

Meek snakes in a Mediterranean religious rite: an intercultural path towards an anti-speciesism dimension

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Abstract

This article examines the handling of snakes for ritual and religious purposes, namely a “tradition” that some groups consider “good to think”, as well as “necessary” for the survival and moral identification of the group itself. For at least four centuries, the inhabitants of Cocullo (a tiny village in the province of L’Aquila) have been capturing and handling non-venomous snakes in honor of Saint Dominic Abbot, who resided in the area in the eleventh century. The extra-ordinary tradition of using snakes in a Catholic rite has been handed down to the present day, with the difference that the snakes are not killed now but released in the same spot where they were captured, in compliance with a zoological monitoring plan (snakes are becoming extinct) sponsored by the Italian Ministry of the Environment. This is the result of a three-decade mediation managed by collaborative anthropologists. In this case, the macroscopic tensions between local traditions and animal rights are overcome by the moral obligation to respect the environment that originated the village’s ritual, and which is a cultural legacy of collective interest. From a cultural point of view, Cocullo represents a biodiversity and a cultural diversity where tradition helps safeguard nature. This path towards an anti-speciesism dimension embodies a true moral examination of humanity in an equal relationship with animals and plants. Here lies the main cultural device of humankind, so much so that all the others derive from it.

Keywords: heritage, ethnography, snakes, rite, Christianity, cultural change, activism

1. Introduction

Every anthropologist involved in the field of heritage understands how many points of friction exist between local traditions (a form of “local law”) and the laws emanated by the state and supra-national bodies. This proposal examines the killing and handling of snakes for ritual and religious purposes, namely a “tradition” that some groups consider “good to think”, as well as “necessary” for the survival and moral identification of the group itself. For at least four centuries, the inhabitants of Cocullo (a tiny village in the province of L’Aquila) have been capturing and handling non-venomous snakes in honor of Saint Dominic Abbot, who resided in the area in the eleventh century. He showed the locals how to survive despite the presence of wild animals, which he tamed as Saint Francis of Assisi did later with the wolf. As is well known, touching snakes means breaking a Christian taboo which assumes they are a dangerous incarnation of Satan. The extraordinary tradition of using snakes in a Catholic rite has been handed down to the present day, with the difference that the snakes are not killed now but released in the same spot where they were captured, in

compliance with a zoological monitoring plan (snakes are becoming extinct) sponsored by the Italian Ministry of the Environment. This is the result of a three-decade mediation managed by collaborative anthropologists. In this case, the macroscopic tensions between local traditions and animal rights are overcome by the moral obligation to safeguard the environment that originated the village's ritual, and which is a cultural legacy of collective interest. From a cultural point of view, Cocullo represents a real biodiversity whose traditional culture helps safeguard the natural milieu, although from the outside it may seem quite the opposite. In short, collaborative anthropologists are engaged in complex mediation actions between "universal rights" and "local rights" based on a profound knowledge of the setting. This proposal suggests practicing this mediation in a comprehensive perspective because "tradition" is not radically opposed to "innovation" and serves as a dynamic and perpetual restructuring force.

2. The Cocullo ritual today: a Catholic procession with snakes

Christianity has transformed the snake into mythical image of evil for the Western World. The snake is the devil in the myth of Adam and Eve, a founding episode of the Bible. So, it is very strange in Cocullo the celebration of the village's patron saint revolves around snakes, which are placed on the statue of Saint Dominic Abbot as it is carried in procession every year in early May and has been for at least three centuries.

Cocullo is a village in the Abruzzo mountains, in the province of L'Aquila. Ethnologists have studied Abruzzo and its patriarchal culture extensively. Historical research of the district began with the Neapolitan "Storia Patria" association (1875) and cast light on the serious socio-economic problems of the new Italy unified as a nation in 1861. The ritual of Saint Dominic and the particular social rules in force in Cocullo and neighboring towns, namely, to catch and manipulate non-poisonous snakes for Catholic religious use, were documented and analyzed by local ethnologists and foreign travelers like Thomas Ashby, Edward Lear, Anne Macdonell and Estella Canziani¹. Also authors and artists like Gabriele D'Annunzio and Francesco Paolo Michetti refer to the Cocullo ritual in their masterpieces. From the end of the nineteenth century, influenced by Positivism, social, historical, and archaeological research has sought to reconstruct the diffusion of cultural patterns and to explain the persistence of this "bizarre cult", which the Church of Rome viewed with concern on the one hand and on the other tried to understand as the apparently

¹ Edward Lear, *Illustrated Excursions in Italy*, London 1846; Anne MacDonell, *In the Abruzzi*, London, 1908; Thomas Ashby, "Some Festivals in the Abruzzi", in *The Anglo-American Review*, vol. 2, 1909, pp. 45–51; Estella Canziani, *Through the Apennines and the Lands of the Abruzzi: Landscape and Peasant Life*, Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1887.

crude local interpretation of religion adapted to the natural environment, to misfortunes in every period, and the passing seasons. Of course, the ethnological perspective was “Frazerian”, which is to say they described Abruzzo as a “wilderness” and Cocullo’s ritual as a relic of Roman and pre-Roman cultures, in the erroneous belief that this culture was static.



Marsi traditional culture - Lid of a stone cinerary urn (1st century BC), L’Aquila, National Museum

Specifically, the festival was observed by local ethnologists Antonio De Nino and Giovanni Pansa, who studied with a historical and philological eye what they saw as a bizarre “pagan mixture” of snakes and Catholicism (De Nino, 1897: 175; Pansa 1924: 38). Many historical sources mention the strange local custom that has been a tradition for over two millennia. The sources describe snake cults in the Marsica district (near the village of Cocullo) since Roman times, when farmers and shepherds in times of dire straits developed the ability to handle not only non-venomous but also venomous snakes, to obtain medications and talismans, and perhaps even to eat in times of famine. The inhabitants of Cocullo and Marsica in general earned their living as healers and enchanters. Indeed, the snake is an important symbol of the medical

arts, seen in the image of the snake coiled around a stick: the so-called staff of Asclepius, or Aesculapius, who was a mythical healer able not only to cure the sick, but even raise the dead. Just like the snake, which hibernates in the cracks of the earth, Asclepius is a chthonic divinity, arbiter of life and death, and this pagan characteristic has been transferred to the figure of the Benedictine abbot, Dominic, who was canonized in 1104.

The snake is clearly present in the transition from Roman polytheistic religion to Christian monotheism. The people of Cocullo continued their activities with snakes and broke a fundamental rule of Judeo-Christian culture, which perceives the snake as a symbol of the devil. Cocullo culture today – just like ancient Greek and Roman civilizations – appreciates the non-poisonous snake, because it protects from mice and brings prosperity to the home. The positive value of poisonous and non-poisonous snakes is handed down in Cocullo and other Mediterranean Christian locations. For example, even today small snakes are a feature of the Orthodox Christian feast of Our Lady of the Snakes, on the Greek island of Kefalonia (Andrianopoulos 2009: 85-98).



Procession of San Domenico statue with tamed snakes

But when was Saint Dominic Abbot paired with snakes? Dominic was born in 951, in Colfornaro di Foligno, and died in Sora in 1031. He was a Benedictine monk and preacher who played an important role in the repopulation of the mountains and roved the Italian Apennines from north to south. For almost twenty years, Dominic lived in Cocullo and Villalago (the neighboring village) and in his hagiography he is said to have left one of his teeth as a gift to the inhabitants². Hagiographic sources then report miracles that attribute him with the power to tame snakes and other animals considered dangerous (Di Nola 1976: 61-78). His major miracle is that of the taming of the wolf which later became characteristic of the preaching of Saint Francis of Assisi. According to legend, a wolf steals a child, but Dominic calls the wolf, ordering it to bring the child back, and the wolf obeys. For centuries this theatrical tale of the wolf miracle is performed in local villages every May, in honor of Saint Dominic Abbot. Since the seventeenth century, the feast of Cocullo has brought together the saint and non-venomous snakes, and this is testified by historical and iconographic sources.

Intellectuals have shown great interest in this cult in recent centuries. Artists, foreign travelers, and local ethnologists (Gennaro Finamore, Antonio De Nino, and Giovanni Pansa) took a “Frazerian” view and applied a reading to this cult in a magical context, seeing it as an expression of religious and cultural backwardness without considering its social functions.

3. A new interpretation of the ritual by Alfonso M. di Nola

After the Second World War, the new generation of ethnologists changed its approach to folklore and observed the social implications of religion and of folklore itself. This new approach perceived that historical event shaped societies, whose strange ancient rituals were nonetheless functional to keeping cultures alive and creating satisfactory socialization, concentrated on a village, social hierarchy, and natural resources. The new interpretation derived from the revolution instigated by Ernesto De Martino and his anthropological studies of Italian folklore.

Cocullo religious rites can be seen as part of the broader context of lay devotional practices in Italy and “experienced religion” methodology, since “experienced religion” is particularly topical in today’s academic circles. In this way, we place this practice in the broader context of the work that anthropologists of religion are doing at this moment in time. Our key reference is *Land of Remorse (La Terra del Rimorso*, first Italian edition 1961), a classic work by Ernesto De Martino,

² The tooth is kept in the Saint’s statue in Cocullo. However, it is a legend because the tooth may have been taken from the tomb of the Saint in Sora for the religious needs of the populations of Cocullo and Villalago (Giancristofaro 2018).

the founding figure of Italian cultural anthropology and ethno-psychiatry. Based on fieldwork conducted in Southern Italy in 1959, the De Martino study deals with the phenomenon of “tarantism” in Puglia, a form of possession thought to be linked to the bite of a mythical tarantula and its ritual cure through the “taranta dance”. De Martino collected the contributions of various specialists who participated in the fieldwork, and the result is a compassionate, compelling account of this kind of belief. Tarantism is no longer seen as mental illness or “surviving” shamanistic irrationality, but as a product of a cultural history defined from above, endowed with its own forms of rationality and resistance. As happened with the “tarantolati” (those affected by tarantism), the rigidity of the cultural framework of rural Southern Italy, where “tarantism” flourished, could explain why this kind of therapy – or solution to human distress – did not inspire suffering people to seek improvement of their condition, or drive them to seek a new sense for their existence (Crapanzano 2005). In short, they continued to rely on the comfort of magic and religion, which numbed pain. The aim of this cultural and religious system was to adjust the emotional significance of disrupted and painful elements, restoring physical strength so people could work and survive despite their pain because they were fortified by their belief in local religion.

Alongside the *Land of Remorse*, I refer to *Magic: A Theory from the South* (*Sud e Magia*, first Italian edition 1959), De Martino’s exploration of the dramatic social and ethical condition of the population, followed by the study of folklore, popular Catholicism, and the persistence of ancient beliefs. After De Martino, many authors in Italy (above all Alfonso M. Di Nola) point out that the population still had a conservative vision of saints, similar to the Medieval concept of the “saint-healer”. With this type of “saint next door” image it was possible to make a pact, to barter, and this happened in Cocullo. Indeed, in Italy it is still customary to make ex-voto gifts, in other words gifts after a vow made to the divinity. The believer agrees to make a gift or sacrifice to the divinity in exchange for the fulfillment of their requests: the gift to the saint as thanks (for a “miracle” or a “favor”) can be made before or after the saint works the miracle or grants the favor (Toschi 1970). This “material dialogue with the saints” and the fact that many positive events are still attributed to the saint, explains why the expectation of the “miracle” – namely the special intervention through a saint – persists in Southern Italy (Di Nola 1976). The theoretical discourse on the relationship of people with saints is important for understanding the cult dedicated to Saint Dominic Abbot in Cocullo, still active precisely because people turn to him for a “miracle” or a “favor”³. Hence, the persistence of snake cults is not a “survival” of shamanistic irrationality, but a rational choice to feel better and survive in difficult times. According to De Martino, the chaos and uncertainty of boundaries between human and nature (i.e., danger

³ I say “liturgical” but I include extra-liturgical cults and many other popular devotion phenomena not approved by the Church linked to animals, stones, places, and relics.

dominates) create a “crisis of presence”, namely an overwhelming fear of being wiped out by uncontrollable forces. The rite and the myth thus appear as a set of social techniques to recover from the crisis and reassure a social group of “being in the world”⁴. Sacred, stereotyped behavior offered solid and reassuring collective models as it was able to manage old and new problems.

Ernesto De Martino’s new interpretation approach inspired ethnologist and historian of religions Alfonso M. di Nola to begin researching the Cocullo rite in 1973. He concluded that the statue covered with live, non-poisonous snakes created a “fiction ritual”. In a nutshell, the procession with snakes is a pop show that tells how Saint Dominic was able to transform snakes and all that is negative or dangerous into something good. In this way, the saint reassures the population, keeping famine and danger away (Di Nola 1976: 125-7; 1986: 65-8; 1995).

The public snake handling ritual, enacted as part of the patron saint’s feast day; public exhibition of snakes and their consecration to the patron; devout pilgrims arriving and the touching procession inside the village, symbolizing purification and sacralization of human space; repetition through images, gestures and formulas of ideologies at the basis of the constitution of the group and its religious representation, periodically modernize the positive events to which the community refers or to use an expression preferred by Italian anthropologists, the ejection of negative from the public scenario. The publication of the ethnography paper *Gli aspetti magico-religiosi di una cultura subalterna italiana* (1976), also translated for publication abroad, increased the self-awareness of the community at a time when the mountain village depopulated and shrank in size. In modern times, agriculture and sheep-farming no longer provided an income and people could only find work in cities. The village in crisis therefore intensified the dialogue with Di Nola to achieve a better overview of the snake cult and its history, but also to reflect on the crisis of the village and the aggressive relationship that cities have with small villages, which lose their identity.

Di Nola felt it was impossible and pointless to decide whether the Catholic cult of Cocullo and the Orthodox cult of Marcopoulos were phenomena of different origins, or whether they constitute the residues of a general snake cult. But this is a secondary detail. The real tragedy, at the end of the twentieth century, was that Cocullo, like all the Apennine towns, stopped functioning in a productive way, becoming a trap for residents, who were unemployed and had no schools and hospitals. With input from anthropologist Di Nola and his team, the Cocullo ritual continued thanks to change, acquiring a new role that saved it when the state was unable to ensure sustainable development in small mountain villages. The interests of anthropology therefore interweave in a profound and empathic way with the interests of the community studied, to allow continuation of the ritual in the village which now

⁴ De Martino, Ernesto. *Magic: A Theory from the South*. Translated by Dorothy Louise Zinn. London: HAU – Classics in Ethnographic Theory, 2015 (1959).

has only one hundred inhabitants. Di Nola leads scholars such as Vittorio Lanternari, Vincenzo Padiglione, Annamaria Rivera, Vittorio Dini, Arnaldo Nesti, Roberto Cipriani, Ettore Paratore, Filippo Ferro, and other psychiatrists from the Policlinico Gemelli hospital also contributed, together with hundreds of students from the universities of Siena-Arezzo and Naples, to talk about ethno-medicine. The group became an important ethnographic workshop in Italy where visitors could experiment how their repulsion for contact with snakes, considered slimy and aggressive, could be transformed into liking and tenderness. Touching the snakes of Saint Dominic therefore also becomes a rite of passage for the lay community, so people free themselves from fear and negative emotions. This explains the presence of over ten thousand visitors every year on the feast day on 1 May.

When Alfonso Di Nola died in 1997, the inhabitants of Cocullo asked his students Ireneo Bellotta and Emiliano Giancrisofaro to continue the studies. They set up the “Alfonso M. di Nola” study center for popular traditions in the town hall, which together with the community how leads promotion and investigation of the snake tradition.

4. From social reading to a process of heritagization

A cultural heritage is a self-conscious tradition. Thanks to the openness of the community and public discussion of the festival with writers, journalists and anthropologists, respect for animals has increased in Cocullo. The first step was to change how the snakes were treated after the ritual because until the nineteenth century they were killed and sometimes even cooked for a ritual meal. At the end in the twentieth century, however, they were being released back into the same habitat where they had been captured, to ensure survival and allow them to return to their earth⁵.

Meanwhile, many wild species were in danger and listed by the United Nations *Convention on Biological Diversity* (Rio de Janeiro, 1992). International agreements set conditions to combat the cruel handling of animals used in public events and popular festivals, urging respect that would educate young people. Europe acknowledged these international policies for the environment with its Habitat Directive (EEC 92/42), implemented in Italy in 1997, raising restrictions well-known to organizers of traditional festivals using wild animals. Moreover, the treatment of domestic animals was also regulated with the prohibition of bullfighting and home butchering where animals suffer suffering.

Following regulation of the treatment of wild animals, Cocullo municipal council, which is the “legal representative” of the snake festival, appointed a

⁵ For many centuries, Cocullo’s expert snake handlers have been called “serpari”.

professional consultant (a veterinarian herpetologist) to monitor the health of the snakes and ensure ethical capture for the ritual. This new ethos in the treatment of snakes made it possible to request an exception to the law, and today public handling of snakes is permitted on the day of the festival. In short, veterinarians and herpetologists from the Ministry of the Environment examine the health of the specimens and research the endangered species, partnering the inhabitants of Cocullo who capture snakes. I have been observing the ritual and its political nuances since 1980 and I explore this coming together of folklore and environmentalism in the volume *Cocullo. Un Percorso Italiano di Salvaguardia Urgente. (Cocullo. An Italian Approach of Urgent Protection*, Bologna, 2018).

In short, this folklore tradition intertwines with ecology, attuned to biodiversity and facilitating the conservation of natural habitats around the village, which are forest-clad mountain slopes that are now protected⁶. Since 2007, the village has pursued an outright herpetological protection project going by the name of *Da Cercatori di Serpenti a Ricercatori Erpetologi (From Snake Seeker to Herpetological Researcher)*. A title that embodies the road taken to protect snakes in their own ecosystem. The conservation project unites herpetologists and *serpari* (traditional snake handlers) in a mutual exchange of information that derives from scientific experience while the experience of one generation is bequeathed to the next. The depopulation of the village has also made changes to tradition: in the past, *serpari* were always men but nowadays the role is open to women and fathers teach their daughters the techniques of capture.

From Alfonso Di Nola onwards it was thus the anthropologists who brought modernization of the village's tradition. Thanks to interaction with the anthropologists, the villagers (the only owners and guardians of the snake rite) overcame the troubling friction between traditional snake handling and wildlife protection regulations. This made the snake procession sustainable, improved the local environment and created a virtuous example of modernization of tradition.

As is clear, the preservation of heritage is across the board, embracing both nature and culture. The diversity and multiple meanings of tradition collide and meet with hierarchies of values and dialectic of juridical and political power. The friction between tradition and law can be resolved through a complex engagement of cultural mediation inspired by the creativity of the lead communities involved. The case of Cocullo, now, seems to have had a happy ending, but there are many cases in which traditions conflict with human and environmental rights standards and common awareness: think of bullfights and other events in which cattle, dogs, horses or even roosters and other birds are treated violently. Then there are other traditions and folk events, in which groups or ethnicities are treated with violence.

⁶ The village is part of Abruzzo, Lazio & Molise National Park and Sirente-Velino Regional Nature Park.



Young *serpari* in Cocullo in San Domenico feast

It is indispensable for a cultural anthropologist today to get their bearings in this scenario. One characteristic of modern nations is the relationship people have with their institutions. In the past – or in some specific cultural contexts – the relationship between people and institutions is based on principles that can be traced back to subjection or subservience, but in modern states this relationship has been modified by the institution of democracy, so being a citizen implies not only having duties (complying with the law, paying taxes, etc.) but also enjoying rights. These privileges include so-called cultural rights which can be exercised peacefully and in a

way that does not harm the environment, as is the case here. This means safeguarding natural heritage but also the cultural legacy of tradition.

Today, thanks to the balance of rights and duties that nation-states can guarantee, citizenship has become a powerful identity reference and an emancipation device. Being a citizen implies recognizing oneself in a culture, in a historical legacy and in a cultural identity that embraces from welfare to participation in public life. The problem today, however, is that the autonomy of states is reduced in the face of global issues such as financial crises, climate change, migration, and pandemic. This influences the implementation of “citizenship rights” because states have little decision-making power in the face of massive transnational political and economic processes. Furthermore, states host large masses of marginalized people who lack political representation, legal protection, and socio-economic rights. This socio-political exclusion can affect immigrants, but also indigenous people, as was the case for Cocollo and other small towns. Globalization also impacts the symbolic dimension of nation-states, reworked and commodified through educational and expressive experiences such as ethnic revivals and tourism, which have grown considerably in the last forty years (Appadurai 1996). Thus, while diasporic, transnational, and local identities emerge, nation-states lose their central function of influencing the self-perception of individuals.

In this transition phase, to mediate the explosion of dysfunctions such as unstoppable consumption of natural resources, increase in social exclusion or religious fundamentalism, UNESCO and the governments of its member states draft international agreements that encourage the application of social sciences in conflict mediation, transforming post-colonial anthropological literature into tangible initiatives for sustainable development. Policy-making strategies centered on political participation in cultural heritage are the result but the weakening of nation-states severely limit UN political programs. In summary, the policies of the United Nations tend to achieve universal citizenship for human rights and the protection of the environment, but the loss of power of member states further distances this goal and makes it seemingly unattainable.

5. UNESCO and the “ecological” perspective: heritage, political engagement, cultural rights

The crisis in Cocollo – the village with the oddest festival in Italy – worsened after the last earthquake.

The village struggles to accommodate safely the thousands of visitors who arrive for the festival each year, and for which no charge is applied. The snake handlers freely allow visitors to touch snakes if they wish. The number of young

people in the village is in sharp decline. In short, this cultural heritage risks becoming extinct.

The presence of the “Alfonso M. di Nola” study center for popular traditions and the fact that Cocullo has a strong, consolidated relationship with anthropologists have not stopped its decline. For this reason, the community asked scholars for new suggestions to promote its historical and symbolic resources, which are so important yet so fragile, because the presence of young people is essential for capturing the snakes and staging the event. On the other hand, the number of snakes is decreasing because of pesticides and aggressive human behavior. The various solutions adopted by residents of the village included contacting the international community of states cooperating for the application of the 2003 *Convention for Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Together with several consultants, the people of Cocullo conceived an innovative project to stop decline, establishing a sustainable development scheme. The consultants of the 2003 Convention, alongside the Italian Ministry for Culture’s UNESCO office found themselves faced with a dramatic reality and suggested applying for registration not in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (which lists great festivals and traditions), but in the Urgent Safeguard List. The latter is a type of application that commits the states subscribing to the 2003 Convention to support the patrimonial communities at risk and in need of help.

Thus, in 2018 Cocullo municipal authority applied to the Ministry of Cultural Heritage as the intangible element *Conoscenze, Saperi e Pratiche legate al Culto di Saint Dominic Abbot e al Rito dei Serpari di Cocullo (Wisdom, Knowledge and Practices related to the Cult of Saint Dominic Abbot and the Serpari Rite of Cocullo (AQ))*: a project that brings together twenty-one villages of Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise partnering to revitalize an environmental and cultural heritage at serious risk.

6. The conflict between innovation and tradition in peripheries and in central institutions

The dialectic between tradition and modernity is expressed both in daily life and in ceremonies, which are the specific terrain of anthropological analysis. In Southern Italy, religious feast days are first folk festivals, independent of Church authority, which is unable to control them at all, as is the case for Cocullo, where over the last two hundred years the Church has had to accept the snake ritual and the archbishop attends the procession. Even when they are religious, folk festivals are organized annually by the community with commissions, confraternities, committees, congregations, and governors. The Church turns a blind eye and just manages the liturgy. It is not enough to define these festivals as pre-modern or the fruit of superstition, because it is important to investigate the individual contexts in depth.

Certainly, these traditions arouse emotions and passions that keep villages like Cocollo alive. Marshall Sahlins commented on the anthropology of modernity (namely the triumph of Western culture over indigenous traditions) following long observation of cultural change in Oceania. At the end of the eighteenth century, at the height of the European Enlightenment, French philosophers invented the concept of “civilization”, which is really an ethnocentric and colonial concept. Imperialism and colonialism over the last two centuries have not diminished these contrasts between the West and cultural diversity. On the contrary, the concept of “civilization” served on the one hand to animate Western ideologies of “modernization” and “forced development” and on the other created the mission of protecting the indigenous⁷. But this vision reduces or eliminates the capacity of non-Western peoples to adapt and understand the global world. These peoples relate to history and are culturally capable of contemplating their own conditions (Sahlins 1972, 1976, 1995). The reactions of each group are different, depending on the context and the external forces to which it relates. And these external forces include the point of view of the anthropologist.

The change and modernization in the procession in honor of Saint Dominic Abbot – also known as the snake festival – demonstrates that people can relate to institutions and of becoming a “civil society”, rising above the level of mere religious belief and mere festive practice. However, some anthropologists have expressed an adverse reaction to the sustainable development choices made by the Cocollo community, which they evidently hope will be banned, with the consequent decline of the festival so dear to anthropology. As Marshall Sahlins pointed out, when the hegemonic class changes perspective, it defines its solutions as “progress” or as a new form of awareness, but when it is “the others” (i.e., the indigenous) who change, particularly when they adopt characteristics that distinguish intellectuals or in any case the elite, this process is seen as a kind of moral corruption (Sahlins 1995).

According to some anthropologists, if the local population asks for support from UNESCO, it loses the pristine innocence for which it was appreciated. But this vision does not consider processes of literacy and citizenship, and reasons as if there had never been a French Revolution, nor industrial and cultural revolutions, nor the Italian Constitutional Charter of 1948, nor the Declaration of Human Rights, which the population knows very well. Some anthropologists feel that the inhabitants of Cocollo should not emancipate themselves and must continue to be “wild”, becoming extinct while the anthropologists passively observe this process without intervening, unable to seek collective improvement through new tools of citizenship, public education, and democracy.

Clearly anthropology is sometimes more conservative than the communities it observes.

⁷ Lévi-Strauss believed the indigenous were in a “dependent” condition about “Western civilization” (Claude Lévi-Strauss 1955).

Today, Hawaiians, Inuit, Tibetans, Amazonian peoples, Australian Aborigines, Maori, Senegalese, and the people of Cocullo claim their “culture” and proclaim their fragility in the face of national or international threats (Berliner 2018). It is an admission of weakness, but also of awareness, courage, and expression of a sense of responsibility. These grievances do not convey a simple nostalgic desire for ancient snake-shaped decorations, rain dances, or other fetishized receptacles of idealized identity. Communities seek something “modern” and “vital”, namely a demand for their own space within world cultural order (Sahlins 2008). The most vital activity of many communities is the indigenization of modernity: just as the people of Cocullo did when they “tamed” European and national regulations prohibiting the capture of snakes, reviewing their tradition in the light of new environmental standards.

From the perspective of global anthropologies, Cocullo’s case contains the diversity of anthropologies practiced around the world in the early twentieth century and the ways in which the pluralizing potential of globalization might allow anthropologists worldwide to benefit from this diversity. Even among anthropologists, to take up one’s diversity is a crucial political and academic strategy, if this discipline is to multiply and be respected in a globalized world (Riberio-Escobar 2006). Cocullo’s case-study also contains a new perspective. In recent years, universities have created entire departments around this delicate topic on the human-animal relationship and even a Human-Animal Studies society was born in North America. Zoo-anthropology, a discipline that arose during the mid-eighties, is a «descriptive science of human-animal interaction» which, with the help of disciplines such as ethology and anthropology, makes anthropo-de-centrism its goal, radically questioning the founding postulates of the humanistic tradition (Marchesini, Tonutti, 2007: 171). This new approach configures post-human studies, i.e., the path towards an anti-speciesism dimension, which overcomes anthropocentrism and investigates animal or animal-non-human subjectivity as a field in its own right⁸. The true moral examination of humanity is its relationship with those who are at its mercy: animals and plants. And here lies the fundamental failure of humankind, so much so that all the others derive from it.

⁸ Among the cornerstones: Donna Haraway, *When species meet*, University of Minnesota Press, 2008, but also Jean Pierre Digard, *L’homme et les animaux domestiques. Anthropologie d’une passion*, Paris 1990, and D. Martinelli, *A critical companion to zoosemiotics. People, paths, ideas*, London-New York 2010.

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