this role, ambiguous and ironic just like any self-respecting spirit) of a new form of possession: a process of embodiment of local history and local memory (Palumbo 1997; Lambek 1998), which delineates a field managed by a multiplicity of subjects from local cultural producers and academic anthropologists to local politicians.

In this chapter I will examine the uses of memory in two fields, comparing the academic anthropological memory of de Martino to the contemporary commodification of tarantism carried out by local cultural producers and institutions. My main aim is to draw a parallel between different discourses invoking memory of the past in Salento: the memory of academic anthropology, with its foundation myths, re-studies and memorial rituals;

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2 After a timely re-reading of tarantism (Pizza 1996, 1998), I started my fieldwork in Salento in the summer 1998, to study the contemporary practices of tarantism and the politics of culture, tradition and memory that subtend them. My main informants were local scholars, academics and musicians, as well as politicians and journalists, each one engaged in the public discourse on tarantism. For a first survey on the cultural production of tarantism in contemporary Salento see Pizza 1999.
and the memory of local cultural producers, collaborating with political and heritage institutions to bring about a sort of commodification of tarantism. In a sense I will try to delineate what happens when they read what we write (Brettel 1993). My argument is that the cultural traits of the local revitalisation discourse and the renewed practice of tarantism have invaded the academic anthropological debate. Local actors are using this debate in order to legitimate the revitalisation of tarantism, which is no longer a “healing rite” or a “possession cult” linked to social suffering, but a “popular dance” with an indefinite trance meaning. In a sense, if we move toward a more open interpretation of tarantism as spirit possession (Olivier de Sardan 1994; Boddy 1994), we can consider it as a wider system of thought and practice to which local writings, pictures, films or music performances may also belong. Local and global artists are also rediscovering the aesthetic values of tarantism, and are participating in this reconstruction of the Salentine cultural past.

In the following four sections I shall explore some specific aspects of this process of revitalisation of Apulian tarantism: first, the transformation of Ernesto de Martino into a symbol of identity in the Italian anthropological discourse; second, the relationship between the ethnographic memory of de Martino and local cultural productions, in particular the works of three local artists-writers-scholars as a case of “visible evidence” of cultural producers (Mahon 2000); third, the transformation of tarantism today into an identity play, claiming a search for local origins; and fourth, the ‘patrimonialisation’ of tarantism, and its transformation into a sort of cultural commodity with the birth of the music festival Night of the Taranta.

**Remembering the “founding father”**

In his article on the work of Ernesto de Martino, published in 1993 in *American Anthropologist*, George Saunders called him “the founding father” of Italian anthropology and compared him to Claude Lévi-Strauss or Franz Boas, as “one of the most exciting, original and profound thinkers of the 20th-century anthropology” (Saunders 1993: 875). Even if somewhat delayed in Anglophone anthropology, this international recognition has contributed to a “revitalisation” of de Martino’s work, and has generated an international debate. Saunders’ article was quickly translated into Italian, along with several international commentaries, and the Italian debate on de Martino, which had quietened down in the 1980s, started up again. The 30th anniversary of de Martino’s death, two years after Saunders’ article appeared, was the occasion for an important conference on his work (Gallini and Massenzio 1997). Clara Gallini, one of Italy’s most important contemporary anthropologists, was the chief organiser of the conference.
Gallini opened the conference with an introduction entitled, *Cultural fatherlands, memory*, quoting de Martino’s concept of *patria culturale*, “cultural fatherland”, and stressing the importance of memory and the act of remembering, especially from the point of view of the politically engaged anthropologist who lives today in a world torn by a sort of “war of memories”, in an age doomed to “oblivion” (Gallini 1997: 6).

“Cultural fatherland” in de Martino’s writings means the emotional consciousness of attachment to a place and at the same time a strong feeling of identity and belonging which links us to our past. Now his most prominent pupil, Clara Gallini, was using this anthropological concept to remind us not to forget de Martino’s work, as it had been forgotten after his untimely death thirty years before. Listening to her memorial overture at the 1995 conference, I found it interesting that a concept taken from de Martino’s work was being given salience in the construction of the identity of Italian anthropology and anthropologists. Gallini went on to criticise Italian anthropology for having sometimes followed culturally exogenous fashions (such as structuralism in the seventies or postmodernism in nineties), wondering whether “we” (Italian anthropologists) “suffer from weak memory, preventing us from building solid cultural fatherlands from which we can look beyond” (Gallini 1997: 10.) In Gallini’s presentation, then, de Martino was considered the epitome of a national anthropological identity, and, in a sense, of the anthropological self. The process of remembering him was thus presented as a way to resist the permeability of post-modern subjectivity.

This kind of relationship with a de Martinian memory in Italian anthropology was strikingly visible at the conference. Those anthropologists for whom de Martino had really been a “founding father” remembered him and spoke about him in genealogical terms. Carlo Tullio Altan (1997), for example, entitled his paper *Ernesto de Martino, my elder brother*, and Pietro Clemente intentionally spoke about *De Martino inside us: history and genealogy*, and decided to title the first part of his paper *Fathers, sons, and grandchildren* in order to stress the presence of this important “ancestor within the page” (Clemente 1997, 1999). Two years later, in 1997, another important Italian anthropologist, Vittorio Lanternari, wrote a book called, *My Alliance with Ernesto de Martino* (Lanternari 1997). The representation of a de Martinian memory was performed in metaphorical terms of kinship,
descent, heritage, consanguinity, affinity, and adoption. In a sense, the discourse surrounding a de Martinian memory involved the person and the self of the orators at the conference, their identity, their capacity to remember the past.

The second half of the nineties witnessed the important rediscovery of de Martino in anthropological discussion, and the recognition of his complex and fascinating thinking. New translations of his books into French, Spanish, (and Polish), and the publication of his archives through the efforts of Clara Gallini (de Martino 1995, 1996), have led to a sort of “renaissance” of his presence in the debate (see Pizza 1999).

Now this bit of good fortune has led to another important consequence. De Martino is not only remembered by several generations of Italian academic anthropologists, but has at the same time also been rediscovered by local actors in southern Italy where he did his fieldwork, in particular in Apulia, on the Salentine peninsula (the “heel” of the Italian “boot”), the land he baptised *The land of remorse, La terra del rimorso* (meaning also the land of the re-bitten).

In the local context, the public memory of tarantism is above all the ethnographic memory of de Martino’s fieldwork team, and of de Martino’s monograph on tarantism. While academic anthropologists are engaged in an undoubtedly important rediscovery of de Martinian thought, on the contemporary Salentine peninsula de Martino is being revitalised in a complex process involving different actors. Depending on the different positions of the diverse subjects on the local scene, de Martino’s work is at times the model for “correct” revitalisation practices, at times a sort of cultural map to be followed step by step by those who want to discover contemporary Salento, or rediscover places and persons (de Martino’s informants). But de Martino is also remembered as the anthropologist who branded the Salentine peninsula *Land of remorse*, for most local actors an offensive term synonymous with backwardness. So they say that Salento is no longer the *Land of remorse* – meaning the land of a “bad past” – but the *Land of renaissance*, and this transformation has been made possible by the continuous revision of tarantism studies.

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3 For the implications in terms of identity within the genre of the “history of anthropology” see Bourdieu 1984; Clemente 1999; Handler 2000.
4 The production of a public discourse about Ernesto de Martino and his 1959 ethnographic expedition on tarantism in Salento is not an isolated phenomenon: the same happens, for example, with the “ghost” of Bronislaw Malinowski among contemporary Trobrianders (see Battaglia 1995, 1997), and with Marcel Griaule’s ethnographic memory among the Dogon in present-day Mali (see Ciarcia 1998; Michel-Jones 1999; Doquet 1999).
All this is happening in part because *La terra del rimorso* is de Martino’s best known work as well as the last big work to be published during his lifetime. But another reason for this “renaissance” is that the cultural phenomenon he studied was really spectacular, consisting of a sort of spirit possession, a spider possession demanding dance and music: the rhythm of the “pizzica tarantata”. So tarantism was literally a “collective representation” in the true sense of a staged performance, and *La terra del rimorso* was a sort of “multimedia” product. The book was enriched with photographs, a disk, and a music score by Diego Carpitella (1961), a founding father of ethnomusicology in Italy, and a member of de Martino’s fieldwork team. Soon after the publication of the book, a film was produced based on Carpitella’s footage and de Martino’s research (Mingozzi 1961).

The Land of Remembrance

The academic rediscovery of de Martino’s work seems to be paralleled by the Salentine rediscovery of De Martino as an important figure and the rise of several “local anthropologies”. At the same time we see a revival and a reinvention of tarantism, which is being freed from its former association with suffering and despair (Signorelli 1996), and transformed into a ‘renaissance’ discourse, renaissance being the specific term used by many local culture specialists.

The transformation of tarantism into a positive symbol, freed of its connection to suffering, is possible only because the symbol has been totally decontextualised, reified, and projected onto an ill-defined universal dimension. While in de Martino’s book the trance of tarantism is an example of a dramatic relationship between the existential self and its presence in the world, with the tarantistic ritual aiming to solve this cultural drama, the contemporary public process of rereading considers trance and possession by the tarantula as a cultural good, a public patrimony: music and dance are no longer linked to suffering but are instruments for recollection of an indefinite idea of trance.

The reversal of de Martino’s interpretation of tarantism thus becomes integrated into the anthropological debate on the *exorcistic* or *adorcistic* nature of the tarantistic ritual.5 Scholars including Georges Lapassade (1994)

5 Luc de Heusch (1962) introduced the distinction between *adorcism* and *exorcism* to differentiate between shamanism and spirit possession: while shamans dominate spirits, the possessed are dominated by spirits. The adorcistic/exorcistic debate on tarantism has been developed by Rouget (1980) and Lapassade (1994) who have criticised a de Martanian consideration of tarantism as *exorcism*, that is as a healing ritual linked to social and existential as well as corporeal female suffering. They say that it is an *adorcistic* ritual instead, a “possession cult” in which the trance identification between women and spiders takes place.
and Gilbert Rouget (1980) accused him of not seeing tarantism as a true adorcistic cult of possession, but merely as an exorcistic ritual; these adorcistic academic interpretations thus favour local revitalisation reinterpretations. The search for possession becomes a sort of attempt to come into contact with the past, to renew the past in the present through a practice of nostalgia (Battaglia 1995).

Here we are confronted with, first, the academic anthropological debate and the anthropological memory of de Martino and, second, a literary sociology of the local response to de Martino’s work, and the cultural policies in contemporary Salento which are revitalising and reactivating the memory of de Martino and tarantism.

These various actors become increasingly bound together. With increasing frequency, in fact, conferences in Salento on the reinterpretation of tarantism appear to be organised by local scholars who work in collaboration with academics belonging to the local university in Lecce and to the national anthropological community. Clear evidence of this process is seen in consortia for the promotion of local cultural heritage where, among the typical regional food products or crafts, town festivals and monuments, tarantism can also be found.

Here, I examine three particular figures who represent different approaches to tarantism and its historical continuity. This historical continuity should be understood as continuity with the Salentine ‘past’ – defined broadly as the “origins of tarantism” – but also as continuity or discontinuity, depending on the analyst’s position, with de Martino’s treatment of tarantism. The books of these authors all take de Martino’s text as their fundamental model, even imitating its style and composition with its photographic appendices and selection of sheet music, and are sometimes sold together with audio or video cassettes.

These three examples share a narrative expressing a sense of belonging to a place and a commitment to the memory of the past. We are dealing with three local artists-writers-scholars, insiders in the contemporary practice of Salentine tarantism, who are also involved in the field of Salentine cultural politics both as organisers of traditional events and programmes and as performers, leaders of musical groups inspired by the tradition of tarantism, publishers of their own books and disks. The three, Giorgio Di Lecce, Luigi

This debate is present in Italian academic anthropology (see Gallini 1988; Apolito 1994; Pizza 1996, 1998, 1999; Dei 1998), as well as among local scholars who also seem to be divided between “de Martinians” (exorcistic approach) and “anti-de Martinians” (adorcistic approach): see in the following paragraph examples by Luigi Chiriatti and Pierpaolo De Giorgi.

**Giorgio Di Lecce: on the trail of a de Martinian tarantism**

Di Lecce is the promoter of the musical group Arachne Mediterranea, director of theatrical performances, and editor of a volume entitled *The dance of the little taranta* (Di Lecce 1994). The latter is a collection by various authors on Apulian tarantism as well as his own recent interviews with victims, often the same “tarantate” who were identified by de Martino in 1959. Di Lecce’s work – like that of the other two local authors – grows out of a local tradition of study and performance of popular traditions which extends from the musical group *Canzoniere Grecanico* in the 1970s to the performances of the theatre group “Oistros” (which took its name from the chapter of de Martino’s book on the symbolism of the “pungolo,” (sting, goad or cudgel, the Greek *oistros*) in the 1980s. These were politico-cultural movements of local historians and artists engaged in collecting local memories of tarantism for theatrical purposes but also with an aim of revitalising the local cultural heritage. Thus Di Lecce and his group took part in these initiatives on a number of occasions and had actually “staged” theatrical performances based on historical documents which had been cited by de Martino.

Di Lecce’s book was published at the time of the completion of a German television documentary produced with Di Lecce’s collaboration on “the origins” of the tarantella. His rediscovery of Salento is constantly informed by de Martino’s descriptions in *La terra del rimorso*; it is de Martino’s Salento that Di Lecce wishes to discover, retracing its steps with a level of care and attention even more persistent than that of de Martino’s followers.

To Di Lecce, retracing de Martino’s steps means tracking down the same informants. In particular, “Maria di Nardò”, the first and most significant “tarantata” to be studied by de Martino in *La terra del rimorso*, is presented by Di Lecce as an exemplary case, described with great precision and literary attention, almost as if to prefigure the screenplay for the photographic sequence or the documentary film produced by the troupe.

The case of Maria di Nardò highlights the effects on the local community of de Martino’s research and simultaneously explains the attention of later researchers. Almost immediately following the investigation conducted by de Martino and his team, Maria di Nardò became the subject of media reports, with photographs of herself performing the dance cycle appearing in weekly magazines as well as the national press and on television. But in order to understand Di Lecce’s insistence on retracing de Martino’s path we have to take a step backward.
Deep South: in search of lost tarantism (or lost de Martino)

In the late 1970s, twenty years after de Martino’s fieldwork, Annabella Rossi, who had herself been on de Martino’s research team, returned to Salento to film with Gianfranco Mingozzi, the director of the first Italian documentary on tarantism. She too retraced de Martino’s steps, entitling her documentary and book Profondo Sud: Viaggio nei luoghi di Ernesto de Martino vent’anni dopo (“Deep South: A Journey to the Places of Ernesto de Martino, Twenty Years Later”, see Barbati-Mingozzi-Rossi 1978). Here too, the focal point is an interview with Maria di Nardò. The documentary shows images of a woman in pain who is impatient with yet one more useless interview with an anthropologist. Watching this documentary today you understand immediately that the anthropologists involved are conducting a pilgrimage in the footsteps of one of their ancestors, subjecting Maria di Nardò to an interview the sole purpose of which seems to be the enactment of a ritual of their own anthropological memory. Perhaps they were anguished by the untimely death of de Martino (at 57 in 1965), but it is clear that this interview explains more from the point of view of “remembering the ancestor”, than it does from an ethnographic point of view. Let’s take a look at the interview.

The interview takes place in the outpatient clinic in Nardò. “Maria. Interior, evening. Maria sits motionless in front of the white wall of the clinic, wearing a dark overcoat. She is very tense; irritated and frightened at the same time. She speaks in a low voice barely looking up.

Question by the female interviewer (Q): What did you eat back then during the day?
Maria’s answer (A): What do I know? I was working, wasn’t I?
Q: No, what did you eat? When you got up in the morning, what did you eat?
A: What did I eat? Whatever there was!
Q: What?
A: Bread, bread and pasta, no?
Q: And at noon?
A: At noon a few mouthfuls of pasta.
Q: And when you came back home in the evening?
A: In the evening…whatever we ate at noon we ate in the evening too.
Q: When you were bitten by the tarantula…how did it happen?
A: Now, lady, who can remember? I can’t remember as far back as that! It’s not just a year ago, it’s a lot of years ago! I can’t remember that now.
Today, compared to 1940, when you went to Galatina for the first time, are there more “tarantate” or fewer?

...How am I supposed to remember how many tarantate there are and how many there aren’t? What do I know about it!”

At this point the producers notice the embarrassing situation and turn things over to a voice off camera:

“The discomfort of this interview is real because the confrontation we are observing is real. The folklore of consumer society is always painless, it doesn’t create discomfort, doesn’t put anyone in difficulty: it is made to nullify feelings of guilt. The work of the ethnologist, on the other hand, is often built on encounters like this one. Overcoming the reserve and hostility of the interviewees, the ethnologist forces himself to document the past, history, the ways of living of a subaltern class which in many cases still hasn’t acquired self-awareness and may not be capable of providing direct testimony about itself without some outside mediator. There is violence in this relationship but it is a necessary violence, at least until these men and women become, as de Martino hoped, protagonists of history, culturally and politically aware”. (Barbati-Mingozzi-Rossi 1978: 139-143)

Obviously, violence was not necessary for such an awareness, but rather for the Salentine pilgrimage of the post-de Martinian anthropologists and for their immersion in their own ancestor cult. Today this document provides testimony not about the past or the history of the subaltern class, but about the relationship that a group of anthropologists in 1976 had with their own anthropological past. Maria shows that she is much less “wild” and much more lucid and aware of her own history than the de-Martinian anthropologists who are interviewing her, when she cries out: “I’m upset because you’re doing these things to me! Because these things are not right!” (And then addressing herself to the doctor, out of respect for whom she had allowed herself to be interviewed). “Doctor, I wouldn’t have done this except out of respect for you. Only for respect! Otherwise, I wouldn’t have come today, not here!”

In the end the de Martinians betray the true ritual character of their motivation, asking:

“Q: Do you remember a professor some years ago by the name of de Martino and who…

Maria, interrupting: But back then that was another story, it was. Now I’m staying in my house. Because those people (the de Martino team) have already framed me once... To me they were all bad people. To me, yeah, they were all lousy…

She suddenly steps outside of the camera frame. The camera remains focused for a few seconds on the white wall of the clinic. Then you hear Maria,
who continues to scream off camera, still referring to the group led by Ernesto de Martino:

Because they always wanted to do bad things to me, they didn’t always wish me well. They always did things against me!” (Barbati-Mingozi-Rossi 1978: 139-143)

Maria’s resistance, her rebellion, turns the interview on its head. The anthropologists reveal the true meaning of their journey to Salento: on the one hand a memorial ritual of the reconstruction and reinvention of their identity as “politically committed” anthropologists, and on the other, a first attempt to project their anthropological memory, or rather the “memory” of Ernesto de Martino, in a public television program.

Thus, in his mimetic attempt at de Martinian remembrance, the local scholar Giorgio Di Lecce also carries out his own ritual performance. He cannot do without an interview of Maria, because only through the “violence” of this “ethnographic” ritual will he be able to legitimate himself as an expert on tarantism. Giving his interview the dramatic title of The remorse of Maria thirty years later, he published a text in which Maria’s answers are clear and repeated refusals:

“Di Lecce: Do you remember…?
[And here I collect all the answers by Maria to all his questions].
Maria: Who are you! What do you want! I don’t know anybody! I don’t remember anything! I don’t know anything! What do you people want? Who are you? Who sent you? How do you know my name and address? What do you want? The water for the pasta is boiling, I gotta go (Di Lecce 1994: 244)”.

Notwithstanding this refusal, Di Lecce’s desire to presentise the past of 1959 makes him conclude that in these last thirty years nothing has changed for Maria di Nardò.

**Love bite**

Luigi Chiriatti is the leader of the popular music group Aramirè, and the author of Morso d’amore (“Love Bite”, Chiriatti 1995). In Salento, Chiriatti has been one of the chief operators in a programme of the rediscovery and conservation of tarantism, which is rather averse to “contamination.” He organised one of the first musical groups in Salento in the post de Martinian era: Il Canzoniere grecanico salentino. Recounting the story of his life, he defines his “entrance” into tarantism as an “initiation crisis,” stealing from anthropology the concepts and terminology to explain his own choices.

Morso d’amore opens, in fact, with an evocation of the author’s own childhood in which cruel games with animals – snakes, lizards, spiders – characteristic of the folklore of children’s games in the rural Italian south –
are experienced with a sense of guilt, especially with respect to Saint Paul, who is both the agent of possession in the tarantistic ritual and the guarantor of the cure.

Chiriatti’s precocious attraction to the popular traditions of his local community – which started when he was ten years old and culminated in a university thesis on tarantism – is recounted and interpreted in this book as a sort of vocation which grew out of his family environment. He begins by recording his parents’ singing, and journeys around Salento. Here his encounter with tarantism, which he defines as a true and proper initiation ritual, takes place. From this moment on, his research on local tarantism, which will lead to encounters with numerous “tarantate,” is described as a kind of challenge-dialogue between himself and Saint Paul, a dialogue similar to that between the “tarantati” and the spirit that possesses them. It is an encounter of two double ambiguities: Chiriatti, researcher and Salentino, and Saint Paul who heals the bite but also attacks by biting. Chiriatti describes his research on tarantism as a continuous attempt to escape from the possibility that he, too, might be possessed by the spider-saint, a position directly opposed to that of Di Lecce and the other researchers.

He is among the many who have tried – since de Martino – to document the most spectacular moment of the possession, when the “tarantate” go to the sanctuary of Saint Paul in Galatina, but he is almost paralysed by a feeling of terror:

I didn’t have the courage to come nearer to the place of worship. I was terrified by the tarantate, because of all my ancestral fears infused with stories and sins committed against Saint Paul [when he killed snakes and spiders in contravention of traditional taboos] (Chiriatti 1995: 16).

And so he decides to continue his study of tarantism through the vehicle of his university thesis, but here, too, his approach is much more cautious than Di Lecce’s. He assumes an attitude of greater modesty in following the same de Martinian tracks, in contacting the same informants. So in the early 1980s, at the beginning of a process of revitalisation, he takes up his research once again and starts shooting a new documentary, discovering a new tarantata, Cristina who will be his Maria di Nardò. But, according to Chiriatti, at the moment she is about to be filmed, the tarantata doesn’t want to dance, she doesn’t feel the impulse of the trance performance. It is then that he reactivates his competitive dialogue with the saint, has a vision, more or less real, of a snake, and kills it while yelling out the traditional magic chant which he had used as a child to challenge Saint Paul. Struck by the challenge, the saint-tarantula moves inside the body of his tarantata, so that the filming of the dance can begin. As we can see from this account, the phe-
nommenon of tarantism appears to be reconstructed in the expressive form of a story of memory, but the attempt to objectify it is an ongoing challenge for Chiriatti, a real and true example of exorcism. Being also “inside” the local tradition, an “initiate,” as he defines himself, the acts he performs in his study of tarantism are effective only when he successfully challenges the saint. He feels the same emotions when he succeeds in entering the church in Galatina on the day of the tarantate. His experience brings him once again very close to the visionary state:

The darker it got on the night of 28 June the more tarante and saints and witches and devils and everything else I had taken in as a child and as an adult through popular culture and through my anthropological studies began to be personified before my eyes. They were all there, alive and real between me and the door leading to the balcony. I couldn’t move, couldn’t manage to win the challenge with Saint Paul. I thought, ‘If I too turn into a tarantato? And if some snake comes out and “blows” me? The battle was drawn between myself and Saint Paul (Chiriatti 1995: 20).

Since then he has never again entered the Galatina church. He believes that the ritual that takes place in the chapel of Saint Paul “is too intimate, too personal, for me to impose my presence. I was always on the outer limit, leaning up against the door of the chapel, half in and half out with one foot poised to enter but stopped from doing so systematically not only out of respect for the tarantate women but also by irrational fears of being co-opted by Saint Paul into the ranks of the tarantati” (Chiriatti 1995: 21).

This ever present risk is transformed, he says, into a sort of trance when he performs his acts as a musician:

The state of being inside the phenomenon as an active participant comes out anyway when I play the drum. There are moments when I completely lose all sense of reality to enter, if only in a personal way, another reality made up of sensations, emotions. Perhaps it is this inside-outside freedom to go in or go out that gives rise to the conflict between myself and Saint Paul: the fact that I have not been captured by him, that I am not one of his possessed, has put us into conflict, sometimes dormant and sometimes diluted over time, but never resolved (Chiriatti 1995: 21).

In the end he tries to achieve a pacification of this intimate dialogue with the saint, which by now has become a constructive element of his own self, and he finds it again in a traditional practice:

I decided to make a definite break by giving the name Paul to my youngest child (Chiriatti 1995: 22).
Concepts of an indigenous auto-anthropology as well as references to de Martino are used by Chiriatti to represent himself as a local scholar who embodies tarantism, achieving a re-evocation and reinvention of his own cultural memory.

**Tarantism as renaissance**

*Tarantismo e rinascita* (“Tarantism and rebirth”) is a recent volume produced by a Salentine publisher, Argo, that also brings out – in different series – the previously unpublished works of de Martino and several journals of academic anthropology. The author of this 333 page volume is Pierpaolo De Giorgi, of whom the book jacket states:

Pierpaolo De Giorgi took his degree in Philosophy at the University of Perugia, discussing a thesis in Aesthetics. He is currently the director of the regional centre for educational and cultural services in Copertino. He conducts an intensive activity of research and promotion of cultural initiatives in the area of popular traditions and ethnomusicology. His interest in the practice of the performing arts led to his founding of the group of “Tamburellisti di Torre Paduli”, with whom he has gone on concert tours throughout Italy and abroad. The groups musical activities are aimed at the conservation and promotion of a whole tradition of Salentine music and dance, commonly known as “pizzica, pizzica”. With this volume he wishes to share with the public a broad range of his reflections on various aspects which come together to make up the universe of tarantism.

“This book… is me,” began De Giorgi, at the presentation of his book in 1999 in Perugia before an audience composed primarily of members of the Perugian Salentine community. He thus rendered explicit his intimate motivation: the attempt to find in tarantism an “ancient identity,” both individual and collective. He also explains that the book’s title expresses, through the idea of rebirth, a reversal of the de Martinian concept of a tarantism connected with suffering. From a perspective which historians of religion would define as neo-irrationalist, De Giorgi intends to subvert a stereotype of a tarantism connected to individual and collective suffering, to arrive at an understanding of the archaic dimension of tarantism, rooted in the archaic mythologies of Magna Grecia (the regions of Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria and Sicily).

We should keep in mind, regarding this point, the broad range of De Giorgi’s activities. He is a poet and a musician in a neo-tarantist ensemble, who defines himself as an ethnomusicologist and anthropologist employed in a cultural institution in the Salentine town of Copertino. He is among the most important figures in the contemporary movement for the revitalisation
of tarantism. As he himself proudly states, his objective “is that of protecting and recovering the Salentine heritage and in particular the culture of tarantism. The music that cured the tarantate must now enchant the crowds in the piazzas” (De Giorgi 1999: 51).

Tarantism is dying in its canonical, de Martinian forms, but according to De Giorgi “it is being born again, because it is nothing else but a philosophy of rebirth, a definitive resource for survival.” (loc. cit.). So from his perspective, the southern question becomes the question of the rebirth of forgotten folklore:

Having shed the worn out clothes of cultural subjection, the Apulian folk tradition and more generally the Mediterranean folk tradition now appears in all of its exuberant potential for rebirth (loc. cit.).

**Tarantisms today: playing identity**

The books of Chiriatti, Di Lecce and De Giorgi about tarantism cannot be considered the work of local historians, but must be seen together with their authors’ activities as musicians, writers and artists. What they have in common is the “search for origins,” which is especially strong in De Giorgi. Their search does not constitute an anthropological or historiographical problem but belongs to a complex rhetoric of identity and self, which attempts to effect a ritualised rebirth of history in the present, or rather to ensure the continuity of the past in the present by reincarnating it in the physical performances of dance and music, or by identifying a new symbolic life in a system of objects connected to tarantism, in particular the drum, which is described as a “cosmic” instrument. De Giorgi writes:

> In my view the Salentine drum is a perfect symbolic expression of the contemporaneous presence of complementary opposites (the sharp notes of the rattles and the bass notes of the skin) condensed inside the unity of the magic ritual circle of the frame. More precisely, it is the instrument that allows the union of sky and earth, the sacrifice and the construction with the skin of the goat, the quintessential sacrificial animal (De Giorgi 1999: 159).

While for Chiriatti:

The drum is the most important instrument for the musical therapy of the tarantati and it must be made in a certain way because it represents the synthesis of musical therapy and is itself a synthesis of symbols. Circle, rattles, and skin must be assembled in a certain way...The circle represents, in its roundness the universe and the magical-ritual circle in which the action of the ritual takes place. The rattles, always made of copper, represent disorder, the irrational, the obscure, the ugly, the discordant, reality that scratches you and falls
on top of you. The rattles scratch, cause disturbance, refuse to enter into harmony with the other instruments, they are annoying, in discord with the pre-constituted rhythmic and harmonic order. This is the reason why the new drums with small, harmonious rattles aren’t appreciated by the old musicians. The skin represents the constant rhythm, the constant cadenced beat, which serves to reintegrate the taranta into the order of the things of daily life (Chiriatti 1995: 27).

The “fetishist” symbolism of the drum is thus revitalised by local subjects in connection with the neo-irrationalist and Jungian readings which are proposed, often in the prefaces to their books, by academic philosophers and scholars. These academic professionals tend to deconstruct, on a scientific level, the de Martinian interpretation of tarantism. The neo-mythological and neo-irrationalist perspective lends itself well to the essentialist construction of identity and belonging, and seems to be more useful for a cultural politics which transforms tarantism into a global commodity.

Salento 1999: the Night of Taranta

Both local culture specialists and academics aim to reify and essentialise symbols, to objectify them and to place them within an individuality understood as a universal entity, outside any obvious concept of the socially constructed nature of the self (Pellegrino 1999). A real and true division of labour is at work, that derives its structure from tacit or declared complicity between local, academic, and national authorities and institutions, and cultural operators and specialists in local culture, but which can explode into open conflicts about the purity, the authenticity, or the “correctness” of the tradition. In sum, what is being put into play is a politics of tradition (Papa 1998).

An example of this is the formation, in the second half of the 1990s, of an actual consortium of Salentine towns for the purpose of implementing a programme for the revitalisation and conservation of local cultural heritage (Consorzio dei Comuni della Grecìa salentina). By way of research projects and “collective representations” – in the concrete sense of performances – the cultural politics launched by these towns directly involves, on the one hand, the University of Lecce, the capital city of Salento, and on the other,

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6 Georges Lapassade, the French anthropologist, for example, writes the preface to Chiriatti’s book, while Paolo Pellegrino, a philosopher from Lecce’s University, does so for De Giorgi (Lapassade 1995; Pellegrino 1999). It is interesting to observe this involvement of intellectuals in the production of neo-tarantism. It should be observed in Gramscian terms (Gramsci 1996) as a connivance in the production of “local culture”, as a sort of “academic and popular partnering” (Downey and Rogers 1995); see also Appadurai 1996; Herzfeld 1997, Palumbo 1997.
local folklore groups and local historians of Salentine popular culture. In the
same period, and alongside the consortium, a publishing house was estab-
lished in Nardò, specialising in texts on tarantism, and, in addition, an asso-
ciation of experts, ethnomusicologists, historians of the theatre, and anthro-
pologists dedicated to an “Institute” to the memory of de Martino’s ethno-
musicologist, Diego Carpitella. This Institute, which at the moment has no
official seat, promoted the festival together with the consortium, the Prov-
ince and the University of Lecce. The festival was held at Melpignano, and
was directed by two professors: Maurizio Agamennone and Gianfranco
Salvatore, teaching Ethnomusicology and History of popular music at the
University of Lecce.

The division of labour in the reconstruction of the Salentine tradition
gives rise to various conflicts which emerge in the design and realisation of a
large annual festival named – with the consent of the above-mentioned
subjects – *Night of the Taranta*. A complex debate explodes around the
*Night of the Taranta*; here, our interest is in understanding, apart from its
economic and political causes, the forms in which the conflict is represented.
And it turns out that the conflict is represented through a discussion about
the conservation of traditions, which pits those who wish to define the phi-
lological purity of tarantism against those whose objective is to achieve an
aesthetic re-evaluation of the phenomenon. These opposing viewpoints cut
cross the established division between groups of local culture specialists
and groups of academics, and, involve all the structures and institutions
concerned with the management of local cultural heritage.

Public statements against the event are made, for example, by Luigi
Santoro, professor of Theatre History at the University of Lecce, in an article
titled *Stop These Fake Events* (Santoro 1999), and also by several folklore
groups excluded by the organisers, including one directed by Luigi Chiriatti.
In reality, this philological dispute hides an economic conflict: part of what
is at stake is local government access to and management of large financial
contributions from the European Community for cultural programmes which
promote interregional relationships between Apulia, Greece, and the Balk-
ans. And so a political conflict begins to emerge around the division of
labour in the cultural revitalisation process, concerning an entitlement to the
right of celebration, the right to be present and to speak, and the right to sing
“ritual” and “traditional” songs (see Di Mitri 1998, Petrachi 1998; Santoro
1999).

The first signs of conflict appeared when the two ethnomusicologists,
who are the directors of the event, decided to open it to outside artistic

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7 On the relationship between ritual, culture, music and property rights see Harrison 1992; Brown 1998; Scherzinger 1999.
directors, nationally and internationally known musicians, experts of that “ethnic” music which has had so much success in the global market of reinvented traditions, or other national musicians who have already had success in the political-folklore revivals of the 1970s and who are now trying to ride the wave back into the music market. Those who are unable to manage these relationships either pull out of the programme and work up a rhetoric of purity, or are expelled from the programme because of their aversion to “contamination.”

Interviewed in 1999, Lamberto Probo, a drum-player, member of one of the most famous local musical groups, Officina Zoè which decided not to participate in the festival, asked:

Why do we always have to hand things over to professors and musicians who come from other parts of Italy? Not having ever lived around here, what can they possibly know about the “pizzica taranta?” You have an in-depth knowledge of these phenomena. That’s why we’ve decided not to participate, because we’re fed up with the fact that the money always ends up going to the same “experts” and professors of music, and the human resources residing in our local communities are called in only after everything has been decided (Anonymous 1999).

So these artists refuse to participate in the reinvention of tarantism, justifying their decision in terms of the prestige of that sector of the scientific community most loyal to de Martino. Or else they return to the evocation of the pre-de Martinian model of tarantism as a disease, stressing the connection between tarantism and suffering, in order to deny its current transformation into a cultural good to be sold on the national and international market, Roberto Licci, leader of Ghetonia, another musical group, states:

The tecno-pizzica? No, no thanks, I’m not interested. I’ll never listen to that. We don’t want to be involved in an event designed for tourists, the only purpose of which is to spend public money. It’s time to put an end to this kind of speculation. Tarantism is a serious thing, it’s connected with sickness and it shouldn’t be sold in the piazza like some commercial product (Anonymous, 1999).

On the other hand, Pietro Fumarola, sociologist from the University of Lecce, states in 1999 that this kind of transformation should be supported because:

The tecno-pizzica better represents the new aesthetic of the pizzica and its penetration into young people’s social environments that are quite distant from the traditional culture of Salento, but which dictate the tastes, cultural strategies, and consumption of the mass of young people.
Luigi Santoro, already engaged in a dispute with other academics over the re-interpretation of tarantism, identifies three alternative forms of discourse: past (de Martinian), present (the contemporary celebrations) and future (to be designed).

There are at least three ways of talking about tarantism: to reconstruct what it was and in what forms it was expressed; to describe what it is and in what forms it is expressed; to imagine what it could be and in what forms we would like it to be expressed in the future (Santoro 1999).

But this proposal for a tarantism of the future would require, in his opinion, a preliminary condition:

All the cultural and musical groups have to stop associating themselves with tarantism and eliminate the pizzica from their repertory. A kind of moratorium on tarantism, since “we have to admit that playing the pizzica now is like playing a funeral march without the corpse (...) all of this is the cultural broth of a ruling class without culture, incapable of reading the past or designing the future, dedicated only to dissipating scarce resources in order to go skating on television in the company of midgets and dancing girls, marionettes, and pied pipers on the take. The pizzica and the taranta are our last reserve of originality and creativity which we can neither sell nor give away. We can only offer to those who feel the need, the conditions for creating a great invention: an area, an event, time and spaces within which to gather up our solitude and accompany our bodies to lie between the abyss of nonsense and the fragile and momentary spider webs of sense, between formless chaos and metaphorical order, between the folds of the I and the fractures of the we. An invention capable of offering a place even to the displaced Karl of Kafka’s Amerika, who, like all of today’s displaced people, ‘had the chance to apply for a job that did not make him feel ashamed, on the contrary, for which he could even have been invited publicly to apply. And the promise that he would be accepted could also have been made publicly.’ In the meantime, the opportune thing to do is to cancel all the events and strike all the sets, take off the masks, and tear up the costumes, but above all to silence the pizziche and bury the tarante” (Santoro 1999).

But the vice-mayor and cultural affairs commissioner of Melpignano (host city to the night of the taranta) Sergio Blasi, founding member of the Diego Carpitella Institute who has put his name on the event together with other historical anthropologists and musicologists, has no intention of cancelling it. He declares:

The Night of the Taranta is not a pre-wrapped package, but an original idea born and developed in the territory of Salento, which has succeeded in moving beyond the narrow confines of the province
and achieving what by now can be called international resonance. Underlying the night there is a clear policy of cultural development aimed at giving visibility to Salento and thus to export it as the home of an important indigenous culture. What we have here is a definitive consecration of the patrimonialisation of tarantism. But, by way of drawing a provisional conclusion, it must be said that, even on the inside of this broad range of voices and activities, this politics of patrimony is not always able to retain control over the very spaces that it creates. Various actors, who live and participate in the practices activated by this programme of revitalisation, tend at times to elaborate it and re-shape it, as the source of an alternative discourse that conceives itself, or that represents itself, as radically autonomous and that asserts the impossibility of reducing the lived experience of a taranta music concert or rave party to either a few anthropological notions or the intent to create a cultural commodity. In the words of Damian, a disc jockey:

I repudiate those who play the role of the trendy anthropologist, pulling out all kinds of analytical hooks which have absolutely nothing to do with this kind of phenomenon. I repudiate those small time, semi-trendy journalists who, although they still haven’t even learned the terminology, try to exploit situations like this to build their CVs.

This affirmation by the young DJ, defending his own autonomy with respect to outside interpretations, can certainly be shared by all those who subscribe to a critical anthropology which is also capable of reflecting on itself and its own involvement in the realities which it studies. In the final analysis, this must mean an anthropology which is aware of its own “aptitude” for complicity with local politico-cultural processes of imagining the past and reinventing identity.

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