

Are historical re-enactments a truth cultural development? Critical aspects of the democratization of history

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Abstract

This paper analyzes historical re-enactments that characterize Western culture nowadays. The analysis takes place in Abruzzo, in the centre of Italy, where historical re-enactments have spread since 1980 throughout the mass culture. With the popular increase in wealth (the economic boom), and the spreading of a new public consciousness based on massive literacy, these new secular ceremonies inspired by the past have replaced the traditional religious activities, that is, Patron Saints' days, or have aligned with it. The positive characteristics of these new local rituals are: making history accessible to all, and strengthening organizations as "civil society". In fact, the local organizations for historical re-enactment cooperate through partnerships and lobbying tactics to purchase significant public funding for their local events. The negative characteristics of such ceremonies are: their high cost, the obligation to repeat them (they become rituals), and the exclusion of foreigners. The scope of such activities creates a conflict between cultural rights and ethical and environmental needs, which the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguard of Intangible Cultural Heritage tries to resolve. It would be useful to create an inclusive and reflective process on the area, as a result of which citizens would learn to relate to their past with ethical awareness and sustainability, in collaboration with the government and the scientific community. For the ongoing success of this activity, it is not sufficient merely to consult historians to validate the formal accuracy of the event; one should also secure the opinion of the anthropologists on the long-term social perspectives of the event.

Keywords: historical re-enactments, rituals, inequality, urban anthropology

1. Ritual ceremonies through a material approach with history

Since Roman Empire and other governmental institutions have performed famous representations of battles and naval (*naumachie*) to develop public memory and collective identity as well as to strengthen the governmental institutions themselves (Assmann 1992). When a community relates to past events, she increases her value and creates a sort of propaganda of herself.

Therefore, specific popular expressive activities have been developed: the historical re-enactments, a form of popular theatre, which recreates the atmosphere of an event or an ancient period, for educational purposes or just as an entertainment. Thence, the historical re-enactments are mostly organized by both the City Halls with local associations. Today in the Western countries, historical re-enactments have become an important part of the mass culture, mobilizing the imagination they use significant economic resources and require the researchers through different approaches and ideas. On the one hand, the historians tend to lean their involvement in the re-enactments towards the most realistic representation in accordance with the past. On the other hand, anthropologists explore the re-enactments from a critical standpoint, to explain why communities need to “ritualize the past”.

According to literature, the current success of historical re-enactments as “institutional activity” depends on the European idea of authenticity. Western standard of historical materials is based on the idea to reconstruct and protect the material historical heritage, as monuments or items. After the Second World War, the reconstruction of monuments was called for the stylistic restoration of the past life based on the “authenticity of fiction” (Petzet 1994). The idea of authenticity as reconstruction prevails over the anthropological idea of authenticity as cultural variety and flexibility. Therefore, the respect for historical heritage is shown through the “perfect reconstruction of the material elements”, according to the restoration standards contained in the fundamentals of the *1964 Venice Charter* (International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites). Today the standard of authenticity is very important in Western countries, where people believe that authenticity is that which most closely represents the original event.

The historical re-enactments reproduce a specific event, inspired by documents from the past, through a “material approach to history”. The re-enactments take place at sites where important events occurred in the past, or in old districts of the ancient cities. Actors and spectators dive into the fiction of the past and “materialize in their bodies the message expressed by the material traces and the aura of the monuments” (Petzet 1994). Therefore, in our era (dominated by the technical reproduction of the images), the documentaries and historical films seem not to satisfy the popular desire to experiment and experience the emotions incarnated in monuments and historical sites. Through the bodies in action, the figures with old costumes and items, the historical re-enactments capture visually both the spectators and the actors, who remain fascinated by the perfect simulation of details. The use of techniques and technology to represent the past is often rich and fulsome, and create a community based on a sort of an anti-aesthetic idea of the past where the principal actors were all rich, holy and powerful (Walker 2010).

This “anti-aesthetic effect” generates a difference of opinion between anthropologists and local people. Anthropologists believe that authenticity is not a requirement for the evaluation of a cultural element, which should instead include

positive characteristics such as historical reflexivity, social inclusiveness, environmental sustainability and ethical values. Today, the State-parties of the UNESCO Conventions act new policies around the public educations, and accept the academic positions. The State-parties of the UNESCO Conventions try to promote the new reflexive standards through the paradigm of Intangible Cultural Heritage, according to which the formal authenticity is not a requirement to consider an item as “cultural heritage”. The reflexive trend is very difficult to promote in the communities; the local groups follow the standard of formal authenticity, moving towards an embalming and mummification of expressive activities. The different perspectives clearly reveal the gap between culture as seen by theorists as an analytical concept, and culture used by social actors as a political, expressive and identifying instrument (Bortolotto 2011).

This essay explores the topic through the view of cultural anthropology. I carried out a multi-location ethnography in a precise context (Abruzzo, in the centre of Italy) through the method based on direct observation, cultural decentralization and discontinuity (I started to observe in 1980 and I am still observing the historical re-enactments in Abruzzo). I did so both through participation in real life, and participation in social networks (Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp), because the electronic communication is an effective way to understand how circulate emotions and symbolic affiliations (Kozinets 2015). Amateur filmography, web pages, blogs and social networks make accessible to me opinions and emotions that previously kept hidden, showing how the contemporary society still tends to reproduce cultural conformism and inequality.

2. Historical re-enactments as propaganda for the town and for specific groups in the town

The historical re-enactments are rituals, and as rituals they aim to make a propaganda. The primary characteristics of historical re-enactments in Abruzzo are that they are annual, strict, formal and spectacular events. The re-enactments are held in summer and are repeated every year using the same format. The historical re-enactments also tend to evoke an old society where the actors were wealthy feudal lords and merchants wearing luxurious clothes. They do not represent poverty but rather wealth, thus only the ‘best’ side of the past. These new secular events have often replaced or partnered with previous official ceremonies, which are religious feasts. The historical re-enactment, therefore, is a purposeful communication, and its aim, which is both symbolic and functional, can be useful to understand its *raison d’être*, which is, above all, to mark time, roles and spaces. Every ritual exists to express a meaning, to explicitly say “what is” a society, who is in charge into a society, and that is the reason why the ritual is performed and reproduced (Turner 1982). Rituals are

the expression of local/regional communities, and should not be considered as “superstitions” or activity merely recreational. This is the opinion of Ernesto De Martino, the Italian anthropologist who has uniquely filled the gap between folk studies and cultural anthropology. De Martino, through his work published in 1961 about certain rituals in southern Italy (*La terra del rimorso. Contributo a una storia religiosa del Sud*. Milano: Il Saggiatore), was a pioneer in recognizing the theoretical skills of ordinary people who develop certain habits to satisfy the unfulfilled needs of society.

As De Martino says, we should analyse these rituals in their historical and political contexts (Crapanzano 2005). The Abruzzi are a land underpopulated, with few and medium towns; the development of historical re-enactments is recent (it started in 1980) but now this real sense of history is swept up by the idea that have always existed. This is how works the concept of “tradition”: the traditions are invented yesterday but are referred to the oldest time to gain value and authority (Hobsbawn-Ranger 1983). Memory is a *suspicious source* of identity, because it is the instrument that those in power use to construct their version of the truth. Theoretically, tradition is the present society that generates and shapes its past (Althabe-Fabre-Lenclud 1995, Dei 2016).

In Abruzzo, the historical re-enactments began in 1981. This creative development can be identified both in the tourist trips to Siena or Arezzo to attend *palios*, and in the national broadcasting of films with medieval settings. The luxurious clothes that turn a member of local society into a medieval nobleman for few hours are, therefore, the outcome of a collective imagination and a precise tailoring specialization that derive from other regions. However, in only a few years, the historical re-enactments have merged with the regional culture and within the traditional propaganda for the town and for special groups in the town. For each city that invented an historical re-enactment, the neighboring city invented another historical re-enactment, to attract visitors and tourists. This development was only possible thanks to the substantial public funding granted to these new activities, considered useful for their ability to promote historical awareness and tourism. The opportunity for public funding attracted locals, who set up permanent organizations specifically focused on historical re-enactments, which every year, claiming rights, require ongoing public support. In fact, the local population appreciates these historical parades, as they have quickly become the new local traditions (Segalen 2002, Dei 2016).

3. The use of past to consolidate social hierarchies

The representation of a distant, prestigious past, in stark contrast to the recent arduous past of poverty and emigration after the Second World War, is the goal of a dynamic partnership between the different social classes. Through historical re-enactments, the leading class establishes a relationship with the masses, who no longer feel poor and prisoners of an unchangeable future (Bausinger 1990). The fiction makes available those “aristocratic symbols” that for previous generations were unattainable, such as coats of arms, decorated chaises and thrones, pearl necklaces, ermine fur coats, and dresses with long trains. The collective theatricalization of wealth and power has become part of the local aesthetic, and is emphasized by the new local media.

The first historical parade and festival is the Mastrogiurato in the city of Lanciano, a re-enactment of a fictional knighting ceremony (called *investitura*). It was established in 1981, as a result of an historical research about the town’s wealth in the Middle Age (Marciani 1974). During this historical re-enactment, the roles of powerful people who march through the city to the rhythm of drums are given to influential senior male citizens, and women merely parade along as luxurious ‘dames’. Year after year, the Mastrogiurato festival reproduces and perpetuates gender, age and class inequality. In addition, only resident families are allowed acting roles in the parade.

A similar situation occurred with the historical re-enactment in Vasto, established in 1986, soon after historical research led to the discovery of an event that took place in 1723, when the Marquis Cesare D’Avalos appointed Fabrizio Colonna, Prince of Rome, *Knight of the Order of the Golden Fleece*. This has inspired citizens to re-enact the knighting parade every August, where about one hundred actors wear the high-ranking clothes to evoke the original event. The city of Vasto is not short of memorable historical events, as there was a revolution leading to the establishment of Vasto’s Republic in 1799. However, the story in which imperial nobility takes a leading role has proved more successful than subversive and republican scenarios.

Other historical re-enactments take place during pre-existing religious festivals, and were intended to promote and revive them. In Abruzzo, one example is the *Perdonanza Celestiniana*, a local Jubilee established by Celestino V, the Pope of humble origins who abdicated in 1294. In 1984 in the celebration of the L’Aquila Jubilee was introduced a large procession in high-ranking clothes impersonating Medieval noblemen, noblewomen, pages and pagans. It increased the organizational and financial costs of the event, it attracted tourists and reduced the event’s penitential and devotional aspect. In short, the principles of coherence and poverty derived from Celestino V challenge the paradoxes of his glorified event. After the tragic earthquake that destroyed L’Aquila in 2009, considerable local interest in preserving the *Perdonanza Celestiniana* resulted in the ceremony being registered on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, as happened in 2019.

Along with these historical re-enactments in Abruzzo, another two hundred and fifty parades happens every year in Abruzzo: the Giostra Cavalleresca (Sulmona), the Certame della Balestra (Popoli), the Palio del Barone (Tortoreto), the Palio delle Contrale (Pianella), the Bizantini (Crecchio), Lucrezia Borgia (Colledara), Signa Leones (Guardiagrele), and the Corteo di Leone Acciaiuoli (Ortona), and many others. All of these fictions resulted in a semantic redefinition of popular festivals based on three points.

Above all, the simplicity of the popular and traditional local event has been compromised because the new ceremonies are not organized by the local community, but rather entrusted to professional intermediary committees. The organizers themselves wear the historical costumes, carry coats, parade in the centre of the village and perform different kinds of shows. The popular festival, therefore, has become exclusively the domain of the celebrating subjects.

Second, the associations responsible for managing the new ceremonies are great centres of socialization, but they do not focus on “modern” issues, such as being environmentally friendly, socially inclusive and non-discriminatory, because they focus on a spectacular entertainment. Such organizations channels reproduce conservative values. For example, female roles require qualities such as beauty, poise and elegance, and thus have been chosen through local competitions such as *Dama di quartiere 2019*. In a kind of political tautology, roles representing people in power are performed by male individuals who are currently powerful, rich, indigenous, old.

Lastly, these new ceremonies inspired by the past have a repetitive requirement deriving from their own customs, and weigh heavily on the local public purse. Each custom, by definition, is a reference to its own version of the past, to be repeated and passed down to obtain the effect of the transformation of reality (Turner 1982). The reference to the past is achieved not only through the use of scenic design but also by repetition. The formal continuity of ritual forms helps reassure communities in the face of other changes (Turner 1982). Perhaps it is precisely the collective need for reassurance from modernization and economic crisis that has caused, in this context, the surprising increase of historical re-enactments. The happiness of the festival perpetuates positive emotions and a feeling of comfort regardless of the contents of the event itself, which may be insignificant and contradictory (Segalen 2002; Heinich 2012).

This network of cultural powers engages the new generations in a rather passive and unconscious manner. The new generations, born after the institutionalization of these ceremonies, see them as continuous with the Middle Ages. Even the elderly, who have seen the birth of these secular events, are now convinced that such ceremonies have taken place every year since the Middle Ages (the interviews are included in Giancristofaro 2017). This forgetfulness relies on the fact that the participants notice only the emotional side of the event (Bausinger 1990, Miller 2008). Tradition resides mainly in practical experience rather than in ideas,

and it is precisely this subjective vision of history that pushes us towards greater anthropological understanding of the overproduction of historical re-enactments today.

Historical re-enactments have now a key role in the community and local institutions indulge the popular position under electoral and rabble-rousing pressure despite the obvious problems associated with attracting tourists through this mass phenomenon in each town in Abruzzo. Therefore, these new customs are weighed down by the future planning and by the expensive and “realistic” representation of the events, certainly linked to the crisis of public culture (Geertz 1995). This overproduction of significant historical events inspired by local identity is a global phenomenon, one that international guidelines try to regulate. In particular, the *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, approved by Italy in 2007, has identified new regulatory challenges for anthropology. Safeguarding local diversity according to a universalistic conception of cultural heritage requires the realization of participatory and reflective processes which help communities to relate to their past with awareness, ethics and sustainability when dealing with institutions and scientific communities. In Italy, as requested by the *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, the institutions and the public bodies will involve the anthropologists to achieve reflexivity in historical re-enactments. This commitment in applied anthropology promises to be difficult because of the basic misunderstanding with the communities. In order to become truly emancipatory, the idealistic power of scholars must intertwine with the interests of civil society and overcome the bureaucratic logic of the UNESCO and the public bodies aimed for public education, in line with what is underlined by some analyzes of institutional power (Herzfeld, 1992: 164-66). The current cultural problems require new generations of operators who, through an integrated use of history, semiotics, cultural anthropology, ethics, psychology and aesthetics, would be able to plan and stimulate a positive change in popular traditions.

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