

A Century of James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*

Shaking the Tree, Breaking the Bough

Edited by
Stephanie Lynn Budin and Caroline J. Tully

First published 2025

ISBN: 978-1-032-69563-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-69564-8 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-69565-5 (ebk)

Chapter 18

Derivative and Associative Popular Frazerism

A Cultural Complex at Work in Late Modern
Europe

Alessandro Testa

CC-BY 4.0

DOI: 10.4324/9781032695655-24

The funder of the Open Access version of this chapter is Charles University.

18 Derivative and Associative Popular Frazerism

A Cultural Complex at Work in Late Modern Europe

Alessandro Testa

Introduction

The cultural complex I define as “popular Frazerism” has been at work in Europe for decades. This conclusion is based on comparative empirical research in various areas of Europe that I have been undertaking for some fifteen years to date (2024). In this chapter, I shall endeavour to recapitulate the theoretical scope of this concept that is both descriptive and analytical, and expand on its original formulations. For instance, I propose a new analytical differentiation between a “derivative popular Frazerism” and an “associative popular Frazerism.” Furthermore, I comment on and make use of some criticisms of the original formulation of the concept, that is, after the studies in which I theorised and presented “popular Frazerism” were published.¹ These studies are the obvious starting point whence this chapter takes off and feeds upon. Borrowings from those texts do, inevitably, occur in this chapter, but the chapter also fleshes out the evidence on which I based my original formulations and branches out towards possible new descriptive and analytical usages.

Popular Frazerism (PF henceforth) describes and explains a set of phenomena within the broader constellation of phenomena which have been named “folk—or ritual—revival.” Such “revival” might be understood as the renewed interest in local traditions, local history, cultural tourism, and similar trends that emerged slowly in Europe after World War II, gained traction and became ethnographically visible (and started to be studied) in the 1960s, and accelerated during the 1970s and 1980s. Since the 1990s, these phenomena have often crystallised into rather specific forms, and as such have become objects of institutionalisation and, since the early 2000s, also of “patrimonialisation” through the international UNESCO ICH (Intangible Cultural Heritage) scheme as well as national schemes.² Folk revivalism, ritual revitalisation, cultural heritage making, cultural institutionalisation, touristification, and ethnographic musealisation are among the most evident clusters of socio-cultural processes that characterise this pan-European trend, which is still ongoing.

During these decades, and especially since the 1970s, and until today (what I hereby call “the late modern times”), local and rural festivals and rituals, once

considered as the expression of “backward” lifestyles and often viewed with scorn and even suppressed as obstacles to modernisation, have gained renewed attention and evaluation both at the etic and emic levels. Communities have used and reconfigured their traditions to express different social concerns, claims, and expectations, but also in order openly to challenge, sanction, or fortify existing political orders or other aspects of social reality. Today there exists a rich literature discussing all of these aspects which has been produced since the 1970s, but especially after the 1980s.³ In fact, it has recently been claimed that this late modern cultural (and specifically ritual) flourishing has constituted the means for different and alternative incarnations—or refusals—of no less than “modernity” itself.⁴ At the very least, it constitutes a more or less conscious challenge to the social “acceleration” that modernity is conventionally thought to bring about; in other words, as has been claimed, folk revival can be considered as “a response from communities seeking to re-assert their identities in the face [...] of rapid structural change, social mobility, and globalisation processes.”⁵ Another, similar opinion affirms that “participatory festivals are neither simple drunken revels nor mystical survivals of ancestral rites but resonant forms of collective action in response to a global crisis of local communities.”⁶ As such, they currently contribute substantially to what has been convincingly named the “European heritage/memory/identity complex.”⁷

The set of phenomena that PF as a concept aspires to describe and understand is today widely spread throughout continental Europe, the British Isles, and elsewhere in what is commonly understood to be the “West” in our late modern times. This fact has led me to proceed inductively in my empirically based methodology. However, there is also a historiographical and theoretically inductive element in my theorisation, which is related to an interest in the scholarship of Sir James Frazer and its reception, and more particularly in the Italian tradition of studies thereof. Italy, my country of origin and the country where most of my pre-doctoral studies were completed, has over the last few decades produced an increasingly rich number of works on Frazer and his intellectual legacy in social/cultural anthropology, folkloristics, and history of religions.⁸ Among these, I am particularly indebted to the ideas of Fabio Dei (1998) and Paola De Sanctis (1984); the latter observed a long time ago the “viral” nature of some of Frazer’s interpretations and their appeal at both the emic and etic levels, to both scholars and laypeople alike.⁹ For instance, as Dei, discussing European ethnology and folkloristics during the better part of the 20th century (and beyond), aptly remarked:

Frazerism has been evident especially in the tendency to interpret any random folkloric element either by evoking the laws of sympathetic magic or by considering it a survival of ancient agrarian rites. Folklore as a discipline has been deeply influenced by this kind of approach [...]. Studies on superstition, festivals and popular theatre, on carnival, games, witchcraft, popular medicine, and on many ceremonial facts have not been able to avoid the influence of Frazerian theses.¹⁰

The tendency to interpret old European festivals and rituals, and the European festivals and rituals *par excellence*, i.e. carnivals, through Frazer's lenses, has been at times so strong as to become *de facto* not only the mainstream but actually the hegemonic interpretation of said facts. This is hardly surprising, for Frazer's is the first modern, systematic, coherent, and *influential* anthropological account of the origins and function of European seasonal festivals and rituals. This account was built upon an entirely suggestive narrative (verging on a piece of historical imagination) that stemmed from the story of the *Rex Nemorensis* in ancient Italy, which, as is well known, is the foundational narrative upholding that entire interpretative edifice that goes under the name of *The Golden Bough*, by far Frazer's most influential and cited work.¹¹

Frazer's Interpretation of European Festivals and Rituals, and the Legacy Thereof¹²

As detailed above, Frazer's work on European rituals, ceremonies, festivals, and carnivals as the quintessential European ritual festive tradition was perhaps not the first, but quite surely the widest and most systematic, and certainly the most influential. According to Frazer, European carnival traditions, documented from the Middle Ages onwards throughout the continent, were to be included in the macro-category of springtime festivities in which propitiatory magical rituals were performed to foster the fertility of the fields. In other words, festivities for the "awakening" or cyclical renewal of nature after the winter (see also Cornish, this volume). However, the hypothesis of the propitiatory nature of seasonal rituals practised in rural Europe to promote or invoke the fecundity of the earth did not originate with Frazer, but with the German scholar Wilhelm Mannhardt and his work *Wald- und Feldkulte* (see also Rosa, this volume).¹³ According to what should probably actually be called the Mannhardt-Frazer theory, these traditions presumably had pre-Christian origins and had "survived," owing to a variety of historical circumstances, and especially in rural folklore, in different forms and intensities up to the modern era, when they were observed and described by folklorists. As "survivals" of pagan times, they were linked to a deep past, but at the same time still bore a function for the communities that had kept and transmitted them in different forms for hundreds of years up until the Victorian century of progress.

Frazer was interested not only in carnival features as observable in folklore but also in their origins and functions. His curiosity also regarded the "magical" properties of the acts and rituals performed during carnival. For example, he considered the ritual killing of the carnival puppet, a pseudo-rite widespread throughout Europe, as a particular kind of "sympathetic magic," a concept that, as is well known, he himself had theorised (see also Lampe and Moorrees, this volume). The puppet, often called by grandfather-like nicknames, represented the outgoing year (or the winter) that had to be "killed" to eliminate the old and, in so doing, ensure the coming of the new, the rebirth of nature, and therefore the renewed fertility of the fields.

Another hypothesis found in Frazer's pages about carnivals and similar festivities, and worth mentioning here, is also linked to their temporal and calendric dimensions: It is based on the idea that, like other pagan festivals, during European carnivals it was possible to observe a tripartite dynamic of social order. During carnival, the local society went from a pre-festive period of stability through a ritualised disorder and subversion of the normal societal and political order, only to undertake, afterwards, a restoration of that same order.¹⁴

One can therefore consider Frazer's interpretations of carnival to be founded on at least three major features: a) the diachronic dimension or "survival" of these festivities from ancient times; b) the propitiatory function through sympathetic magic embodied especially—but not exclusively—in scapegoat-like performances (the killing and similar rituals as a necessary act to ensure fertility and the perpetuation of the agrarian year); and c) a draft of a social theory of ritualised disorder, which was to be theorised, later and closely in accordance with Frazer's formulation, by other scholars interested in European popular culture—the so-called "safety-valve theory." These three elements have been extremely influential in folkloristics, ethnology, anthropology, and the history of religions, although detractors of his theories and methods existed both when his main works were being published and, especially, afterwards.

In Italy, one of the European countries renowned for its long tradition of folkloric studies, Frazer's theories about carnivals were studied and used early by scholars, but they were made popular mainly through a very influential book, *Le origini del teatro italiano* (*The origins of Italian theatre*) by Paolo Toschi (1955). Toschi's interpretation of carnivals and carnival-like festivities and their ritual features borrows heavily from Frazer's analyses and conclusions. Conversely, a voice significantly and authoritatively discordant on the relationship between carnival and fertility is that of Arnold van Gennep, a French ethnologist and folklorist who was also a crucial figure in the development of modern folkloristics and anthropology, and whose theories are still influential, especially in the field of ritual studies. Van Gennep was profoundly skeptical of Frazer's methods and conclusions, and he criticised his British colleague several times in his monumental encyclopedia of French folklore—particularly in the book devoted to the "cyclical seasonal ceremonies."¹⁵ He refused a "survivalist" approach on the basis of the assumption that social and cultural facts can exist and live only insofar as they bear an actual function for society; if it were not so, they would not persist as cultural relics, but would be disused and abandoned. Even before Frazer's death, many were his colleagues who criticised and moved beyond the survivalist paradigm. By the second half of the 20th century, few would defend it, and it is today widely discredited and considered of mere historiographical significance.¹⁶

Despite these reservations and critiques, the diffusion of Frazer's main theses was pervasive to the extent of becoming the standard—or even canonical—exegetis for specialists, and even more so for amateurs and learned but non-academic people, as is discussed in greater detail in the following pages.

The (Main) Evidence

The empirical evidence that sustains the theory presented in the following sections can be divided into three main categories: 1) first-hand systematic ethnography; 2) first-hand unsystematic ethnographic observations; and 3) secondary sources. The first refers to my own intensive, long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Italy, Czechia, and Catalonia (and to a lesser extent Austria); the second to direct but circumstantial and occasional observation of similar phenomena elsewhere in Europe; and the third to comparisons and parallels that I have drawn between what I have observed and studied personally and what can be found in the now rich literature about the European ritual and folk revival. A brief description of these case studies will also make it clear why I have proposed to name this cultural complex “popular Frazerism.”

The ethnographic studies I refer to are about the ritual of the Deer-man (“*GI' Cierv*”) in Castelnuovo al Volturno, Molise (Italy); the Masopust (the western Slavic carnival-like festival) in Hlinsko v Čechách, Bohemia (Czechia); the carnival of Solsona, Catalonia (Spain); and the Krampus “runs” or parades of the Salzburg region in Austria. I have, however, also gathered evidence concerning many other similar (and sometimes also dissimilar) “carnavalesque” rituals and festivals around Europe. In these, the main symbolic source of inspiration for the emic understanding of said rituals and festivals (as well as for the connected local aesthetic taste and historical explanation about such facts) has been, I have concluded, Frazer’s theses on European agrarian festivities and folk rituals, or rather a popularised version of these theses. This popularisation includes local, emic notions of ritually fostered fertility; the appeal to agrarian magic; a rather uncritical inclination towards cross-cultural comparison based only on formal similitudes; the seasonal aspect considered as a crucial aetiology; and/or the supposed pagan origins of those phenomena—for instance, their being a “survival” of ancient, pre-Christian rituals (at times considered of presumed unfathomable antiquity or even prehistoric).¹⁷ These traits can coexist or not. In most cases, only some of them are mobilised in the emic interpretations; in others, they all exist at once. Emblematic in this respect is the case of Castelnuovo al Volturno, where the carnival performance centres around the ritual “hunting” of a man disguised with furs and horns as a deer, its killing and resuscitation, the final casting of a handful of wheat grain, and a number of other complementary ritual acts.

The case of Castelnuovo is particularly striking because of at least two other factors. First, the Frazerian “agrarian magic” that is today at the core of the pantomime of the Deer-man results not from spontaneous popular inventiveness, but from an operation of cultural bricolage promoted by one sole individual, a documentarist and amateur ethnographer alien to the village of Castelnuovo itself, in the early 1990s. This operation eventually led to the shaping of a brand-new ritual magical act and also to the formation of the belief in its effectiveness, which is furthermore a rather striking example of the emergence of a newly created magical symbol. This new symbol, established through an act of ritualisation promoted by a social agent external to the locals and to the ritual performers, has not only been accepted and

integrated into the ritual machinery of the performance but is now characterised by a dimension of greater symbolic density or intensity. It aptly exemplifies the idea of “symbolic hierarchy” that I have theorised elsewhere.¹⁸ Second, it can be demonstrated easily through written documentation that virtually all the interpretations proposed and diffused by said amateur ethnographer—as well as by his counterpart, a “rival” learned man and amateur ethnographer active in the same years, and also in the numerous publications that they penned or were published during the period of the revitalisation of the Deer-man—are based on Frazer’s abridged edition of *The Golden Bough*. Many other improvised and impressionistic interpreters followed suit, and a flourishing literature grew around the Deer-man in the 1990s and early 2000s, also promoted and subsidised by the local cultural association that took over the organisation of the festival in the early 1990s. This documentation I have diligently collected and studied. The level of knowledge, understanding, and usage of Frazer’s actual theses by these different social actors can vary significantly (sometimes it is sound, other times less so, other times very superficial, for the greater part of this literature was produced by authors with little or no education in history, folkloristics, or anthropology). Expressions such as “ancient fertility rite,” “magical agrarian rite,” “the killing of the sacred animal,” and the like abound therein. After all, as has been written, “Frazer’s theses have held a popular grip, so to speak, on non-specialist scholars”¹⁹ (Figures 18.1 and 18.2).

This case is emblematic because most, if not all, of the published or verbally circulating interpretations of this peculiar pantomime insisted precisely on Frazerian ideas: The festival has been called “very ancient” and “pagan,” but, despite its archaic features, it is a couple of hundred years old at most (and probably even less). It has been called “Dionysian,” but it has absolutely nothing Dionysian in it, neither literally nor figuratively. It has been interpreted as a rite to induce or sustain

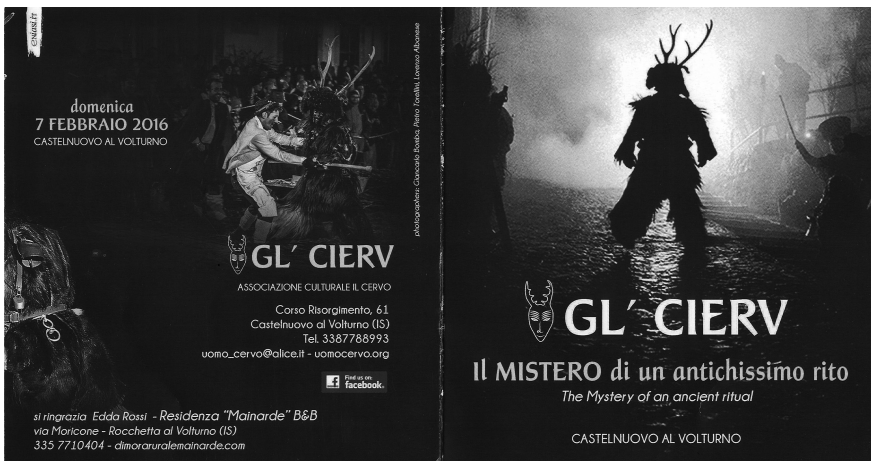


Figure 18.1 A promotional flyer for the 2016 edition of the Deer-man pantomime in Castelnuevo al Volturno.

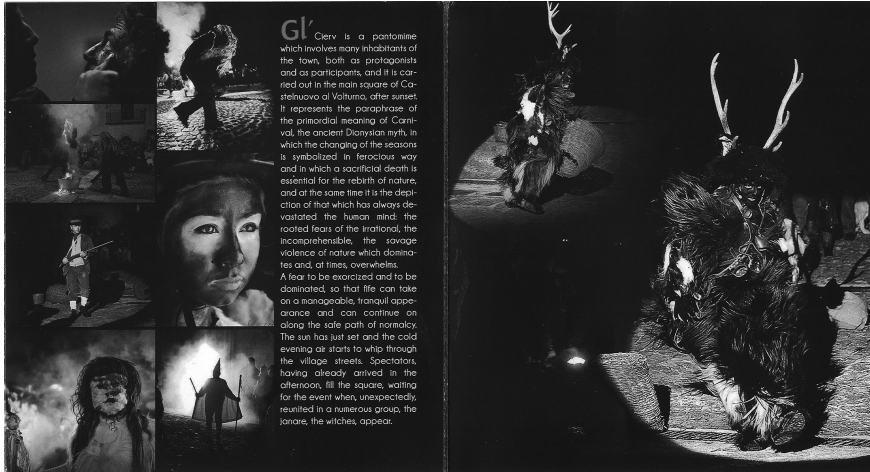


Figure 18.2 A promotional flyer for the 2016 edition of the Deer-man pantomime in Castelnuovo al Volturno. This type of grey literature has been flourishing since the 1990s. The explicatory texts are quite exemplary of what popular Frazerism is and of how it can circulate through a variety of different media.

fertility magically, but actually, it had a very different function in the past (not connected to fertility, as I have demonstrated elsewhere: Testa 2014), and it has a very different function in the present. These characteristics have been attached *post facto* to the Carnival of Castelnuovo *because of* a certain reading of *The Golden Bough*, i.e. because of a direct influence of Frazer's theses among certain non-academic interpreters, and the wider circulation of Frazer's theses through them. Frazer himself has, of course, no direct responsibility (he had no knowledge of this specific ritual pantomime, although he cites and discusses similar ones in his work), but the emic interpretations of Castelnuovo's Carnival that are now canonical—albeit, from an etic perspective, historically inaccurate and conceptually flawed—have their ultimate source in Frazer's *Golden Bough*. In short, the “Frazerianism” (or at least the “Frazerian air”) of such emic interpretations has in time become not only a common trait but the mainstream trait of the popular interpretation of certain manifestations of popular culture—a veritable “folk theory.”

As for the other sources, there is no space here to recapitulate them all. This chapter has been conceived to present and discuss again the theory, and not the evidence. The other case studies have been presented and interpreted with an abundance of ethnographic details and thorough citations in a number of previous works, now mostly compiled in Testa 2023a. Certainly, the other cases are not as emblematic as the Italian one. However, they also display common ideas of ritual magic and antiquity and the “paganness” of a festival (even when this is provably modern, or even very recent). These are veritable common denominators of PF, hence common denominators associating my own case studies and dozens if not hundreds of others that are knowable through secondary sources.

The Theory

Popular Frazerism is, broadly speaking, a cultural complex that is emically experienced—and functions—as a folk theory. It is not “received” by social agents through a process of “top-down” acculturation; on the contrary, it is symbolically crafted in a synergy between different social agents endowed with different social and cultural capitals. It is so widespread because the cultural conditions for such a reception have existed in Europe for decades. Its emergence depends on forms of symbolic (and religious) confluence, and on “cultural bricolage.” The latter expression is used here to signify the crafting of a cultural artefact (PF) based on more-or-less coherent sets of representations, forms, and features taken from culturally and socially available symbolic sources.²⁰ The notion of cultural bricolage is akin to that of cultural assemblage and that of acculturation, but it is more appropriate than the latter in our case because it avoids the idea of a passive and immediate cultural transfer from one social group to another, or from one category of people to another. Instead, it denotes the adaptability and creative collective agency inherent in the composition and invention of cultural features from a variety of symbolic sources, social dynamics, and historical processes, as well as from individual authorship. It also evokes the idea of cultural circulation and hybridity.

These considerations lead us straight to the necessity of a conceptual justification of the adjective “popular.” I opt for it for at least three reasons, which are also linked to three possible receptions of the word: First, to stress that PF, as a folk theory, seems to bear a particular appeal among laypeople, an appeal which is certainly weaker among those academically educated in things historical and anthropological. Second, to signal its vicinity to today’s widespread cultural tropes or scapes of magic, primitivism, primordialism, and fantasy fiction that are decidedly admired and well-received—“popular,” to be precise—in the late modern West, as countless examples in the cultural industry (books, movies, video games) demonstrate. Third, and ultimately, because PF can also be thought of—especially in its “derivative” modality, as we are about to see—as a veritable form of *popularisation* of Frazer’s ideas.

As for the main symbolic source and resource from which PF draws its force, this is certainly *the past*, or rather a *certain* culturally comprehended and accepted representation of a *certain past*. In general, in the case of popular ritual cultural facts like carnivals, the best type of past, in a manner of speaking, is the ancestral time of pagan rituals, and the often romanticised and fictionalised medieval times (or pre-modern times more generally). It is this “sense of the antique” (more than any possible and actual antique feature which can be easily altered or even fabricated) that binds a tradition and the people who practise it to a past that can be used to enhance collective sentiments of authenticity, social belonging, and common identity among the communities in which PF is observable and functions as catalysers of said dynamics. It is based on the consideration of this socio-symbolic dimension that one can explain the emic usage of adjectives like “very ancient,” “antique,” “pagan,” or even “prehistoric”: The equation at work is that the more remote the evoked past is, the more “authentic” the tradition, and therefore the

worthier as an element of collective identity, social memory, and cultural heritage (Figure 18.3).

Unlike my previous formulations of PF, I here distinguish it between two main gnoseological modalities of this complex: a derivative (or genealogical, or “proven”), and an associative (or indirect, or “vague”). Derivative popular Frazerism refers to a case in which a direct, linear, descendent influence can be derived from a concrete source, usually a social agent (a person, most often, but it can also be a more or less formalised group of individuals) functioning as a cultural mediator who popularises Frazer’s theses: This is decidedly the case of Castelnuovo and to a minor extent that of Hlinsko. Associative popular Frazerism refers to a more vague and indirect influence, whereby Frazerian themes are observable more as *Familienähnlichkeit* than through a direct work of influence and popularisation. In these cases, it is not always possible, and sometimes it is factually impossible, to know from which sources the Frazerian themes were derived: When asked about why they think that the Krampus are a survival of pagan rituals, many in the Salzburg region would just shrug and affirm that it is common knowledge. Similarly, in Hlinsko, the idea of ritually fostered fertility power channelled by the Masopust processions and dances would simply be considered as a given, without any specific reference to who or what came up with such an interpretation first. In this latter case, however, many would instead grant the paternity (or rather maternity) of this interpretation to the professional ethnologist who created and promoted the (successful) UNESCO nomination: In the case of Hlinsko, we observe a fluctuation between the derivative and associative modalities (Figure 18.4).



Figure 18.3 Krampuslauf in St. Johann im Pongau, Austria, in 2015 (photo by Alessandro Testa).



Masopust_carnival costumes 3 @ Czech Tourism/Lukas Zentel

The Czech Republic's answer to Venice's Carnivale and the USA's Mardi Gras, Masopust is a high-octane extravaganza of colour and culture that spills across Prague's streets at the start of the year. Ushering in the spring with a flurry of costumed parades and raucous parties, it's one of the most enjoyable times to visit. The festival dates back to medieval times when it celebrated the fertility and abundance of spring. While its pagan roots have been eclipsed by the Christian Lent tradition – it's now the equivalent of Shrove Tuesday – Masopust has survived as a convivial country-wide celebration. Here's what not to miss if you're lucky enough to be in Prague for the carnival.

Figure 18.4 A promotional webpage describing the Czech Masopust for touristic purposes. Here, too, the explicatory caption is quite indicative of popular Frazerism.

One objection to the explanatory power of this theory is that we actually find erudite or, as we would say today, etic explanations based on survivalism and paganism already in the past. In truth, seasonal festivities such as carnivals have been interpreted as survivals of pagan rites since the Middle Ages and through the early modern period (this is analysed in greater detail in Testa 2020). True, Frazer was hardly the first to offer this kind of interpretation; however, what distinguishes the historical interpretations prior to Frazer from PF is that the latter represents that kind of interpretation turning emic, or better put, turning “popular.” This did not happen in medieval or early modern times, and not even in the late 19th century, but in the 20th century, which is in fact the age during which both Frazerism (in academia and high culture) and PF (among the laypeople) emerge.

To recapitulate the most significant theoretical constituents of this theory, I would like to highlight five dimensions. The first two concern how PF is made and how it spreads, i.e. through an uncritical, morphological, transcultural comparison and through operations of cultural bricolage and cultural circulation among segments of society characterised by the access, possession, and spread of different social and cultural capitals, but eventually as a not-learned and not-critical folk theory. The other dimensions are about what PF is and what it does. As a folk theory and a cultural complex, PF contributes to the structuring of both social representations (and veritable imaginaries) and individual feelings of ancestry,

magicness, and primitivism—bearing resemblance, in this respect, to other forms of neo-Romanticism and contemporary primordialism. More importantly, it nourishes a sense of the past that easily translates into “structural nostalgia”²¹ and into a sense of authenticity, which is a prime ingredient for the crafting of local identities and cultural heritages.²² These in turn inform and transform into claims, passions, and ethos at the community level. One last dimension, that of its “re-enchanting” force, will be briefly detailed in the following section.

Popular Frazerism and/as Re-Enchantment

What I call “re-enchantment” is a constellation of spiritual, religious, and religionesque sets of individualised and often fragmented beliefs, representations, and practices that are observable in late modern, post-secular Europe, especially in the shape of a renewed interest in magic (as the name itself suggests) and the re-emergence or revival of former (or allegedly former) religious experiences, such as folk religion and contemporary Paganism.²³

PF can be considered a variation or an expression, and a catalyser, of re-enchantment; that is, a re-enchanting and re-enchanted folk theory, for most beliefs, practices, and representations that can be considered examples of PF evoke superhuman agents or agency (whether in action, such as magic, or in retrospect, such as an alleged pagan survival). As a consequence, PF often acquires (or is based upon) pseudo-religious, quasi-religious, or religionesque forms. After all, agrarian ritual magic, symbolic effectiveness, and pagan characterisation all fall or may fall within the religious sphere. It is hence not surprising if similarities are observable between PF and other symbolically similar phenomena such as contemporary Paganism and other New Religious Movements—for instance, contemporary Paganism itself has traditionally drawn from Frazer as a source of inspiration (see also Cornish, Tully, Lavallée, and Brissman, this volume).²⁴ Indeed, examples of cultural circulation and bricolage very similar to my ethnographic case studies (but from England and California this time), also involving the (re)invention of tradition, especially festive traditions, but on the other hand leading to genuinely religious (contemporary Pagan) beliefs and practices, are described and analysed in Magliocco 2004 and Hutton 2008. In fact, both PF and contemporary Paganism have in common a nostalgic longing for symbolic authenticity and depth, and they both emphasise the importance of rituality, seeking—or trying to reproduce—the assumed original and pristine ritual form. They both stress the connection with an ancient past, postulate a strong link between community (or individuals) and traditions, and maintain that modernisation and its cluster of cultural changes and tropes have “polluted” the more authentic, culturally “purer” pre-modern experience of the sacred. Despite both PF and contemporary Paganism being themselves modern—and chiefly late modern—cultural phenomena, they share an implicit or sometimes explicit anti-modernist stance. In the frenzy of masquerades and folkloric figures and fireworks in the Catalan festival of Patum in Spain, “primordialism was not simply the triumph of disorder and opposition: it was an invocation of a time before order had divided the community.”²⁵ Similarly, in the mumming procession of the Kukeri

in Bulgaria, the trope of “polluting modernisation” is particularly felt and mobilised. As Gerald Creed wrote in his ethnography of the revival and refunctionalisation of these figures, “mumming’s modern role is to represent the premodern”²⁶ (on the same page, Creed also mentioned, incidentally, that some contemporary Pagan representations feed on or echo the mumming tradition of the Kukeri, and in a more recent contribution he has concluded that in the Bulgarian context “neopagan practices [...] resonate with village folk practices”²⁷).

The reference to paganism, or to the superhuman or supernatural, can therefore also be regarded as a possible tool for the shaping of localised, vernacular forms of religiosity. In Hlinsko in Czechia, this acquires the form of a heritagised folk belief in magic and ritually induced fertility in what is otherwise a highly secularised, post-communism context.²⁸ In Castelnuovo al Volturno in Italy and in the Salzburg region in Austria, both regions of stronger Catholic identity, PF blends with local variations of Catholicism (and typically of “Southern” Catholicism in the case of Castelnuovo, according to the definition given in de Martino 2015); the result is that revitalised traditions such as the Deer-man and the Krampus are often overtly regarded by the locals as “pagan” and willingly participated in, without this questioning the orthodoxy of their Catholic faith.

Conclusions

Popular Frazerism, whether “derivative” or “associative,” has emerged as a powerful interpretative tool, or in fact a veritable folk theory, during the period of festive and ritual revival of the second half of the 20th century, and also as one of the modalities for the emic reconfiguration and rethinking of traditional facts in Europe in late modern times more generally. In its derivative form, this tool has been used especially by specific individuals, often endowed with greater social and cultural capital without being the representatives of an officially etic standpoint. Whatever the actual intention of these “cultural mediators,” this operation resulted in establishing and legitimising their own interpretation of local traditions, and in so doing infusing them with an aura of ancestrality, thus “thickening” their symbolic value. In its more associative forms, PF has become an explanatory framework for the masses in subtler and more indirect ways, not always recordable through ethnographic study. And yet numerous times it has in the past few decades been ethnographically ascertained that single individuals and even entire communities have been prone to PF in imagining and symbolically moulding their pasts and their sense of historicity, but also in manufacturing their cultural heritages, shaping feelings of belonging and attachment to their localities, and discriminating between (what they consider) authentic and inauthentic cultural items and ritual practices. To date, PF has served these (and other) purposes, wittingly or, mostly, unwittingly. Moreover, it has constituted and can constitute an element in the development and crystallisation of local identities as well as a viable cultural device to display those very identities and cause them to circulate across wider networks (such as the digital media), but it can also envisage different modes of social

representation, and even foster the experience of novel, “re-enchanted” forms of religiosity.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund project “Beyond Security: Role of Conflict in Resilience-Building” (reg. no.: CZ.02.01.01/00/22_008/0004595).

Notes

- 1 The term “popular Frazerism” appears for the first time in my doctoral thesis (2013) which later became my second book (Testa 2014: 545). However, I had been working with a similar—though embryonic and still unstructured—idea since 2009 or 2010, i.e. since the beginning of my doctoral studies. After 2014, I published several articles and chapters that explored the various implications and ramifications of this concept more in depth. These writings, which it is superfluous to recall here in their original published form, have recently been reorganised, refreshed, and republished in a monograph, Testa 2023a—to which I refer for those interested in the previous manifestations of the concept. Testa 2019 is another text which is present and alive in this chapter but was not included in Testa 2023a. In short, Testa 2014, 2019, and 2023a are the key texts to understand the genesis and development of the concept of popular Frazerism as recapitulated and expanded in this chapter.
- 2 Jeremy Boissevain offered a different periodisation: “There seems to have been a spur of celebratory activity in the years immediately following the war. By the late 1950s this had tapered off, and festivities were declining. The decline persisted through the 1960s, but began to reverse itself in the 1970s. In the 1980s the floescence of celebrations [...] was widely visible” (Boissevain 1992b: 10). My own or Boissevain’s periodisation of festive and ritual revival and re-functionalisation in Europe is similarly formulated in many works (see, among others, several contributions in Ariño and Lombardi Satriani 1997, Boissevain 1992a, Sisto and Totaro 2010, but also Bravo 1984, Fabre 1986, Faeta 2005, Gallini 1971, Grimaldi 2002 and 2003, Hodges 2011, Lass 1989, Macdonald 2013: 226–227; see also the works cited in the following note).
- 3 Ariño and Lombardi Satriani 1997, Faeta 2005, Handelman 2004, Hansen 2003, Herzfeld 1982, Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983, Testa 2014, just to name a few.
- 4 Creed 2011.
- 5 Picard and Robinson 2006b: 2.
- 6 Noyes 2003: 12.
- 7 Macdonald 2013.
- 8 This corpus is now rich, numbering several articles, books, edited volumes, and thematic journal issues: Clemente 1984, Clemente 2008, Dei 1998, Dimpflmeier 2014, Scarpelli 2018, to name the most significant ones.
- 9 Paola De Sanctis’s intuitions on “*frazierismo diffuso*” (“widespread Frazerism”) in the 1980s were promising, but she did not develop them further, probably because they were not founded on any intensive or extensive ethnographic investigations. De Sanctis did not continue to study the phenomenon after that first article. This idea was again rediscovered and rediscussed later (e.g. in Clemente 2008 and Dei 1998), but almost exclusively within the realms of “high culture” and the etic discourse.
- 10 Dei 1998: 411, my translation from the Italian.
- 11 In this chapter, I will refer to Frazer’s major work, *The Golden Bough*, in its abridged edition (Frazer 1922). *The Golden Bough* originally appeared in 1890, and a complete twelve-volume edition was published by 1915. Nevertheless, the shortened edition

- from 1922 is, as has been written, “by far the most diffused and influential” (Clemente, Simonicca, and Dei 1984: 5).
- 12 This section is a shortened version, with emendations and other minor changes, of section 6.4 in Testa 2023a.
 - 13 See section 6.4 in Testa 2023a for more details about this.
 - 14 The historiography and implications of this second set of theories and hypotheses have been thoroughly reconstructed and analysed in Testa 2020: 114–122.
 - 15 Van Gennep 1947.
 - 16 The historiographic overview and criticism offered in these pages in no way imply a denial of Frazer’s importance in the history of social anthropology, the history of religions, and Western culture in general, which can hardly be overestimated. Frazer was a brilliant scholar and, in a manner of speaking, all ethnologists, anthropologists, and historians of religion are children of Frazer.
 - 17 It is possible to find all or some of these traits in many European ethnographic records: most of the works cited in the previous notes form a rich database of sources, but others could be mentioned here, e.g. Creed 2011, Grimaldi 2003, Gunnell 2007, Noyes 2003, Rest and Seiser 2016, Sisto and Totaro 2010 and 2012—and the examples could be easily multiplied. Popular Frazerism seems to be a pan-European phenomenon just like the diffusion of carnival festivities and the use of fertility rites in pre-modern times.
 - 18 Testa 2023a: 49–66.
 - 19 Simonicca and Dei 1998b: 23.
 - 20 Fiona Bowie has written that “the term *bricolage* has been widely adopted within anthropology to refer to the creation of symbolic structures from a variety of culturally available symbols” (2006: 70). My use of the notion owes much to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s theorisation of native classificatory systems (1962), but also, and perhaps especially, to the critical considerations about its theoretical and methodological utility by Peter Burke (2008: 100–101). Anthropological and historical analyses of cultural bricolage with regard to traditional facts can be found in many studies, among which Handler 1988, Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983, Macdonald 2013, and Sahlins 1994; more specifically, in relation to festive events and popular culture, in Ariño and Lombardi Satriani 1997, Bertolotti 1991, Bravo 2006, Burke 1978, and Buttitta 2010.
 - 21 Herzfeld 1997.
 - 22 Bortolotto 2020, Macdonald 2013.
 - 23 Testa 2023b.
 - 24 Magliocco 2004, Hutton 1999, York 1999.
 - 25 Noyes 2003: 193.
 - 26 Creed 2011: 203.
 - 27 Creed 2024: 33.
 - 28 Testa 2016a.

Bibliography

- Ariño, Antoni, and Luigi M. Lombardi Satriani. (eds.). 1997. *L’utopia di Dioniso. Festa tra tradizione e modernità*. Meltemi, Rome.
- Bertolotti, Maurizio. 1991. *Carnevale di massa 1950*. Einaudi, Turin.
- Boissevain, Jeremy. (ed.). 1992a. *Revitalizing European Rituals*. Routledge, London.
- Boissevain, Jeremy. 1992b. “Introduction.” In J. Boissevain (ed.) *Revitalizing European Rituals*: Routledge, London, 1–19.
- Bortolotto, Chiara. 2020. “Le patrimoine immatériel et le tabou de l’authenticité: de la pérennisation à la durabilité.” *Le patrimoine culturel immatériel au seuil des sciences sociales : Actes du colloque de Cerisy-la-Salle, septembre 2012*. Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, Paris.

- Bowie, Fiona. 2006. *The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Bravo, Gian Luigi. 1984. *Festa contadina e società complessa*. Franco Angeli, Milan.
- Bravo, Gian Luigi. 2006. "Sacra rappresentazione e bricolage." In *La complessità della tradizione. Festa, museo e ricerca antropologica*. Franco Angeli, Milan, 21–36.
- Burke, Peter. 1978. *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. Temple Smith, London.
- Burke, Peter. 2008. *What is Cultural History?* Polity Press, Cambridge. First Published 2005.
- Buttitta, Ignazio E. 2010. "Carnevali di Sicilia fra tradizione e innovazione." In P. Sisto and P. Totaro (eds.) *Il Carnevale e il Mediterraneo* Progedit, Bari, 206–248.
- Clemente, Pietro. (ed.). 1984. *I frutti del Ramo d'oro. James Frazer e l'eredità dell'antropologia*. Thematic issue of *La ricerca folklorica* 10.
- Clemente, Pietro. (ed.). 2008. *I frutti del Ramo d'oro. Venticinque anni dopo*. Thematic issue of *I Quaderni del Ramo d'Oro on-line* 1.
- Creed, Gerald W. 2011. *Masquerade and Postsocialism: Ritual and Cultural Dispossession in Bulgaria*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- Creed, Gerald W. 2024. "Avenues of Re-enchantment in Bulgarian Mummings." In Alessandro Testa, Zuzana Bártoová, and Istvan Povedák (eds.) "Re-enchantment" and Religious Change in Former Socialist Europe. Thematic issue of *Religion* 54.1, 21–39.
- Dei, Fabio. 1998. *La discesa agli inferi: James G. Frazer e la cultura del Novecento*. Argo, Lecce.
- de Martino, Ernesto. 2015. *Magic: A Theory from the South*. HAU Books, Chicago. First Published 1959.
- de Sanctis, Paola. 1984. "Frazer alla Rai-TV. Sondaggi su alcune fonti di massa del 'frazerismo diffuso'," In "I frutti del Ramo d'oro James G. Frazer e le eredità dell'antropologia," ed. P. Clemente. Special issue, *La ricerca folklorica* 10, 85–90.
- Dimpflmeier, Fabiana. 2014. "Nel bosco sacro. Realtà, finzione, magia e natura ne *Il ramo d'oro* di James G. Frazer." *Belphegor. Littératures populaires et culture médiatique* 12.1.
- Fabre, Daniel. 1986. "Le sauvage en personne." *Terrain* 6, 6–18.
- Faeta, Francesco. (ed.) 2005. "Un oggetto conoscibile. La festa religiosa in aree dell'Europa meridionale contemporanea." In *Questioni italiane. Demologia, antropologia, critica culturale*. Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 151–170.
- Frazer, James G. 1922. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abridged ed. Macmillan, London.
- Gallini, Clara. 1971. *Il consumo del sacro. Feste lunghe di Sardegna*. Laterza, Bari.
- Grimaldi, Piercarlo. 2002. *Il calendario rituale contadino. Il tempo della festa e del lavoro fra tradizione e complessità sociale*. 2nd ed. Franco Angeli, Milan. First Published 1993.
- Grimaldi, Piercarlo. (ed.). 2003. *Bestie, santi, divinità: Maschere animali dell'Europa tradizionale*. Museo nazionale della montagna "Duca degli Abruzzi," Turin.
- Gunnell, Terry. (ed.). 2007. *Masks and Mummings in the Nordic Area*. The Royal Gustavus Adolphus Academy for Swedish Folk Culture, Uppsala.
- Handelman, Don. 2004. *Nationalism and the Israeli State: Bureaucratic Logic in Public Events*. Berg, Oxford.
- Handler, Richard. 1988. *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec*. The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison.
- Hansen, Kjell. 2003. "Festivals, Spatiality and the New Europe." In J. Frykman and P. Niedermüller (eds.) *Articulating Europe. Local Perspectives*. Museum Tusulanum Press, Copenhagen, 19–36.
- Herzfeld, Michael. 1997. *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-state*. Routledge, New York.
- Herzfeld, Michael. 1982. *Ours Once More: Folklore, Ideology, and the Making of Modern Greece*. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Hobsbawm, Eric J. E., and Terence O. Ranger. (eds.). 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

- Hodges, Matt. 2011. "Disciplinary Anthropology? Amateur Ethnography and the Production of 'Heritage' in Rural France." *Ethnos* 76.3, 348–374.
- Hutton, Ronald. 1999. *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Hutton, Ronald. 2008. "Modern Pagan Festivals: A Study in the Nature of Tradition." *Folklore* 119, 251–273.
- Lass, Andrew. 1989. "What Keeps Czech Folk 'Alive'?" *Dialectical Anthropology* 14.1, 7–19.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1962. *La pensée sauvage*. Plon, Paris.
- Macdonald, Sharon. 2013. *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*. Routledge, London-New York.
- Magliocco, Sabina. 2004. *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.
- Noyes, Dorothy. 2003. *Fire in the Plaça: Catalan Festival Politics After Franco*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.
- Picard, David, and Michael Robinson. (eds.). 2006a. *Festivals, Tourism and Social Change. Remaking Worlds*. Channel View Publications, Clevedon.
- Picard, David, and Michael Robinson. 2006b. "Remaking Worlds: Festivals, Tourism and Change." In *Festivals, Tourism and Social Change. Remaking Worlds*. Channel View Publications, Bristol, 1–31.
- Rest, Matthäus, and Gertraud Seiser. (eds.). 2016. *Wild und schön: Der Krampus im Salzburger Land*. LIT Verlag, Münster.
- Sahlins, Marshall. 1994. "Goodbye to Tristes Tropes: Ethnography in the Context of the Modern World History." In R. Borofsky (ed.) *Assessing Cultural Anthropology*. McGraw-Hill, New York, 377–394.
- Scarpelli, Giacomo. 2018. *Il razionalista pagano: Frazer e la filosofia del mito*. Meltemi, Roma.
- Simonica, Alessandro, and Fabio Dei. 1998. "Introduzione." In A. Simonica and F. Dei (eds.) *Simbolo e teoria nell'antropologia religiosa*. Argo, Lecce, 9–110.
- Sisto, Pietro, and Piero Totaro. (eds.). 2010. *Il Carnevale e il Mediterraneo*. Progedit, Bari.
- Sisto, Pietro, and Piero Totaro. (eds.). 2012. *La maschera e il corpo*. Progedit, Bari.
- Testa, Alessandro. 2014. *Il carnevale dell'uomo-animale. Le dimensioni storiche e socio-culturali di una festa appenninica*. Loffredo, Naples.
- Testa, Alessandro. 2016. "Problemi e prospettive della ricerca demo-etno-antropologica su memoria sociale, (n)ostalgia, ritualità pubblica e patrimonio culturale immateriale nell'Europa post-socialista." *Lares* 82.2, 237–276.
- Testa, Alessandro. 2019. "Mumming in Europe, Frazer(ism) in Italy, and 'Survivals' in Historical Anthropology: a response to Julian Whybra." *The Morris Dancer* 6.5, 134–142.
- Testa, Alessandro. 2020. *Rituality and Social (Dis)Order: The Historical Anthropology of Popular Carnival in Europe*. Routledge, London-New York.
- Testa, Alessandro. 2023a. *Ritualising Cultural Heritage and Re-Enchanting Rituals in Europe*. Carolina Academic Press, Durham.
- Testa, Alessandro. 2023b. "Re-thinking the Concept of Re-enchantment in Central-Eastern Europe." *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 31.1, 103–131.
- Toschi, Paolo. 1955. *Le origini del teatro italiano*. Einaudi, Turin.
- van Gennep, Arnold. 1947. *Manuel de folklore français contemporain. Tome premier. Vol. III. Les cérémonies périodiques cycliques et saisonnières*. Picard, Paris.
- York, Michael. 1999. "Invented Culture/Invented Religion: The Fictional Origins of Contemporary Paganism." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 3.1, 135–146.