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Vol

**CEREMONIAL DANCES**  
*in SICILY*

**Pino Biondo**

# CEREMONIAL DANCES *in SICILY*

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*Translation:* Rosario Sapienza

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## Introduction

In the last thirty years, scholars' attention towards the heritage of Sicilian ethnomusicology grew to a great extent thanks to the discovery of styles and repertoires of great interest. There is still poor interest in Sicilian ethno-dance repertoire, and the rare sources show considerable gaps regarding the structural and morphological descriptions together with dancing, contextual data. In fact, few scholars have noticed the specific issues of traditional folk dances. This lack of interest is mainly due to the poor attention that scholars, belonging to the hegemonic classes, have paid to the dances of low classes. In addition to this, but not less important, the scarce employment of methods and techniques that should allow a careful analysis of the processing and morphological description of theatrical dances played a significant role. Last but not least is the opposition of the Church to those dances, considered to be immoral and vulgar, that is to say something one has to get rid of. Due to the fact that the traditions related to the farming world are gradually disappearing, a good portion of that repertoire, especially in some areas of Sicily, has been poorly documented. The research on music and ballroom dances, which I started in 1990 and is still in progress, aims at raising awareness of various forms of ceremonial dances, without neglecting their connections to other symbolic rituals.

The analysis conducted on ceremonial dances and their documentations of religious music, has made possible to highlight and classify various types of dances in Sicily found in specific geographical areas and marked by distinctive features. Classifying them through an analysis of homogeneous elements is what has been taken into consideration. We have grouped them into categories of dances that share the same names, types of training and figuration, also considering the type of subdivision of choreographic phrasing, gestures, and so on. It has been possible to highlight the meaningful tradition of making the statues of the Saints dance and run, which is widely known and practiced throughout Sicily. The dances can be synthesized in the following types:

The "dance of Candelmas", (people perform dances with wooden structures called "Candelore", widespread in the province of Catania);

The "dance of the Giants", made with big freaking puppets, spread in some municipalities of the province of Enna, Caltanissetta, Catania, Messina;

The "dance of the Saints", performed by men carrying 'fercoli' (religious chariots) bearing the Simulacra or relics of Saints, widespread all over the Sicilian provinces;

The "free dances", performed in religious contexts (such as those who are performed in Sorrentini, Licata, Misterbianco, based on figures in a circle or spiral, with or without musical accompaniment);

The dances performed by people with vegetal elements (branches, flowers, etc.).

Common characteristics of festival rituals can be found in various Sicilian towns, since many of them are within easy reach. This has favoured migration flows between one town to another. Neighbouring communities are often related; they establish links and interchanges at different levels determining similar social economic, religious, cultural structures.

Many festivities, especially in honour of the Patron Saint, have undergone calendar changing through the time: some of them have been replicated, others shifted over few months. The transfer of religious ceremonial occasions from autumn, winter and spring to summer is mainly due to allow migrants to participate in the Festival of their own country, and for economic and affective reasons (see affective. I. E. Buttitta, 2002 – 172).

The dancing type, mentioned above, includes a large number of dances still alive throughout Sicily. I will briefly describe some of the most representative examples.

## Method and research materials

Research is still on-going, it is conducted with the ethnographic method, which consists in observing a social reality, where the observer himself is part of. Ceremonial dances, described and analyzed in this book, are taken from repeated video shoots and investigations on the field, carried out over a period of twenty years. The research is usually preceded by the reading, study and considerations of scientific publications and documentations that can give information about the object of study. In fact, it is necessary to know the crucial moments of ceremonial events to be able to shoot a video, to record an audio track, and to collect photos in extreme conditions, in which the protagonists of rituals often move quickly in the darkness. So it is useful to go back to the same places, on the same conditions to have a satisfactory experience. During the research, data, notes, objects and any other document considered as helpful for the anthropological study of cultural contexts are collected in diaries. The dances and the interviews to interviewees are audio and video recorded as well as photographed. From 1990 to 1995 analogue devices have been used to pass later on to digital. After that, from a theoretical elaboration, we have shifted to the corpus of scientific publications.

### 1. THE DANCE OF CANDELORE (CANDELMAS)

Measurements: 5/10/2008 (Edmonton); 12/3/2009 (Paternò); 1/31/2010 – 2/5/2012 (Catania).

Video Recordings: Biondo Giuseppe.

For the Catholic Church, the Candlemas is the feast of the purification of Mary, celebrated on 2nd February. The festivity falls forty days after Christmas, which is the time required by the Jewish law for the purification of a new mother after the birth of a male, and commemorates the presentation of Jesus in the temple (cfr. Luke, 39: 2-22).

However, the origins of Candlemas have far distant roots in time. Between 454 and 447 BC, Herodotus described the frequent processions observed in Egypt, during which faithfuls carried high columns lit by wax fires burning at the top (Herodotus, histories II, 47-508). Fire means light and life, although its symbolism is polyvalent and closely associated with the archaic cult of the Sun. The fire is an element, which appears in the religious ceremonial calendar in a period that goes from winter solstice to summer solstice. Custom is still in use; processions with torches or candelore, lighting of bonfire, burning of puppets with various functions, such as cleansing and apotropaic, or lighting the processional route, reminding the martyrdom of the Saints, they are all connected with the rituals that involve jumps and dances around bonfires, food consumption to symbolize the delicate and important moments of the passage of the seasonal cycles of the year: from darkness to light, from the death of nature to its new life. The votive offering of the wax can be found in many Sicilian religious rites. During the Swabian domination, the Kings lit a candle to the Madonna dell'Assunta in Trapani. King Ludwig, in Catania, in 1315 imposed on workers to offer candles to the Virgin Mary, to whom he built an altar in the Cathedral. In 1435, King Alfonso disposed the lighting of candles to Sant'Agata the patroness saint of the city. Over the centuries, the votive candles became increasingly huge and decorated, up to a point of getting rid of the candle itself, which was later replaced by a Baroque or Rococo wooden structure, richly decorated and gilded. The obligation of candelore, widely spread throughout the province of Catania, is still present in 10 municipalities: Catania, Acireale, Aci Platani, Aci Acì Sant'Antonio, Gravina di Catania, Misterbianco, Motta Sant'Anastasia, Paternò, Pedara, Trecastagni. The analysis conducted on filmic documents has made it possible to clarify the elements that distinguish the repertoire of dances, called annacate (swingings), still in use in Catania and its hinterland. From systematic observations and comparisons of all the real contexts of Candelore, examined in religious ceremonials, there are many elements in common: the names of their bearers, their disposal, used tools, clothing, training, types of figuration, choreographic gesture and used phrasings in annacate.



## 1.1 Formation and Disposal of the bearers

The team of the faithfuls who carry the candelore, composed of eight people, is called *chiumma* or *chiumma* which means the crew. Once they were called ‘*vastasi*’, since they were selected among dockers. The eight porters are placed, on the Candlemas procession, two in front and two in the back, they carry their wooden crosspieces called in slang *stanghi*, placed at the nape of the porters wearing a headdress that falls on their shoulders, called *vaddedda*. It is made of robust and durable canvas and has a hook made from pieces of canvas tent, wet and wrapped, where the *stanga* runs not to slip behind so that to cushion the weight of heavy Candlemas; in order to prevent the *vaddedda* from slipping away, the four bearers keep their hands on their heads to hold it. Positioned in the center, respectively one in front and one behind, two porters carry the weight by a leather strap (*curria*), about 10 cm wide. Anchored to the Candlemas and kept on their shoulders, they do not wear the *vaddedda*: the man who stands forward is called ‘*curria*’ or head Chief ‘*chiumm’a*’, who, besides being a bearer, is also responsible for directing the *chiumma* (crew). Two other porters are positioned on the sides of the Candlemas, respectively, one on the right and one on the left. They do not wear any *vaddedda*; they support and balance the candelore. In case of very heavy candelore, porters are twelve, just like in the one of the bakers (*panittera*) in Catania, on the occasion of the feast of St. Agatha, or ten, as in the Candlemas “the wax *Vigneri*” of Misterbianco. The arrangement of *chiumma*, compared to the previous one consists of two porters on the front and two behind who carry the ‘*stanghi*’. The lighter Candlemas in Catania is the one of Monsignor Ventimiglia and is carried with belts by four porters, one in the front, one back and two at the sides.

## 1.2 Dancing Figurations / Coreography

Analyzing the dancing candelore in their figurations, it has been verified that, in the area of Catania, a shared idea of *annacata* (swinging movements) lives together with a kind of movement in the space, corresponding to a real practice, which can be synthesized as follows: “*fare i facci*” (to pay homage) is a sequence of steps performed in a linear path forward and then backward, with an initial respectful greeting addressed to the gifter during the begging, that is to say the ecclesiastical or political authority, the shrine, the sacred votive statue, a place of public relevance. The initial and final greeting can be performed through a small bow, or by waving or nodding the head.

*Balilla*, is a sequence of steps performed in a linear path, but sideways left and right, with initial, half-bowed position and hardly splayed legs to balance the load. On the initial sign, usually through a nodding from the “*capucurria*” that gives the direction to the moving, the bearers all together perform a sequence of side-steps: they step half on the right by moving the right leg first followed by the left one; on the *capucurria* wave, a number of these steps, are repeated to the left.

“*Fari i sagghiati*” is a sequence of rhythmic steps on a regular schedule from one to the other side of the path. The porters, sometimes, in order to show their abilities, give the “*candelora*” a quaky movement, which is the result of the bending and relaxing of the legs, performed with the aid of the shoulders that give a light push upwards.

“*Attorna*” (also *firriòlu*, *atturniàri* or rotate), i.e. giving the *candelora* a slight rotation, clockwise and counter clock wise, around its own axis, first in one direction and then to the other. From the base position, the three porters, who are in front, perform in two different steps, starting with the right leg with a small step right side shifting their own weight on it; then the left will be joined to the right, while the right side bearer takes a small step back with right leg, to join the left. The bearers, who stand behind, perform the same steps starting with the left leg, while the bearer on the left side, who is the central point of rotation, performs a short step forward with his left leg to join the right. The Group of porters perform a series of steps together, to complete a full lap around the central axis of the Candlemas; they are first clockwise and, after a short break, counter clock wise.

Bell or “*cannila*” (the Bell or candle) gives the Candlemas, on the spot, a swinging movement on the front side, similar to that of a bell. From the base position, the porters, who carry the staves, stand still, while the head “*curia*” and the central rear give a swinging movement by the staves that hold in their hands, and assisted, at the same time, by the twos on the sides, who control the right inclination. The steps are performed together with a light springing of the knees followed by a short half-bending and later a relaxing position. In some cases, they accentuate the movement and, in relaxing the legs, they almost lift on their forefeet with a boost upward. The slight twisting movement around the axes, clockwise and counter clockwise, is given by the two front belt bearers, through the side wood axis with the help of the side porters, in order to give the Candlemas a spring-loaded gripper or swinging movement called “*annacata*”. The commands are given by the leader Chief “*chiumma curia*”, through a wave, a nod (by bending his head, the chief orders the bearers to put the *candelora* down; by lifting his head, the chief orders the bearers to hoist the *candelora*), and in religious silence, only with a glance or nod, as it is with the Candlemas of Ortolani *capucurria* in Paternò. However, the ordinary way to hoist or put down the Candlemas is to strike with the hands the staves by causing vibrations perceived by the other porters. The music by small group of pipes bands, playing songs from different repertoires, accompanying the *candelora*, plays a crucial role: from the “*reportori marcette*”, the songs of the sixties and seventies, revisited for modern instruments like trumpets, saxophones, clarinet, and percussions drums, bass drums are performed.

The *Candelore* begin dancing in the neighbourhoods; that usually takes place at least 10 days before the Festival, and in some cases, during the celebration days. The *candelore* are accompanied by the promoters, who organize everything around the *candelore*, such as the pipe band, and the faithful in procession, al groups. They follow different itineraries by going to different places according to the guild the *candelore* is symbol of. The fishmonger *candelora* goes to the fish market, the greengrocer’s goes to the vegetable market, the baker’s to bakers etc... The *candelore* representing certain neighbourhoods go around those places. In all cases, after the Candlemas, warmly applauded by bystanders, money cash and an abundant refreshment are offered as a contribution, followed by fireworks.

## 2. DANCE OF THE SAINTS

In this section deals with the *fercoli* (chariots) carried on shoulder by the faithful, whose performance modes are characterized by an intense activity, which is unconventional and liberating (races, repeated lifting and lowering of the *fercolo*, strong fluctuations, , Vortex tours, etc.) and supported by music band, screams and applause, deafening shots crackers, donation of food, a sequence of actions. All of that can be defined as a ritual orgy, intended as “excess, abundance, cancellation of rules and prohibitions of daily living” (cit. F. Giallombardo, 1999: 108).

### 2.1 The *rrigattiate* in Agrigento

Calamònici, Festivities of St Vincent Ferreri, St Anna, St Joseph.  
(Detection: 8/7/2009 – 4/18/2012, discoverer: Biondo Giuseppe)

But how can the survival of “*rrigattiate*” be explained in Agrigento? How can dancing, ceremonial performances of *fercoli*, which see in a ritual competition two factions of young devotees, belonging to confraternities or quarters of a specific community take place? How can that sort of competition, showing off strength and skill in bringing the Simulacra of the Saints, go on? The Church has tried repeatedly to prevent the “orgiastic” ostentations performed during religious ceremonies, but in the end, though with compromises and limitations, had to accept them in public cults due to the insistence of the community who strongly feels the necessity and the need to establish, maintain and transmit those forms of practical life, ethics and aesthetics, which are congenial and essential, while, at the same time renew or wipe out those who have died or are out of date.

The origin of the term *rrigattiate*, according to Vincenzo Vacante, is linked to the spoken Latin word



recapture and then “Chase to catch, and catch again “, and can be the equivalent of the terms “competition” and “compete.”

In the province of Agrigento, the *rigattiat*, also called *riattiat*, are present in the festive calendar of Calamònci and three other neighbouring towns: Burgio, Villafranca Sicula — Lucca Sicula. In Calamònci the feast of the Patron Saint, san Vincenzo Ferreri, takes place in three days of the first week of August: Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Until 1974, it took place on the second Sunday of May. In Burgio, the rite of *rifesi rigattiate* takes place on Easter Sunday from the afternoon until midnight with Simulacra of san Vito and san Luca who, in turn, go round the streets of the country jolting to the rhythm of music. The same ritual takes place in Villafranca Sicula and in the late evening in Lucca Sicula: in these towns, like Calamònci, the Simulacra of St. John the Baptist and St. Michael the Archangel are reasons for altercations among the faithful. However, in these towns, as in Calamònci and anywhere else in the province of Agrigento, during Easter, the figure of St. Michael is crucial to the ritual meeting of Simulacra of the risen Christ and of the Virgin Mary. The *rigattiate* are repeated later in Villafranca on the first Sunday of August, during the feast of the Madonna del Mirto, whose overall ritual is very similar to the feast of Calamònci. The *rigattiate* have been existing since the early fifties of the last century, nearby Caltabellotta, where fights among the faithful of the towns were caused by the Simulacra of Saint Michele the Archangel and Saint Sebastian.

The ballade of San Michele, in the form of *rigattiat*, is also found in Sant’Anna, a division of Caltabellotta; in addition, this ritual is repeated twice a year for the feast of the Holy Cross and for the bonfire of St. Joseph. (See Vacante, 1999: Vincenzo 55-65)

The *rigattiat*, like the *candelore*, exemplify organized rituals through the movement in a dancing-like expression. From a systematic observation and comparison of the *rigattiat* examined in the Royal ceremonial of Calamònci and neighbouring towns previously mentioned, a lot of homogeneous elements among them are pointed out. The bearers take the name from the Saints who are devotees: *sammichilara* devotees of Saint Michael and *sanguannara* of Saint John, in the villages of Calamònci, Villafranca Sicula and Lucca Sicula. In contrast, in Burgio are named *santuvitara* and *santulucara* devotees of St. Vitus the former and St. Luke’s the latter. The *fercoli* (chariots) are adorned with flowers and evergreen foliage, above all bay leaf; the competition between the two factions is expressed through dancing actions, floral ornament of the Simulacra, but also through the ovations of the faithful in favour of their Saint and the mocking cries addressed to their opponents. The culmination and decisive challenge between the two confraternities are the Fireworks that conclude the Festival. The bearers usually wear simple coloured shirts: a group wears the red one, the other a white or a blue one. Another distinctive feature of the two factions, essential for the performance of *rigattiate*, is represented by melodies the two pipe bands perform continuously. They are expressively composed for the saints and are named after the Saint they play for during the way: *sammichilata* (St Michael’s march), *sanguannata* (St John’s March), *santalucara* (St Luke’s March), *santavitara* (St Vitus’s March). The music is gradually performed at a faster pace. All children and young people who follow their Simulacra are caught by those melodies, they hold their hands, walk arm in arm, or with tied arms behind their back and perform liberating movements (races, skips and continuous standing jumps).

## 2.2 Dancing Figurations / Coreography

Analysing the dancing patterns of *rigattiate* has let the possibility to verify that a shared technique of how to move the *fercolo* (chariot) exists in Agrigento.

The most challenging steps, where high strength, resistance and skill are required, are carried out by the carriers into preconcerted, wider spaces: in Burgio near Umberto square; Calamònci, in Via Garibaldi at the crossing between Via Garibaldi and Via Crispi; in Lucca Sicula, in Vittorio Emanuele square; in Villafranca, in Via Vittorio Emanuele.

The performances of *rigattiate*, described below, are deduced from direct observation as well as from the vision of video recording, made by one of my collaborators, Giuseppe Pollari, and myself

in 2008-2012.

They may be summarized as follows:

1) Carriers perform a sequence of rhythmical and fast steps in a linear path, while holding the *fercolo* on their shoulders.

2) In order to show more skill, they make a shaking movement determined by partly folding and subsequent distension of their legs. The same vibrating movement is imprinted to the *fercolo*, while it is moved to the left and to the right on the transversal axis, or around its longitudinal axis.

3) Carriers raise the *fercolo* with their hands, lower it quickly by grazing the soil, cushioning the fall down by a bending of their arms and the folding of their legs; from this position, with synchronistic and symmetrical movement, they raise the *fercolo* and they pull it down several times.

4) Changing grip: carriers hold up the beams of the *fercolo* with their arms and forearms by running a couple of laps around the longitudinal axis of the *fercolo* clockwise. Carriers are placed under the beams in head-on lines, so, during the clockwise rotation, those who govern the right beam proceed backwards and vice versa in anticlockwise rotation. Later, they perform a third rotation in the same direction and uplift the *fercolo*. With the same grip, they make movements to the right or to the left on the cross axis of the *fercolo*.

5) With their hands rise up, they keep the *fercolo* as long as possible in movement or stationary.

6) They bounce off the *fercolo* by keeping the beams with their hands and forearms.

7) During the procession, they give thanks to the people who offer thirst quenchers or *oboli* to the Saint; the latter can only be sent to the Sanctuary. The carriers made a bow by bending the *fercolo* forward, by lowering the front beams and uplifting the back ones.

8) The way of moving the *fercolo*, alternatively on the frontal and sagittal plane, I have noticed only in St Anna (Caltabellotta). The carriers, with semi folded legs and the bust bending forward, hold the ranks in their hands, and give them a gentle rocking (*annacata*), in anterior, posterior and lateral directions, as if they wanted gently to rock San Michele Arcangelo at the rhythm of a traditional waltz.

## 3. FREE DANCES IN RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS

“St. Gregory from Nazianzen wrote of sacred dances that numerous communities used to perform, with great enthusiasm, on sacred places of martyrdom to honour them. This custom of dancing in sacred places of martyrdom and in the basilicas is also attested by a homily, held in a Church of the East around 370 AD, to celebrate the birth of St Polieutto. Undoubtedly, this is a very valuable testimony, because it reveals the practice was very common and deep-rooted” [Renato Torniai, 1951 : 230].

Currently, in Sicily, there are a few documents related to sacred, free dances performed on religious rituals. Two examples of para-liturgical dance have been detected in Misterbianco and Sorrentini during religious festivals.

## 4. DANCES WITH BOUGHS AND FLOWERS

The plant elements in Sicilian religious ceremonies are widespread. On the contrary, it is rare to see what happens in San Marco D’Alunzio (in the province of Messina): faithful youngsters dancing in a circle, bearing boughs, accompanied by marches and danceable songs performed by the pipe band.

## 5. The DANCE of the GIANTS

The Giants - also called *Santoni* (Santuni) or *Sanpaoloni* (Sampauluna) are giant statues made of wickerwork, wood and papier-mâché - and the Simulacra of the Apostles, at the time of the encounter between Christ and the Our Lady of Sorrow, constitute the main attraction of Easter Sunday in some





religious ceremonial processions of South-Central Sicily. The processional, votive Giants, animated in many local festivals in Western Europe and Latin America, also evoke, out of context, popular characters, animals, mythological figures such as figures of Giants-warriors, who escorted the Madonna in her ceremonial moving to Messina for the feast of the Assumption day (August 15<sup>th</sup>) (U Giganti e a Gigantissa) and in Mistretta (Gesanti) for the feast of Our Lady of light (6-7-8 September). Symbolically the Giants and giantesses, spectacular protagonists in organized parades during some religious celebrations, are the custodians of the Christian faith, but at the same time, these impressive figures are the guarantee of a return to order in the tolerated confusion of the feast. Their appearance during the Easter procession, or the feast of Our Lady of light in Mistretta, means the rebirth of life, the triumph of light over darkness and death, the triumph of restored order, almost like in contrast with giant Carnival figures representing the collective chaos. The Christian religion has been able to recover the primordial myth of the Giants through the rite and feast by changing its course from Paganism to Christianity, by respecting the fun-enjoyable peculiarity, by adding the historical time sanctified by the incarnation of the son of God and the Virgin Mary.

## 5.2 Mitia and Cronos dance

Detection: 9/7/2009, Mistretta (ME) – feast of Our Lady of light

The feast of our Lady of light is celebrated every year in Mistretta for three consecutive days on 6-7-8 September. It is characterized by the presence of a pair of Giants (Gesanti), depicting a man and a woman dressed as warriors named Kronos and Mytia respectively, in guide of the simulacrum depicting St. Anne with the Virgin baby in her arms. The two giants, three metres high, weighing 75 kg. each one, have only a bust, and are fibreglass; inside there is a frame in which a man is placed, the bearer, who alternates along the way with six other experts companions to lighten the hard fatigue. Cronos and Mytia wear a warrior armour, a helmet, a shield in their left hand, moreover, the first one holds a sword in the right hand, while the giantess has, in her hand flowers, propitiatory symbols. On 6 and 7 September the giants go around the streets accompanied by marching band for questing that will serve to manage the costs of the event. They dance at different rhythms: Waltz, polka, mazurka, tarantella, samba and cheerful marches such as bersaglieri (Flic floc). On 8<sup>th</sup> of September, in the evening, the procession starts up along a country road that leads to the Church of the cemetery. Here a big bonfire is made. The statue of the Madonna enters into the Church to be replaced in its place and the giants, in front of the Church, dance for the last time, and finally they retire between the applause of bystanders.

### *Description of the choreography*

During the processional parade, the giants do not perform any dances, but they escort the statue of St. Anne who holds in her arms the little Madonna. Choreographies the bearers perform with the Giants are simple, but they require strength and balance. On 7 September, at 12.00 o'clock in the square in front of the Mother church, to celebrate the arrival of the Madonna, at the rhythm of bersagliera performed by the local band, the two giants execute the following choreographies: a circle with running steps, forward, Mytia, chased by Cronos; then, facing each other, three feet away, they go round in circles on themselves, without any interruption; at a dance music sound, the two giants, with rhythmic steps, approach head-on and then depart going backwards, for two, three times. Then they perform a whirl on themselves. To the rhythm of a tarantella, the two giants, arranged facing each other, perform lateral movements clockwise and counter clockwise; this movement is interrupted by turns executed on the spot. The same motion dance is performed to the rhythm of another traditional Mistretta tarantella. Always in a frontal position, they repeat the three choreographies at a rhythm of mazurka and other dance music. The simple choreographies are repeated the following evening in front of the Church of the cemetery.

The ritual Dance follows the legend of the Giants from Messina: the Moor Griffin who falls in love with the islander and tries to conquer Mata. It is a real courtship dance: initially the woman is chased, then approached, in the end she returns his affection. The two, by means of a series of spectacular rounds, approach more and more, until they almost embrace. It is a real triumph of love described through this propitiatory dance of fertility.

## 6. THE DANCE OF THE ZOOMORPHIC PUPPETS AND WILD MAN

It is still a living tradition in Sicily, on religious festivities, the performance of zoomorphic puppets, such as camels, horses or donkeys, in a 'fireworks dance of purifying fire'. This practice continues to survive in many villages in the province of Messina: Villaggio Bordonaro "Pagghiaru u - u Cavaduzzu and omu sabbaggiu", on Epiphany day; St. Stephen Middle, "u camiddu and omu sabbaggiu" on the feast of St. Anthony Abbot, Sunday after 17 January; Molino, a small agricultural and pastoral village, although not regularly, a performance of "u camiddu" is given on occasion of the feast of the patron saint Madonna della Scala (the first Sunday after August 2nd); Torre Faro, on occasion of the religious festivity dedicated to Our Lady of the Letter, August 21st; Ali Superiore, "U sciccareddu e omu sabbaggiu" performance, on occasion of the the feast of Santa Maria del Bosco, second Sunday in September; Gallodoro, "u sceccu pacciu" performance on occasion of the feast of St. Rocco, August 16th; Nizza di Sicilia, "u sciccareddu", on occasion of the feast of the Immaculate Conception; San Filippo del Mela "u sceccu pacciu", on occasion of the feast of the patron saint Our Lady of Mount Carmel, July 16th and in Villaggio Pace, on occasion of feast of the patron saint Our Lady of Grace; in the neighborhoods Ringo and Grotte in Messina, and until a few years ago in Santa Margherita (feast of Saint Sebastian) and Mili San Marco a performance of "u camiddu and omu sabbaggiu" is given during the celebrations of the patron Saint St Mark, on the second Sunday of August, and even before the last Sunday in May. Other puppets depicting a camel and a snake, not decorated with fireworks, perform in religious festivals, respectively in Casalvecchio Siculo (Me) and Butera (CI).

The pantomime is made between two contenders: u Camiddu, a camel, more similar to a horse rather than a camel, and the Omu Sabbaggiu, the fierce man. They simulate a fight by moving at the rhythm of a traditional tarantella played by the band. In other cases, see San Filippo del Mela, a small orchestra with instruments like the accordion, reed flute, tambourine performs the music. The dispute in dance refers to the victory of Count Roger de Hauteville against the Saracens and the episode according to which he made his triumphal entry into Messina on the back of a camel. U camiddu (the camel) represents the animal tamed by the count, while the omu sabbaggiu (fierce man) represents the Saracen; the former wears an armour made with strips of aluminum (a few years ago they were made of cane) and the latter wears an armor, a helmet with sunburst, spear and shield, also in aluminum. Frames are expertly trimmed with Roman candles, sparklers, flares and small firecrackers that are started and explode from the start of the fight-dance. Both contenders also wear headgear and fireproof clothing.

In Ali Superiore, the omu sabbaggiu is represented by a man with a colorful cylindrical hat and in his left hand a multicolored umbrella, which is used to defend from fires issued by "sciccareddu", and in the right a tool in the form of rake, whose ends pyrotechnic elements are positioned.

### 6.0 Description of the Coreographies

The dances - performed by puppets depicting horses, fierce men, donkeys, camels - are examples of rituals accompanied by a series of simple steps recalling an idea of dance. By observing and comparing the dances in real contexts, that is to say religious ceremonials in the town of Santo Stefano Medio and nearby areas, several homogeneous elements among them can be highlighted and summarized as follows: they take place at the end of the religious festivity and generally on the parvis. The first performing character is the omu sabbaggiu (the fierce man). From 2002 onwards, following the ser-

vice created by RAI TV in Santo Stefano Medio, four more characters, wearing Norman and Saracen costumes, were added in order to create a more dramatic effect. They wear jumpsuits elsewhere. The fierce man tries to simulate a sort of aggression towards the audience by means of fake weapons. The left side of the parvis is left for the rival. U camiddu (a camel) with two other assistants, in Norman costumes, make their entrance greeted by a warm applause of the audience, and place in front of the rival. The band starts to play. The pyrotechnists spark off the fuses of the fireworks, which are placed on the costumes of the two contenders. They move to the rhythm of a tarantella. Small steps run back and forth. Jumped steps run at the sides in the attempt of attacking or avoiding an attack in order to escape the explosion of firecrackers. In addition to performing linear and rotational steps around themselves or the opponent, both characters perform horizontally-pivoted movements with the pelvis, which recall the sexual act, or attention those fiery torches placed to the front or rear of the pelvis, especially, on the fierce man.

These obscene gestures that recall the act of peeing or farting, cause fun among the bystanders, to the point that they end up suggesting the comic movements to the two contenders: a syringe! A move! In the end, u camiddu prevails on the fierce man. As a sign of defeat, one of the characters falls on the parvis, apparently dead, in order to recall what Count Roger did to prevail on the Saracen warrior. On January 20th 2013, the fierce man and the camel entered the scene without the two assistants in Santo Stefano Medio.

## 7. CEREMONIAL DANCES AT CARNIVAL

In midwinter, when the earth rests and rural communities spend their time at home, waiting for the spring to come, a beneficial invasion of spirits interrupts the monotony of the days, puts the nights on fire and throws into disarray villages. Those are the spirits of the flock and of the forest, the ancestors who return, hidden and sublime forces of dormant Nature. They are frightening, impressive and prodigious beings, represented by masked people during colorful, clamouring and begging processions that involve the entire community. Thus, the long winter of European peasants is interrupted by a series of spontaneous ceremonies, both ancient and seemingly incomprehensible, of which the best known is certainly Carnival: sudden bursts of noise, colour and shared festivity, which hide symbolical rituals very difficult to decipher. The hypothesis of this research has its origins on the fact that the winter masks, shared by Europeans - that is to say Carnival itself together with other events taking place from All Saints to the gates of spring -, may be inspired by a common ceremonial, and may be structured similarly - with characters, actions and situations often identical -, as if to draw from the same ancient liturgy. [John Kezich, 2009 3-4]

“When the Sicilian peasants find a good paid job, they end up committing less than when it comes about organizing religious and secular festivities, without showing regrets. They would never give up to two events: the feast of the patron saint and the feast of Carnival. Despite different from each other, they want to spend them happily with their families” (Solomon S. Marino, *Costumi e Usanze dei Contadini di Sicilia*).

The church has “canonized” the entire calendar by setting the dates of religious cults dedicated to saints, but little intervention was possible to Carnival and May 1st, which remained secular.

The period of Carnival celebrations, formally, refers to the normal “ordering” of time outside of the Advent/Christmas or Lent/Easter seasons, and starts according to local traditions such as Christmas, the Epiphany, the Feast of St. Anthony the Abbot on January 17th, Candlemas on February 2nd. In the Christian calendar, it ends on Mardi Gras before the Lent begins on Ash Wednesday.

Carnival comes from the Latin words *carne vale*, meaning “farewell to the flesh.” Like many Catholic

holidays and seasonal celebrations, it may have its roots in pre-Christian traditions based on the seasons. Once, only Mardi Gras was considered as Carnival day, after which Ash Wednesday followed, prelude to a period of 40 days people should abstain from eating meat. Other scholars state that, the term “carnival” dates back to the thirteenth century, when the use of a special charriot was involved, and due to its grandeur, it was called “*carrus navalis* “. It was a wooden cart on wheels, which was carried around during Christian processions.

The Carnival celebrations are linked to ancient pagan rites, such as the Greek Dionysian (the Anthesteria), the Bacchanalian feasts, Saturnalia, Lupercalia, Cherubs or Isidis Navigium and others (cf. Fatima Giallombardo 2003). They were characterized by masked parades, actions centered on social role inversions, acts of sexual performance propitiatory or purifying rites, animal sacrifices, deafening music, singing and dancing, heavy drinking and good feed. These festivals were celebrated at the beginning of the year, in a period between the winter solstice and the approaching of the spring equinox to mark the transition from winter to spring. It symbolically represented the passage from death to life.

For those who lived in the countryside, Carnival was the closing of an agricultural cycle and the beginning of a period of symbolical renewal, during which chaos replaced the established order. However, once, the festive period was over, a new cycle opened and would have culminated in the next carnival [Universon, De Agostini, 1966: 113].

Temporal rites were held necessary, they fulfilled apotropaic and productive functions: on the one hand, they were meant to ward off any kind of famine related to weather phenomena, pestilence or war, on the other hand, they were aimed at stimulating the regeneration of the earth, so that it would give its best fruits in the new coming cycle.

The same pleasure of love, which goes into the ritual, has the magical sense of fecundity. Jumps, dances and music prepared the spirit to higher joys, knowing that treading on the ground let the Earth be fruitful, so the higher the jumps, the stronger the prayer to the Earth for its generosity. Moreover, temporal rites and ceremonies of purification, in their auspices, required a particular interpretation as well as a mimicking caricature capable of destroying that kind of evil men had previously accumulated. These ceremonies resulted in the neutralisation of demons and their anguished past, evils and sins in man’s life. Then, the destruction of Evil needed a scapegoat ritual. The scapegoat could be a person, an animal, a god, a deified animal, a deified man, a demon or any object, on which impurities were transferred for the deliverance from sin. That is why the grandfather puppet - stuffed with straw, acting as the personification of Carnival-, burned the night of Mardi Gras, symbolically represents the archaic, instinctive and warm blooded man, who is the cause of devastation and chaos. It becomes the scapegoat; the act of offering that is sought for the washing of all sins and collective injustices. From its ashes the subverted, established order and new life would rise again.

It is easy to realize that symbolic acts about the regeneration of time and man, expressed by different ritual forms, are present in other traditional festivals in Sicily. A few significant examples are: the “*Diàvuli*” in Prizzi town (Province of Palermo) and “*Giudei*” of San Fratello town (province of Messina); “*U Camiddu*” in Casalvecchio Siculo, “*U Camiddu e Omu Sabbaggiu*” in Santo Stefano Medio (province of Messina), “*u Sirpintazzu*” in Butera (province of Caltanissetta). The first two rituals are performed at Easter, while the remaining three are staged on the occasion of patronal festivities typical of the Euro-Mediterranean culture.

### The Bear Mask

In some cases, the bear mask works as a scapegoat. It is a pagan mask incorporated into many traditional carnivals. It represents the ferocity, strength, aggressive wildlife and evil to be fought and tamed. In one of his works, Propp stated that, in a permanent transition from hunting to the agricultural phase, the animal can change into the antropomorphic figures of “*Sileni*” or the “*Sylvani*”, the latter a Roman tutelary deity or spirit of woods and fields, with occult knowledge, and dominator of animals. [...] From this moment on, those figures begin to be considered in a new way, that is to say like mon-



sters of the forest, who are scary, dangerous, big, ugly. The farmers always seize them. The forest has been won. Its space has been given to fields and gardens. Sileni are inebriated with wine and become the enemies and destroyers of the fields: they devastate and ruin crops. Sylvani and Sileni are often drunk and imprisoned [...] [Propp V. Ja. 1963, trans. en. Daedalus, Bari]. The bear is hunted, captured and taken to the villages and is left open to the crowd's mockery. It is forced to embody the role of the clown; it jumps, growls, and tries to scare people, who are enjoying its unique performance. The epilogue can range from the killing of the bear to its release, or from its escape to its return to nature.

That description fits perfectly to the rituals of capturing the bear. They can be observed in many places. The bear appears as a mask in the rites of Carnival, or at least in those rituals, which take place at the end of the very cold days of winter. It is spread in a wide area ranging from the French Pyrenees Mountains to Thessaly in Greece. Piercarlo Grimaldi traced a more detailed and almost complete map of the bear mask (and, to a lesser extent, the fierce man) in Piedmont and Valle d'Aosta in 1996. He listed 33 locations, where this ritual is practiced or where memories of it are still kept. However, the bear ritual is also detectable in Apulia region, in Putignano; in Basilicata region, in Teana, whose carnival is characterised by the mask of the bear, carrying the body of Carnival in the woods after his assassination. It is also found in the propitiatory rites of fertility in Jelsi – province of Campobasso, Molise - in winter (the antropomorphic bear or 'u' Ball dell'Urz', the Bear Dance). It is also found in Sardinia, a region with a rich repertoire of animal masks, some of which take us back to the primitive totem groups, and the cult of some animals whose sacredness of their hunting culture was inherited by breeders and farmers later. (See. V. Lanternari, *La Grande Festa*, Milano 1959). In Sicily, the parade of the bear and the princely court can still be seen in Saponara, in the province of Messina.

#### Propitiatory Bear

We examined the mask of the diabolical bear as a symbol of dark and negative forces. However, it recalls the figure of a real bear with its rituals and its seasonal behavior, that proved functional and of great propitiatory importance to the rural world.

According to the scholars Van Gennep and Claude Gaignebet, bears are a regulator of the time linked to the lunar calendar. Their exit from hibernation was considered a vital sign to indicate the end of winter, though it was believed that it was the bear, which caused the coming of the cold season. A similar thought is believed for certain annual rituals, which can favour the advent of certain natural phenomena (in our case the period of the awakening of the trees, the blooming of flowers and the ripening of fruits). It is thanks to these thoughts that climate predictions and favourable or negative wishes could be drawn for the new harvest.

The moon of February marks the end of winter and the coming of spring: the bear, animal influenced by lunar phases, comes out of his couch and announces the coming of the good season. The carnival mask of the bear has therefore been of great importance in the past for the farming culture: it worked as an indicator for the new coming season, thus a remarkable symbol for the community. Furthermore, the Bear mask and the Fierce Man Mask had the same tasks too. They were in charge of welcoming the authorities on short stay in the villages. [Paul Ferruccio Cuniberti, *The Mask Bear* art. 2011]

Once, the bear was a trained animal, which was carried around by a mountaineer/tamer, from village to village, to show its dances in the streets. However this custom disappeared in some countries and, in order to keep the tradition alive, a person in disguise, who did the same pantomime, replaced the bear.

#### 7.5 The contaddanza in ceremonial Carnival

In Sicily, the dance tradition is still an expression of culture that is spread and shared, although to a lesser extent than in the past. The Contraddanza and Schottish dances are attested especially in times of archaic rituals, like at Carnival, or in ritual contexts of a newest form: festivals, celebrations of spring or summer, etc. Even today, some communities reproduce the "quadrille" at Carnival time as introductory or closing ceremonies, (see *The Master of the Field* in Mezzojuso (PA), the *Bear of Saponara* (ME), the *Twelve Months* in Rodi Milici (ME), in *Balestrate* (ME), in *Regalbuto* (EN). In *Cattafi*, the traditional Carnival dances are performed by a groups of young dancers in total respect

for the local tradition, the shared historical memory, both documented or legendary, to strengthen its people's identity.

## Conclusions

Despite the cultural transformations, dance, which seemed to be destined to disappear first in religious rituals, today, is widely attested all over the island in various festive occasions. Dance confirms its vital importance within the life of man because it was and is an integral part of his rituals, prayers, social aggregation, collectivity in civil and religious festivals. «Running and dancing regenerate space and time, evoke the totality without order and orientation, from which the humanly shaped cosmos can draw its mythopoeic strength» (F. Giallombardo, 1999: 107).

«In the traditional dances, the body performanc is a social body, within which the vital energy of each individual is reunited with other energies: human, animals and natural, as it is attested in numerous dances, characterized by the presence of teriomorfe forms and motifs. It is in such implosion of energies that the deep sense of cosmic and social renewal iterates» (Rosario Perricone, 2005: 16). When that comes, it is almost always supported and connected to other ritual forms that transmit live transpositions and allegorical symbols, in order to "respond" to -risk situations, critical moments of individual and social life. Ceremonial rituals in religious festivities, then, are related among them and are not isolated or describable individually; They also must be exposed and explained within the reports in an annual calendar for rituals, because every cultural phenomenon "reaches its fullness only by means of others and together with others"(cf. M. Solimini in 1982: 52 Bogatyřev. -See A. Buttitta 2004) In their interrelationship, in fact, we have described the typological variety of dances, without neglecting the observation of other symbolic items (plants, fire, plenty food, songs, sounds, physical competitions etc.), transition and symbols of cosmic social renewal.

These propitiatory rituals and thanksgivings were perpetuated in archaic society in honour of divine entities considered to be responsible for the regular course of productive processes. The survival of the agro-pastoral community, in fact, depended on the quality and quantity of the crop and animal welfare herds. Today, these ritual symbols reappear in a society, which is transformed, industrialized, far from the most archaic bonds to traditional production cycles, and continue to transmit messages, values and allegorical illustrations in order to respond to new situations of individual and social life. Today, the new risky condition of the Sicilian society is represented by the constant state of unemployment. Overall in the region, we note a considerable increase of employees who have lost their jobs and have increased people in search of employment, more women than men. In pole position, for the collapse of employment, there is the building industry, followed by industry, commerce and agriculture.

The spread of political patronage and the ramping up of mafia associations aggravate the occupational and economic insecurity. Moreover the change processes that have occurred to our society contribute to a state of impatience, bringing deep changes to its structures and its patterns of social organization, causing a state of disorientation, anxiety, and worry. These and other factors linked among them, put at risk the survival of social communities who, feeling threatened their own life, produce self-defence mechanisms and propose the stereotyped behaviours of rites that convey reassuring and tested models to follow; In addition, the rites try to guarantee the maintenance of identity and social group membership. The sociologist Émile Durkheim, in line with the anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski, however, has highlighted the social component of the rites, which allow you to establish or strengthen the ties within the community.

This publication, self-published, is a survey of religious and secular ceremonial dances that wind during the holidays according to the Gregorian Calendar and the cycle of the seasons in Sicily, without neglecting their connection with other symbolical rituals, and that can be summarized in the following types:

1) The dance of Candelore; 2) The dance of the Saints which also includes rigattiate in the province of Agrigento; 3) The dance of the Giants; 4) The free dance performed in religious contexts; 5) The dance performed by the faithful bearing plant elements; 6) Carnival ceremonial dances. The formal description of the choreography is highlighted by the vision of the film and literary texts.

It contains a volume of 133 pages in PDF format and two DVD.



### Pino Biondo's Professional Profile

Giuseppe (Pino) Biondo, since 1990 has carried out an intensive field research on the repertoires of oral tradition, focusing on the territory of central Sicily. He has lectured at several talks on ethno-musical traditions and ethno-choreography, organized by various cultural associations.

Because of his research, on the proposal of Prof. Dr. Alkis Raftis, President of CID UNESCO, since 2009, he is a member of CID as well as one of its researchers.

#### Musical training

He studied accordion with Maestro Maurizio Burzillà, a great virtuoso of this musical instrument. He played for his orchestra "Centro Siciliano Accordion" from 1990 to 2013, and was also its vice president and co-founder with Maurizio Burzillà.

#### Publications by Pino Biondo

Ethnica Enna catalogue, a work published by the Cultural and Sport Club Galaria, of which the author of the works is also the president.

Sounds and folk songs in the Province of Enna. Vol. I - The cycle of the year, with the CD booklet, Ethnica Enna, 001, 2002.

Sounds and folk songs in the Province of Enna. Vol. II - The cycle of life, SO-CALLED with small volume, Ethnica Enna, 002, 2002.

Sounds and folk songs in the Province of Enna. Vol. III - The work, CD with booklet, Ethnica Enna 003, 2002.

Christmas - Sounds and Songs Traditional Sicilian hinterland. Vol. IV - CD with volume, Ethnica Enna 004, 2003.

Holy Week - Sounds and Songs Traditional Sicilian hinterland. Vol. V - CD with volume, Ethnica Enna 005, 2004.

Sicily Dance Music From Tradition. Vol. VI - CD with booklet, Ethnica 006, 2011.

Sicily Music and Dances of Tradition Vol. VII - CD with DVD and booklet, Ethnica 007, 2014.

Ceremonial Dances in Sicily, Vol. VIII - 2 DVD + a booklet of 180 pages. Ethnica 008, 2015.

He has worked as a co-researcher for the following CDs published and distributed by the Association "TARANTA" of Florence, by ethnomusicologists Giuliana Fugazzotto and Mario Sarica:

[1993] The Sufferings of Our Lord Jesus Christ, chants of The Holy Week in Sicily.

[1994] Cumpagnu, ti mannu lu Signuri, songs of harvesting and threshing in Sicily.

[1995] Traditional Dance Music in Sicily.

#### Other releases by Pino Biondo:

[2003] Three Carnival Farces in Gagliano Castelferrato, at "Carnival Time", 2003: 153-165, edited by S. and M. Bonanzinga Sarica, Michele Intilla publishers.

[2006] The texts of the prayers and songs in honor of St. Joseph 89-109, in "The artara of San Giuseppe in Leonforte. Myths rites symbols" - edited by Ignazio Buttitta and Gaetano Algozino.

[2010] Dicinnu bella lu cori m'abballa, traditional songs of the town of Assoro (EN), edited by Pino Biondo and Vittorio Vicari, produced by "Associazione Amici dei Musei dei Monumenti e dei Siti di Sicilia".



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**Pino Biondo**

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