

Special Issue
Engineering the Future Sociologically:
a Call to Delve into Environmental
Education Enhanced by
Technological Innovations

FUORI LUOGO

**Journal of Sociology of Territory,
Tourism, Technology**

Guest Editors

Norberto Albano
Sandro Brignone
Carmine Urciuoli



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Festive Expressions in Contexts of Depopulation: Carnival in the “Sicani Area” in Sicily²

Introduction

The festive events observed today in various towns and villages of southern Sicily are deeply embedded in contemporary society and the processes of globalisation, incorporating elements of spectacle, technological dissemination, and a tourism-oriented approach. Nonetheless, they retain significant ritualistic and communal dimensions, alongside thought-provoking opportunities that emerge during the creation of allegories, floats, costumes, and carnival anthems—key elements in the dramatisation of narratives and imagery that hold particular relevance for the community.

The ‘forms of interaction’ inherent in the preparation and enactment of Carnival can be examined through the ‘home-street’ debate, which has implications for the use of public space and the sharing of private space. Furthermore, the interpretative lens of ‘familiarity and organisation’ is particularly pertinent, as it enables an understanding of the carnival both as a spontaneous occasion for social encounters and community recognition, and as a sphere of political and institutional decision-making.

A critical reflection on the Carnival phenomenon in the small towns of the Sicani area in Sicily must be contextualised within the broader social challenges these territories face today. The evolving structural dynamics between urban and rural areas have led to the increasing marginalisation of the so-called Italian Inner Areas, where depopulation processes exert a profound impact on the development of local cultural life.

Each year, Carnival organisers and the festival itself cope with the consequences of demographic decline, which manifest in a progressively shrinking organisational community and diminished audiences. These trends pose significant risks to social cohesion and the preservation of local identity. The contemporary Carnival does not exist in isolation from these socio-economic transformations; rather, such issues are explicitly articulated in the discourses and texts of allegories and hymns, which serve as ‘forms of communication’—the discursive dimension through which the symbols embedded in carnival performances convey meaning.

In light of these considerations, this article aims to: (i) describe the demographic and cultural dynamics of the municipalities of Santo Stefano Quisquina, Bivona, and Alessandria della Rocca, situated within the Sicani Inner Area of Sicily; (ii) investigate local carnival expressions from a historical perspective; and (iii) analyse contemporary carnival representations, with particular attention to the discourses on depopulation embedded within the dramatisations.

The conceptual framework for this analysis is grounded in the existing scholarly literature on carnival and festive events in Italy, with specific references to Sicilian traditions, as well as to the Brazilian Carnival, the Carnival of Barranquilla in Colombia, and the Carnival of Cádiz in Spain. These international examples serve as theoretical points of reference rather than as subjects of direct comparison with the Sicani context.

Additionally, the article reflects on the socio-cultural transformations occurring in rural areas and highly urbanised settings, particularly those linked to depopulation. Geolocalised quantitative data are employed to examine demographic trends in the study area, providing a contextual foundation for understanding how these challenges are represented in carnival narratives. The analysis subsequently focuses on the carnivals of the aforementioned municipalities, comparing traditional and contemporary expressions. This discussion is informed by a series of semi-struct-

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tured interviews conducted with various local actors involved in the present-day organisation of the carnival, including musicians, event organisers, representatives of local associations, and custodians of collective memory.³

1. Theoretical Definitions

In an attempt to interpret the carnival ritual, Buttitta (2010, p. 208) identifies four perspectives that are also relevant to the case study examined here: as a representation or dramatisation of cosmic chaos; as a representation or dramatisation of social chaos; as a temporary space of excess and enjoyment, not allowed in everyday life; and as a totemic event that engages the community, providing an image of cohesion and joy while contributing to the local economy by attracting external participants. These perspectives are present across different elements and manifestations of carnival, assuming varying degrees of emphasis in different historical periods. The multiplicity of elements and expressions emerging in local carnival traditions can be classified, according to Bausinger & Sordi (1982, p. 89), into three categories: 'signs', encompassing masks, emblems, and symbols; 'forms of interaction', which include processions, house-breaking, dances, and staged fights; and 'forms of communication', concerning language-based expressions such as satires, mock trials, songs, and proclamations. These elements—variably present across different local contexts—constitute the uncommon and exceptional nature of Carnival, manifesting in both public and private spaces.

Da Matta (1991) highlights the 'home' and the 'street' as the two central domains in which carnival unfolds in the Brazilian context. From a symbolic perspective, he examines the transition of elements between these two domains, from the domestic sphere to the public and vice versa. Public and impersonal values often infiltrate the private realm of the home, just as domestic elements extend into public space, to the point where 'the social world finds its centre in the personalised metaphor of the home' (Da Matta, 1991, p. 73). In some cases, these two spheres merge seamlessly. A different dynamic between the public and private spheres emerged in the revival of the Carnival of Cádiz, Spain, particularly following the return to democracy in 1979. From that period onwards, many spontaneous groups composed of family members found in the *peñas*⁴ not only a space to rehearse carnival songs but also a venue for intergenerational transmission and social gathering. These intimate and secure environments played a crucial role in reclaiming the street as a stage for freedom of expression, critique, satire, and humour—elements that define the contemporary festival, where costumes, parody, and songs serve as primary means of articulation (Mariscal, 2022, p. 206).

In the past, in the town of Corleone in Sicily, during the festivities, families and friends would gather in their homes to spend the evenings dancing, eating and singing 'i dubbi', riddles containing sexual references that, though prohibited by religious morality, provoked laughter among those present. Meanwhile, the streets were animated by masked figures, including the *riavulicchi*, who engaged in spontaneous group jumping and dancing, accompanied by the *cianciane tintinnanti*. On the final day, Mardi Gras (*Martedì Grasso*), the *Nannu* puppet was burned following the absurd reading of its will. This event, traditionally held in various neighbourhoods, represented a ritual sacrifice of a figure bearing the burdens of all evils, marking the birth of new forces (Cascio, 2022, p.108). With regard to the social and institutional dimensions of carnival, Matus & Aldana (2021) identify two key aspects in the Carnival of Barranquilla, Colombia, that shape audience participation: 'familiarity and spontaneity' and 'security and organisation'. The first aspect relates to the event's strong community foundations, its deep local roots, and its connection to historical memory. These elements foster social gatherings, the enjoyment of the festive moment, and improvisation. The second aspect concerns the in-

3 All interviews in the text were conducted by the author. A code is indicated to anonymise the testimonies.

4 In south Spain, "Peña" is a traditional bar where carnival groups usually practice their repertoire.

stitutional and managerial structures that regulate the event, ensuring its organisation and security while also highlighting the social contradictions that influence public participation and attendance.

The relationship between home and street, as well as between intimacy and impersonality and between familiarity and organisation, is particularly significant in the context of Sicily's small villages. Since the mid-twentieth century, a transformation in carnival events has been observed, shifting from celebrations held within homes to large-scale performances in the streets of the town. Another crucial aspect of the carnival phenomenon concerns its representative function as a ritual. One perspective in the study of rituals focuses on how elements of everyday social life are elaborated and dramatised within the festive moment—a concept that Buttitta (2010, p. 208) defines as the 'representation/dramatisation of social chaos'. This dimension, often overlooked in analyses of carnival, entails the transformation of real-world elements to create a 'new world'—a unique, highly significant, and politically charged moment. The dramatisation of everyday problems through ritual and myth offers an opportunity to reflect on the real world while also imagining an alternative one. Da Matta (1991, p. 25) explores how the ritual mirrors the social problems that triggers it, revealing «aspects that are normally submerged in daily routines, interests, indifferences, and other such complications».

In various traditional societies, dramatisation played a role in regenerating social cohesion and solidarity during times of crisis, counteracting processes of individualisation. In modern societies, by contrast, the ritual seeks to construct collective moments in which individuality is emphasised—whether represented by the local territory, an ethnic identity, or individual participants in the festive event. Within this framework, competitive and agonistic elements are integrated through the ritual to form 'omnicomprehensive totalities' (Da Matta, 1991, p. 18). However, different ritual combinations today accommodate both solidarity and individuality. Competition, which Caillois (2017) defines as *agon*, is one of the fundamental categories of play and manifests as a rivalry focused on a specific quality or attribute—be it ingenuity, endurance, memory, or other skills defined by the rules of the game—within well-established limits. Competition is a recurring feature in various festive expressions, such as in *contrade*, which represent neighbourhoods during *palii* or historical games, and in the structural division of the city based on «complex symbolic markings», as observed by Fabio Dei (2017, p. 21) in historical re-enactments. As Di Pasquale (2017, p. 176) notes in his description of the *Ferie delle Messi* in San Gimignano, competition does not necessarily conform to specific cultural criteria, nor does it always produce discriminatory effects. Instead, it fosters an atmosphere of enthusiastic engagement among groups and stimulates participation.

Following Simeoni's (2016, p. 90) perspective, local events should be analysed by considering their particularities in the «vitally current» moment. While these events recur annually, they are unrepeatable in their combination of tradition and modernity. Such celebrations evoke memory while simultaneously drawing inspiration from global trends, incorporating elements of invention, imitation, and negotiation. Beyond pursuing economic interests and seeking media visibility, local festivals contribute to the production of social bonds, emotional connections, and a sense of communal belonging. In this postmodern urban context, carnival remains a popular festival, though not in a strictly traditional sense. Rather, it takes the form of 'a hybrid entity' (Matus and Aldana, 2021, p. 5), in which public and private institutions support traditional events in response to weakening community ties. Regarding the changes of carnival events in twentieth-century Italy, Mirizzi (2017) describes the consolidation of mass culture in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the diffusion of transnational cultural models. When these global influences intersected with local traditions, the latter began to be perceived as remnants of a past world, associated with the elderly and often at odds with the expectations of younger generations. Today, this declining popular culture is being re-evaluated in response to a renewed interest in local identity and authenticity, often linked to tourism initiatives. In this context, Buttitta (2010, p. 234) describes contemporary 'popular' Carnivals, still alive in various inner areas and towns in Sicily, as disconnected from «traditional ceremonial systems», which have been excluded from

the calendrical festive cycle and desacralised. From this perspective, carnival has become an occasion for social gathering, entertainment, and collective reunion. In regions facing demographic decline, it serves as an opportunity for identity affirmation and local image promotion. Since the late twentieth century, the rediscovery of festive culture—both as an expression of belonging and as a driver of economic growth through tourism—has been critically interpreted as a process of «reification and instrumentalisation to the needs of the economy» (Rossi and Vanolo, 2010, p. 54). What was once a cultural dimension free from such impositions has now become a factor in capitalist development, repurposed to meet the demands of consumption and distributed on a global scale. At this point, a question arises regarding the meaning of carnival in contemporary society—a time in which, paraphrasing Bauman, liquidity has blurred the boundaries between culture and *loisir*, culture and entertainment, and authenticity and reinvention (Melotti, 2010, p. 61). While the rediscovery of traditional festivals is not only driven by commodification, it reflects a dual interest: the revival of an identity rooted in the past and the pursuit of authenticity within the framework of new media culture. The economic dimension of carnival as a «collective totemic event» is thus intertwined with its symbolic content. In this regard, Melotti (2010) describes how the process of glocalisation transcends borders and distances, bringing mass-consumed cultural elements from Brazil and the United States into various Italian carnivals. These new cultural elements may embody values that are different from those that originally characterised carnival celebrations. Nonetheless, new traditions can be invented that are recognised by the local inhabitants after a few decades. In this case, the notion of tradition is understood as a set of 'ritualised practices' that maintain an invariable character and reference a past that may be real or invented (Hobsbawm & Sanz, 2001).

Within Buttitta's (2010) framework of the «space-time of fun», some of the psychological and social functions of Sicily's 'traditional' carnival include its role in interrupting the continuity of daily life, fostering a temporary sense of community through participation, transgressing the dominant social value system, and satirising power. While these functions have not entirely disappeared, they now manifest in a range of urban entertainment forms, including media spectacles, stadium sports events, religious celebrations, festivals, and historical re-enactments. These are expressions of an ongoing 'carnivalisation' of society, in which entertainment is consumed as a commodity and serves to channel the tensions of life in a globalised world (Melotti, 2010, p. 64).

2. Sociodemographic Context of the Carnival in the Sicani Inner Area

Inner areas in Italy, small towns and villages less connected to metropolitan poles, are also affected by the cultural processes on a global scale mentioned above. However, in these territories, peculiarities linked to their rural condition and distance from urban centres can be observed, including depopulation. This demographic trend, together with phenomena such as unemployment, economic poverty, and territorial marginalisation, has contributed to the loss of cultural diversity and the vulnerability of tangible and intangible heritage in European rural areas. Local cultural and heritage resources, in turn, are fundamental in the development of these communities, representing opportunities for economic competitiveness and social cohesion in the mentioned territories (De Luca & Tondelli, 2022).

The depopulation and abandonment of inner areas, mainly concentrated in rural and mountainous regions of the country, is a long-standing historical-geographical process. This phenomenon is currently presented as a consolidated trend, organically linked with global dynamics, and is altering social, economic, and cultural conditions at the local level (Macchi Jánica & Palumbo, 2019). This demographic trend is observed in inner areas throughout the national territory, but with greater intensity in the South and in small municipalities (ISTAT, 2022).

According to Barca (2022), the marginalisation of inner territories arises not only from the loss of the crucial roles they once played in the overall territorial functions, which were supported by

usage, productive activities, and historically rooted social bases, but also from the urban imaginary that relegates them to a status of ‘remnants’ as opposed to metropolitan centers (De Rossi, 2018). Additionally, the ‘metrophilic culture,’ which exclusively associates modernity with large urban centers, views inner areas as places of refuge and seasonal leisure, or as ‘salvific’ spaces in the context of pandemics and climate change (Mussolino, 2023, p.145).

Moreover, the new model of urban-rural relations, characterized by high mobility of people and information, diverges from the previous static conception of Inner Areas. These regions now exhibit a cosmopolitan and hybrid character, facilitated by access to education, urban employment, and consumption (Querol & Ginés, 2021). From this perspective, one dimension of ‘rurbanity’ (Hoffmman et al., 2023) concerns the ‘lifestyle’ that leads a portion of the population to perceive themselves as «a little bit urban and a little bit rural» (Micheletti, Saravia, & Letelier, 2019, p.127). This dual belonging stems from the fact that, although they reside in cities, they maintain connections with rural areas due to their familial origins and the need to travel for certain activities. The carnivals analysed are located in the Sicani area, within the province of Agrigento in southern Sicily. This territory has been classified as an ‘inner area’ under the framework of the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), a national policy aimed at addressing the territorial marginality of municipalities defined as peripheral based on their distance from health, education, and rail services (De Toni et al., 2020). The SNAI identifies priority groups of municipalities that, through local partnerships, develop specific intervention strategies tailored to each territorial reality. In the case of the Sicani, the strategy was adopted to group 12 municipalities. To the northeast of this area, the three municipalities analysed—Alessandria della Rocca, Bivona, and Santo Stefano Quisquina—are situated in the hilly and mountainous region of the Sicani Mountains. The main towns of these three municipalities are approximately 15 kilometers apart.

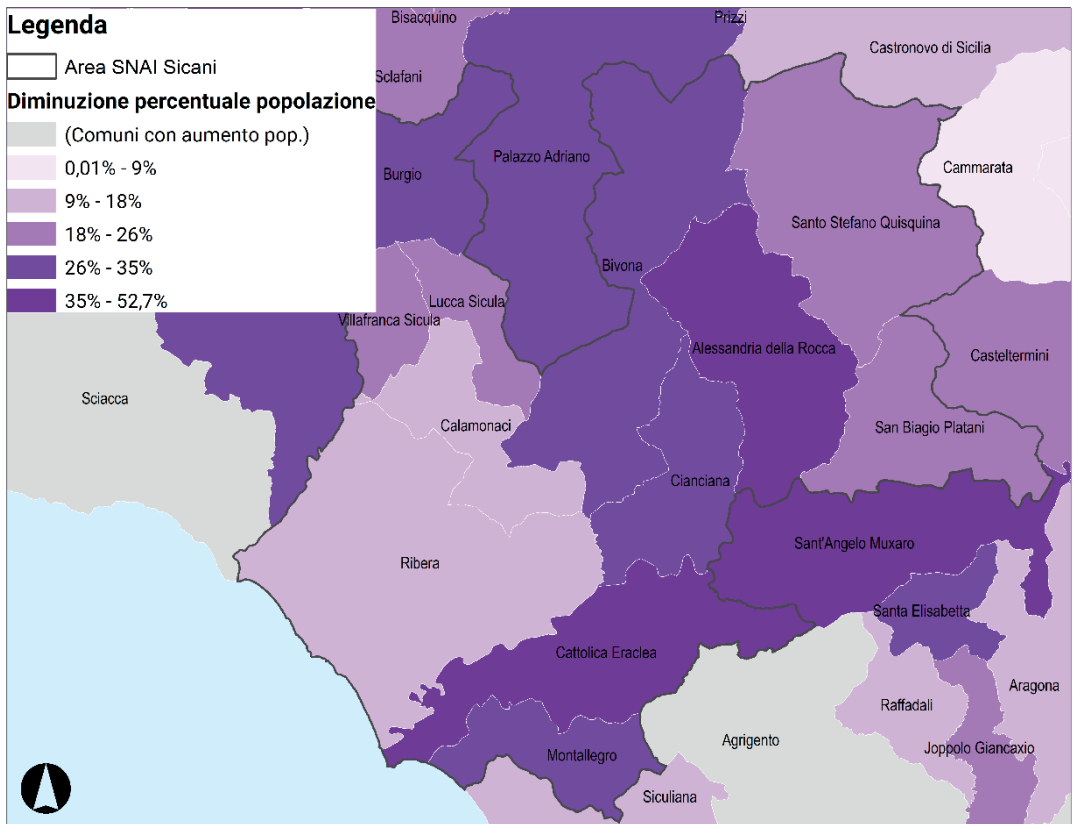


Fig. 1 - Percentage variation of municipalities in the Sicani inner area. ISTAT Census 1991-2018, SNAI intervention areas. Elaborated by the author.

The Sicani Inner Area is characterized by one of the highest percentage decreases in population over the 2011-2020 period (10.3%) (National Committee Inner Areas, 2022) and the highest proportion of peripheral and outermost municipalities (84.5%) compared to other SNAI Areas in Sicily⁵. Additionally, this area exhibits the highest percentage decrease in Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA) between 2000 and 2010, in relation to other Inner Sicilian Areas, with a reduction of -13.4%, falling well below the average of the Italian Inner Areas (-3.02%) (Census of Agriculture ISTAT, 2000; 2010). These data indicate a scenario of depopulation and peripherality, compounded by the decline in agricultural production and the traditional productive functions in these areas. As the Sicilian Region states (2021, p.3): «the homogeneity of the area is characterized by the economic fabric of the territory, predominantly agricultural with low income, lacking in the industrial sector and services, and with GDP per capita lower than the regional average».

In particular, the municipalities within the Sicani area show a significant decrease in population according to the ISTAT 1991 and 2021 censuses. Specifically, Alessandria della Rocca experienced a variation of -51.1%, Bivona -35.8%, and Santo Stefano Quisquina -26.1%. Despite the territory's demographic challenges, various institutional documents highlight positive conditions in other areas. For instance, the Sicilian Region (2021) notes the rich historical, cultural, archaeological, and natural heritage, and the consequent potential for the tourism sector. The first Local Development Plan (LDP) of the GAL Sicani (Local Action Group), anticipated in 2009, emphasized the historical and cultural values present in the area's villages, particularly events such as religious festivals and fairs linked to various local food productions, which have deep-rooted culinary traditions, handicrafts, and manual labour techniques.

Among the territory's priority needs, the LAP identifies: «enhancing the rural cultural heritage by recovering or strengthening the territories' identity, promoting culture in rural areas (literature, music, cinema, theatre, etc.), and recreational activities» (Sicilian Region, 2009, p.15). Moreover, the Sicilian Region (2021) explicitly indicates that the Sicani area stands out for its cultural and traditional events that enrich its annual calendar of activities, holding significant potential for tourism. However, it is emphasized that it is necessary to complement the actions of dissemination, protection, and promotion of material, archaeological, and natural heritage with the enhancement of its intangible dimensions, as noted by Gana (2022, p.132), by strengthening the existing cultural activities and events, as well as the actors and communities that manage them.

3. The Carnival in the “Sicani Area”

Various secular festive events and others linked to the religious calendar are active and socially rooted in the Sicani area. In almost all towns in this area, the ancient agrarian and religious symbolism of loaves of bread is represented on altars and tables, a tradition especially renowned in Chiusa Sclafani, Cianciana, and San Biagio Platani, where the 'Easter Arches' (Archi di Pasqua) festivity also takes place, attracting tourists from all over Sicily. The riggattiate, uniquely celebrated in Burgio during Holy Week and in Calamonaci for the feast of San Vincenzo Ferreri in August, is another event that remains strongly felt today (Cicala, 2015).

Carnival, while part of the religious calendar, has a secular character and still thrives in several towns in the area. For instance, in February 2023, it was celebrated in most municipalities of the area, including San Biagio Platani, Santo Stefano Quisquina, Bivona, Alessandria della Rocca, Montallegro, Cattolica Eraclea, Ribera, and Villafranca Sicula. In 2024, the event was revived by a municipal initiative in Burgio, Cianciana, and Lucca Sicula.

In the three analysed municipalities, Carnival is one of the most significant secular festivities in the annual calendar, with a local rootedness comparable to that of religious festivities, which sometimes attract more tourist interest. This rootedness also has historical foundations: in the

⁵ Data from the map of Internal Areas, with methodological support from NUVAP (Department for Cohesion Policies) and NUVEC (Agency for Territorial Cohesion).

past, Carnival involved the entire community, regardless of local peculiarities related to festive expressions. Today, Carnival celebrations are confined to small towns and the main streets. Each municipality provides limited resources to help build an allegorical float and support other expenses. Youth groups associated with the festivity and some associations coordinate fundraising among small local businesses for additional financial support to organize the event, design and build the float, and produce costumes and other necessary materials.

«Because of the economic situation, many young people are forced to emigrate to the north or even abroad for study or work reasons; consequently, these small communities remain somewhat uninhabited. Those of us who remain, whether we are in high school or fortunate enough to work in our hometown, manage to organize activities in our own small way [...] the municipality has funded part of these activities, but all the local businesses also contribute as sponsors» (Interview 01, Santo Stefano Quisquina, 18/02/2023).

Until the 1950s and 1960s, Carnival had a less spectacular, yet more community-based and sharing version among fellow citizens, as described in the various villages through the memories of those interviewed. It consisted of celebrations inside the village houses, opened specifically for the arrival of masqueraders, who, led by a non-masked character, the *bastoniere*, partied wherever there was music for dancing—also sharing simple, homemade food—while visiting different houses during the festive evenings. According to Bausinger & Sordi (1982, p.89), the carnival ‘forms of interaction’ at that time were housebreaking and dancing. This event was reportedly being revived by local associations in towns such as Palazzo Adriano, where masked youth dressed as shepherds, with large sticks in their hands, were already running and dancing «accompanied by carnivalesque shouts» in the main squares and streets at the end of the 19th century (Pitrè, 1889, p.23).

«They would come and ask: tenemo lo sonu? And there were all these people who dressed up in masks and wandered around these houses where the ‘sonu’ (sound or noise) was kept. There was a gentleman who would escort the masquerades, talk to the owner of the house and say: I have a group of masks. Since we all know each other here, it’s a small village, so he would give the consent to let the masks in» «On Saturdays and Sundays there was ‘sonu’. On Tuesdays there was carnival and then we traditionally had the ‘carnelevarune’, which meant that on the following Sunday we had the last carnelevarata, the last dance, the last evenings, and we were always hanging around [...] This type of carnival lasted until the late 1960s and early 1970s» (Interview 02, Alessandria della Rocca, 19/02/2023).

In the following decades, allegorical floats and outdoor festive activities, which included parades, processions, and masked dances around the floats, became the predominant events, replacing the tradition of lo sonu and house-to-house dances. One of the reasons for this shift can be traced back to the influence of the Matricola festivity from the 1960s onwards, which gained prominence as increasing numbers of younger people enrolled to the university (Green, 2023). Consequently, carnival expressions evolved towards celebrations that required more expensive and complex material production, both in the construction of the floats and the manufacture of costumes and the management of the event. Broccolini (2013, p.62), describing the Lenten carnival in Poggio Mirteto, defines this festive mode as a «typically urban carnival», in the Parisian style of the late 19th century, characterized by parades of floats, dances, and parties. From Buttitta’s (2010, p.241) perspective, contemporary Sicilian carnivals draw inspiration from spectacular carnival events of various origins, such as those in Venice, Viareggio, and Rio de Janeiro; an argument that aligns with Melotti’s (2010) observation on the influence received by Italian carnivals from abroad. These hegemonic models became established especially since the 1960s through media such as radio, press, and television, and can be observed in Sicilian rural communities.

In this process of transformation, the influence of major Sicilian carnivals such as those in Sciacca and Acireale, where the floats are the main attraction, has been significant. In addition to the changes in material elements, important symbolic elements were introduced during this period, such as the drafting of allegories with poetic and ironic connotations, referring to local and national actuality, as well as the representation of historical characters and worldwide stereotypes. In the three countries analysed, a decline in participation in Carnival and a decrease in the impact of this activity can be observed in recent years, a phenomenon resulting from various institutional, cultural, and demographic factors. For example, interviews confirm that the resources made available by the municipality for the production of Carnival have progressively decreased: «we feel that gradually this tradition is fading away because primarily the economic problem... that money is the main problem of realisation, then depopulation» (Interview 03, Santo Stefano Quisquina, 15/04/2023). These funds were used to finance the infrastructure of the event, i.e., the construction of the float, the dressmaking of the costumes, the logistical and technical production, as well as the cash prizes for the various competing categories. In previous decades, the funds allocated by the municipalities were larger and allowed for the construction of more floats. Additionally, these resources had a positive effect on the local economy, benefiting shops, tailor's shops, and encouraging the arrival of visitors. With the reduction of these resources, these positive impacts gradually diminished.

The agonistic dimension, enabled by the presence of several floats and masked groups in each village, is significant, as it is one of the symbolic motivations that drove various youth groups to put their best efforts into creating a creative proposal: «the carnival comes from there. The sprint, the desire to make the most beautiful float is born precisely because there is an active competition, a healthy competition because there are no quarrels [...] we know each other, we are friends, but when the Carnival period begins we are rivals» (Interview 03, Santo Stefano Quisquina, 15/04/2023). The agonistic motivation and group involvement that this non-exclusive competition entails are aspects previously noted by Callois (2017) and Di Pasquale (2017).

Prior to the 2020 pandemic closure, witnesses report that the formation of antagonistic groups was sometimes influenced by the presence of a specific memory bearer, who attracted their own circle of friends. However, in 2023, the reduction of resources offered by the municipalities led youth groups to unite in the construction of a single float for each village. This change has not resulted in a loss of the festive spirit, although motivation has suffered, especially in Alessandria della Rocca, where participation has greatly diminished and needs greater encouragement and guidance from the associations organizing the event.

4. Social Dynamics and Festive Traditions

From the interviewees' testimonies, it emerges that Carnival in this area was severely affected by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, during which, like many other cultural events, it was suspended. Its resurgence has not been easy, as the dynamics of interaction and familiarity, which were renewed each year for the organisation of the event, had dissipated. The motivation of the youth groups, which in each country drove the realisation of the carnival, has diminished to some extent due to migration processes, the scarcity of available resources, and the reduced time available for organisational management, also influenced by the late opening of calls for tenders by the municipalities. «For two years we had no carnival because of the pandemic, so the spirit had been lost a little. For example, sometimes they use the old structures, they transform them, instead, now they have been lost because for two years they abandoned them [...] if before they were seen more often now, they are seen less [...] So everything has become more complicated» (Interview 04, Santo Stefano Quisquina, 10/01/2023). «(The impact) could be even better, you could do more, (but we have) very low costs. How do you make structures, beautiful things? because you stimulate people like this, there is a prize, we pay for everything, let's try [...] Here we

arrive every year at Carnival the last days. How do you stimulate the children to do things, when such bureaucracy...? Besides, if you say it fifteen days before, it's complicated to solve» (Interview 05, Alessandria della Rocca, 19/02/2023).

Despite these difficulties, the festival still maintains an important gathering function and a 'sense of communion' (Simeoni, 2016), characteristic of contemporary 'popular' carnivals, as defined by Buttitta (2010). This function, particularly relevant for young participants, manifests itself in the preparation process preceding the activity, involving the collective creation of the allegorical float and choreography, inspired by concepts significant to the community. In these processes, unique moments of meeting and sharing occur throughout the year, which also motivate the return to the village of some young 'emigrants'.

«The best thing is not only the three evenings of Carnival, it's all the preparation that goes on beforehand. The guys rent a garage, a warehouse, and for more than a month, they build the float. Obviously, it's not really work, but it's an aggregative moment, so in the evening, you eat together, you put on music, you have company» (Interview 04, Santo Stefano Quisquina, 10/01/2023). «There were guys waiting to book the plane to come back for Carnival, which shows that there's still an attachment to this tradition» (Interview 06, Santo Stefano Quisquina, 10/01/2023).



Fig. 2 - 'Power, consumism, taboos are the laws of RAI TV', Alessandria della Rocca carnival 1983, and the 'Mamma RAI and Marco Polo' float. Source: photograph by Armando Cannata.

Regarding the ritual aspect, Carnival still retains some significant elements, albeit of recent origin. These elements are expressed in the dramatisation of the allegory embodied in the float itself, in the costumes, and in the composition of the hymn, which is learnt by the community during the period of preparation and reproduced during the parade. Specifically, one of the fundamental forms of Carnival communication in these countries is the allegory, defined by the interviewees as an easily understandable carnival idea with a social and topical theme, represented through the structure and characters of the float.

Individuals working on the creation of the allegory generally possess more experience and a greater personal commitment than the majority of young people involved in the construction of

the float. Filippo Mortellaro, a young student from Santo Stefano Quisquina involved in designing the allegory, inherited significant experience from his father, who built floats, and from his grandfather, Gaetano Ippolito, who acted as a *bastoniere* (Baton twirler) in the 1960s. However, the new generations experience some difficulties in fully understanding the importance of allegory:

«The allegories used here in Alessandria, as in all villages, are subjects that concern either the town or the nation [...] We'll base it on the local administration of this village and also generalize to Italy, because 'Toyland' (il paese dei balocchi) can also refer to Italy and Italian politics of the last 30 years. The problem is that I understand it. When I tell them -we have to see the allegory inside the cart- they ask: why? Because otherwise there is no point in making the float» (Interview 05, Alessandria della Rocca, 19/02/2023).

The idea of the allegory can be developed by an individual or a group, which chooses the basic theme from several proposed alternatives, related to local, national or international current events. Once the theme is decided, the allegory is represented in a sketch and, in some cases, written in a poetic text. An allegory with an international subject inspired the King Kong float of 1983, one of the most remembered in Bivona:

«King Kong was a structure, a giant, an animal that you see in the movies, but our reality was to show that at that moment in history, where there was the possibility of a third world war, to show Russia and the US confronting each other, and there was this big chimpanzee holding both the Russian leader and the US leader, and saying that if it's the third world war, I will be the one to rule, that is a return to prehistory, a return to being ruled by chimpanzees» (Interview 07, Bivona, 18/02/2023).

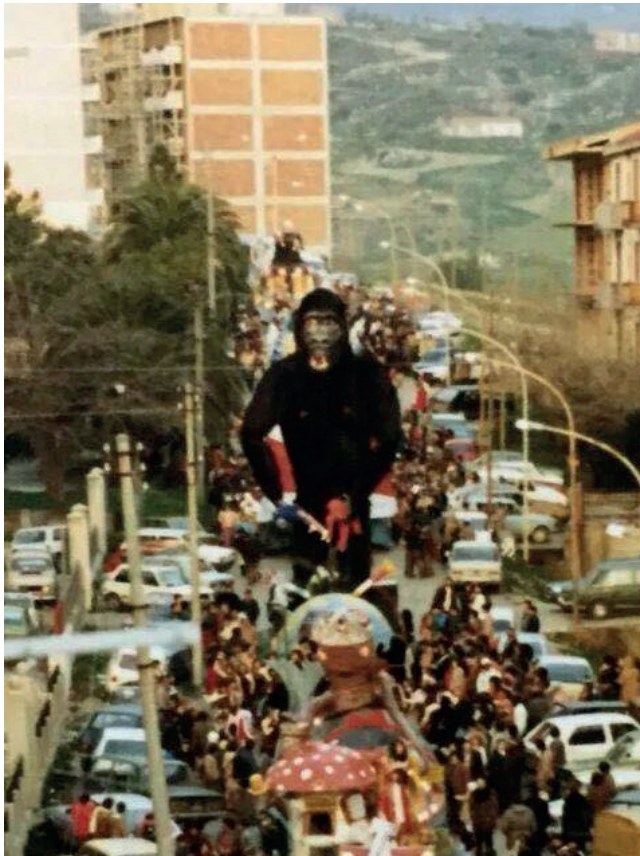


Fig. 3 - 'King Kong' allegorical wagon in the streets of Bivona, 1983.
Photograph sent in by Matteo Baio.

In 2023, the young *carristi* (float builders) of the Bello Lampo Group chose a subject for the allegory for the Santo Stefano Quisquina Carnival that is particularly relevant to the demographic problems in the small municipalities of the Sicilian inner areas. The allegorical float is entitled «A forza di ni nni iri lu carnevale va a finiri» (By dint of leaving, the carnival comes to an end). The allegory is dedicated to the local territory and underlines how the Carnival tradition is being lost due to economic problems, depopulation, and youth emigration. The return to the origins is represented by the traditional masks of Harlequin and Columbine, while the eagle, which takes a «flight of improvement», represents the passion for Carnival of a friend of the group of *carristi*, who passed away a few years ago and who had conceived the idea for this design (Interview 03, Santo Stefano Quisquina, 15/04/2023). The allegory reads as follows:

«Migration changes traditions that remain the heritage of all humanity. 'Escape' has changed the lives, the daily lives of the young people, but there is one thing we have learnt most of all: the desire to 'return to traditions'. In the float, Harlequin, Columbine, Punchinello, Pantalone and the eagle, an animal that masters in the foreground, symbolize the desire to return to the nest. The remaining figures emphasize a great desire to return to the past, that traditional past that made carnival rich and prosperous, to which each of us, with a lump in our throat, always remains anchored» (Frammento dell'allegoria. Gruppo Bello Lampo, 2023).



Fig. 4 - Sketch of the allegorical float 'A forza di ni nni iri lu carnevale va a finiri', Carnevale Quisquinense 2023. Drawing by Filippo Mortellaro.

The allegory underlies a second form of communication, namely, the Carnival anthem that serves as the soundtrack for the float. It is an original song, meant to be sung, characterized by cheerful carnival music with a tarantella beat and other traditional rhythmic elements, reinterpreted in a pop key. The hymn of the Carnival of Santo Stefano Quisquina 2023 was composed and produced by Salvatore Cacciatore, a local musician, who involved the *carristi* and some local personalities in the creative process, both in the composition of the song and in listening to what

was being created in the recording studio. Once completed, the song is distributed throughout the village so that it is known by everyone during the festivities.

«The anthem is a very important thing. So all the young people come to my studio to listen to what is being born, to see what it is because there is so much expectation. The anthem then is very catchy, it must immediately stick in the head. So already before Carnival, I give them the CD already prepared, the whole company knows it by heart and immediately there is a total diffusion of copies and everyone knows it. The evening of Carnival they all go out and by the time I put the hymn on everyone already knows it. [...] what makes the difference, however, is the theme, i.e., the allegory in the float, because if it's witty it's already an extra plus, and it also makes a difference the group of young people for that kind of float» (Interview 08, Santo Stefano Quisquina, 09/01/2023).

The Carnival anthem is now considered an established 'tradition' by interviewees. This expression arises from the passion for Carnival, and the desire for community involvement in the creation process. Although the hymn is a relatively recent tradition, it has taken root in these small villages in recent decades. In the 1980s, anthems did not yet exist; instead, amplified music was played on floats, often carnival and Brazilian music, but not specifically created for the occasion. Anthems, in the form we know today, emerged in the 1990s, as Pietro Lattuca recalls in reference to Bivona. Lattuca composed the music for several songs for the floats, some with lyrics written by local poet Giuseppe 'Beppe' Scili Bellomo. In Alessandria della Rocca, one of the musicians who has recently worked on composing carnival anthems is Daniele Guastella. These new carnival songs follow the rhythmic and sound pattern of the Sciacca Carnival anthems.



Fig. 5 - 'Ballets in front of the allegorical float'. Carnival of Santo Stefano Quisquina 2023.
Source: photograph by the author, 19 February 2023.

The social topics present in the allegory and their subsequent staging in creative elements such as the float, costumes, and anthem are concrete examples of the «representation/dramatisation of social chaos» through a contemporary carnival event. In today's Carnival, social cohesion and collective reaffirmation are manifested in public spaces, i.e., on the street. However, during the

periods of preparation and construction of the creative elements, the dimension of familiarity in intimate encounters and the weaving of social bonds in closed spaces are crucial. This process takes place in warehouses where the float is built, in bars, or sports centers where the choreography is prepared.

5. Final Reflections

Carnivals in small Sicilian villages have undergone significant changes in recent decades. Since the 1980s, celebrations have shifted from a logic of familiarity, spontaneity, and intimacy to one of impersonality, organization, and security (Matus & Aldana, 2021), moving from the house to the street (Da Matta, 1991). In this transformation, the incorporation of global cultural elements (Melotti, 2010) and the influence of other Sicilian carnivals, such as that of Sciacca, have conferred a greater character of spectacularity and competition (Cailliois, 2017). In these rural contexts, a popular and contemporary carnival is configured (Buttitta, 2010) which, although it maintains ritualized practices that are locally recognized as traditions, is of recent origin and incorporates elements of invention: techniques and knowledge in the construction of floats, literary forms and satire in the allegory, musical and poetic forms in the anthem, 'forms of interaction' (Bausinger & Sordi, 1982) and entertainment in the carnival evenings.

In an attempt at identity affirmation, these practices are integrated into the dimension of cultural events that, in addition to contributing to social gathering, promote the local image in contexts of economic decline and depopulation. However, Carnival still maintains dynamics of dramatization of social chaos (Buttitta, 2010), especially through its creative elements: the float, costumes, dances, and 'forms of communication' such as allegories and anthems, which incorporate relevant community issues such as depopulation. Indeed, in spite of demographic trends, the artistic groups, associations, and communities of carvers that still remain in these villages continue to express their resilience through creative carnival work.

Carnival still represents an opportunity for meeting and social gathering, especially among young people, but there is also a gradual loss of motivation by these generations, due in part to the diminishing presence of people in the organizing collectives and spectators, key groups in events that, just a few years ago, involved an important part of the community. In the interviews, the issue of the predominant role played by technology and social networks for the younger generations emerges as a factor in the limited interest in 'traditions' and popular festivities. On the other hand, the motivation and commitment shown especially by the young girls of Alessandria della Rocca, in comparison to the boys, when carrying out cultural projects such as Carnival, is emphasized.

The demographic problems are highlighted in the discourses of the interviewees, especially in relation to the emigration of young people. External support and the few 'new energies' that fuel cultural activities in these villages are unable to counteract the effects of demographic decline. These trends also have an impact on the decline of people mastering the traditional trades and crafts behind Carnival production. This brings to a halt the process of passing on cultural knowledge to new generations, as with the technique of cartapesta (papier-mâché) and iron structures for the construction of the float, as well as with costume tailoring, which is now being replaced with clothes bought on the internet. These difficulties are not adequately addressed by administrations which, with a few exceptions, allocate decreasing resources to this activity every year.

A stronger institutional commitment to Carnival within the events calendar, including a certain amount of financial support, could initiate the revival of this moment of social and creative encounter, especially for young people. An example is the municipality of Cattolica Eraclea, where resources for Carnival have increased considerably in recent years, bringing good results (Interview 09, Cattolica Eraclea, 29/08/2023). In addition, the inclusion of Carnival in an intermunicipal logic, with social, cultural, and economic objectives, could have positive effects in these

depopulated territories, overcoming the fragmentary character of initiatives, which limits the effectiveness of cultural actions and increases the risk of banalization, in the logic of the spectacularization of art as decoration (Crobe, 2023).

Finally, a more accurate planning of the event could allow the connection with the Carnivals of the neighboring countries, the organization of common activities, the integration of associations and cultural stakeholders beyond the limits of each municipality and, as a possible positive impact, a greater presence of tourists, as well as local inhabitants returning to the village on the celebration days. This should be achieved without neglecting the pursuit of the aims of social cohesion of the most vulnerable groups, an aspect often not adequately addressed by the so-called 'cultural instrumentalism' initiatives (Rossi & Vanolo, 2010, p.68) for the promotion of culture in order to achieve development goals.

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