

Conference Paper

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**Festival ethnography through the looking glass: alternative methods and knowledge production in Sardinia, North Catalonia and the Baltic States.**

In this presentation, due to time constraint, we will talk about some of our preferred ethnographic methods and our reflections about the 'field' in Festival studies, by giving an account of our fieldwork experience, including the consequences of the (very well-known at this point) covid outbreak in our research. With our paper, we want to shed light on the potential of ethnographic methods used in Festival research for other disciplines. By doing so, we hope to contribute to the conversation around the analysis of new methodological and conceptual approaches to ethnographic research and understanding of the field.

We start by introducing our case studies: the Festival of Sant'Efisio in Sardinia, a religious procession which also features elements of Sardinian folklore; the folk Festival de la Sardana de Ceret in Northern Catalonia; and the folk Festival Baltica, which takes place in the three Baltic States alternating location each year. We illustrate our chosen ethnographic methods, and explain how we have been dealing with the dynamics of being on/off fieldwork, the blurred boundaries of the 'field' and the consequent perceptions in terms of identity, all of this having been especially affected by the global pandemic crisis.

Ritual ceremonies and festive celebrations are, regardless of their more or less religious character, known for being participatory. The presence and attendance of people is, in fact, an almost essential character of these events. Our case studies are no exception to this. In the time of coronavirus, though, gatherings and crowds are forbidden by law (in the Baltics, in Catalonia and in Sardinia this is the case). That is why at the moment most festivals, just like all public events, have been cancelled or postponed until the foreseeable future. Although at the moment the lockdown has been eased in most countries, the Festival Baltica has been postponed to next year, and it seems that the Festival de la Sardana de Ceret won't be taking place this summer.

*Case study Chiara: Sant'Efisio*

However, the option of cancelling the Festival of Sant'Efisio altogether this year was never considered, as it is of extreme importance that the procession is performed every year. The reason lies in the fundamental essence of this Feast which is the fulfilment of the vow made by the City of Cagliari council in 1652/1656 in response to the plague that was decimating the Sardinian population at that time. Since then, the statue of the Saint is carried for four days from its church in the old town of Cagliari (South Sardinia) to the place of the martyrdom (about 40km away) and back. The procession follows a specific route with various stops, starting with a large and colourful folk parade on the 1<sup>st</sup> May, which is the most attended and popular event, and comprises various collateral rituals and events in the whole area involved.

Since its origin in 1656, the procession has always taken place although in some very exceptional instances, such as during the World Wars, its format was modified. The uncanny analogy between the health crisis caused by the covid-19 outbreak and the circumstances that originated the Feast in the first place makes this year edition of the Festival, its 364<sup>th</sup>, not just extremely meaningful but also necessary. It was decided to carry the statue to Nora and back to its church on a Red Cross wagon on the 3<sup>rd</sup> May without any public being allowed apart from the key essential actors, and to minimise the rituals and perform them at close doors. The whole event was streamed on TV and social media, so that the community could participate.

This should have been, in conventional academic terms, the time of my fieldwork and data collection, following a 'yo-yo fieldwork' (Wulff, 2002) approach which would allow me to balance my academic life in Scotland and my PhD research in Sardinia without having to renounce to the 'face to face' interaction and presence typical of ethnographic research. I would like to highlight that one of the specificities of doing research on festivals is that it requires the ethnographer to make sense of her subject of study in a relatively short time-span, which consequently develops an ability to focus on and make a selection of specific key moments and elements. As Handelman observed in relation to doing ethnography of public events 'for the ethnographer, public events are privileged points of penetration into social and cultural universes' (Handelman 2000, 14).

At the start of the year, I planned my field trips both in March and April/May, and I had already arranged various interviews with some key actors and ‘general public’. Although Aleida will expand on the dynamics of researching local vs foreign culture, I can say that one of the positive sides of doing ethnographic research in my hometown is certainly the ability to easily establish connections. It would certainly be reductive to say that ‘everybody knows everybody’ in Cagliari (its population is currently just over 150,000 inhabitants), but I have been able to contact quite a few people involved in the Festival just through word of mouth. Sometimes it is enough for me to simply mention to an acquaintance the topic of my research to initiate a ‘snowball effect’ which results in me receiving an array of information, particularly in the form of web links and visual material, through Whatsapp texts from people whom I have never met before.

I turn then to the importance of social media and informal networks in this type of research which, in my experience, has been proved particularly true in these unprecedented circumstances. As I have previously mentioned, the fulfilment of the vow is the essential character of the Feast of Sant’Efigio which has to be performed every year. The coronavirus pandemic, although it represented a huge challenge for the whole community, did not impede the completion of the ritual despite being performed in a reduced and much more sober form than usual, with all the necessary safety measures in place. The phenomenon that I would like to discuss in this respect is that not only was the whole event live streamed on the regional television and social media, but these channels became the platform for the community to experience and actively participate in the ceremony, and for me the main source of information and data gathering. For example, Facebook became the stage of several ‘exhibitions’ and ‘performances’ such as a local renowned photographer virtual exhibition called ‘Solo Sant’Efigio’ (‘Just Sant’Efigio’), or the collective chanting initiative promoted by a famous illustrator and a singer dedicated to the prayers for Saint Efigio. Moreover, the days preceding May the Facebook page ‘Festa di Sant’Efigio’ (‘Feast of Sant’Efigio’) posted various facts and anecdotes about the history of the procession, especially remembering previous difficult and extraordinary editions of the Feast. The local TV also contributed to this memory discourse with the screening of documentaries about the Festival and the cult of the Saint.

In normal circumstances, the coverage from the media is restricted to the streaming of the four days events and not much attention is placed on the commemoration of the past of

Sant'Efisio, as it was much more evident this year, making the visual elements (see Pink, 2006, 2007, 2008; Harper, 2002; Kharel, 2015) of the event became extremely relevant and essential for my understanding of engagement and involvement of the community to this ritual (which is the core of my research project).

I therefore found myself re-evaluating and re-interpreting my 'field', which shifted from being the geographical location of Sardinia, which in my case also represents 'back home'(with all the implications that this bears in ethnographic research), to a virtual and abstract space. For both the participants and myself as ethnographer, the value of '*being there*' completely replaced that of '*being there*' in the field (Nic Craith and Hill, 2015), which allowed a participation and somehow a creation of a closer 'imagined community' across countries (Anderson, 2006 [1983]) that would have otherwise been impossible. Therefore, although we appreciate that online ethnography poses some major challenges for example in relation to issues of presence (see Hine, 2008), ethics (see Svenigsson, 2004), context (see Hammersley, 2006) among others, we want to recognise its potential for understanding how communities 'make sense' of the world which now more than ever, especially during and after the coronavirus crisis, involves being online.

#### *Case studies Aleida*

The challenges that arise from my fieldwork differ from those of Chiara's, since I have been collecting material for my doctoral thesis since 2018. The main aspect that has shaped my research is my methodology based on a comparative study of folk festivals in Northern Catalonia and Latvia.

As a brief background, Northern Catalonia is a territory that was annexed to France in 1659 but that has claimed its Catalan historical origins and transmitted the Catalan language and traditions from generation to generation. Since 1957 a sardana folk festival takes place annually, gathering Catalans from both Southern and Northern Catalonia. My second case study corresponds to Festival Baltica, which began to be celebrated in 1987 with the start of the Singing Revolution and that is held annually in a different Baltic State. I focus on the festival editions celebrated in Latvia since I have been living and doing anthropological observation in the country for two years.

When approaching these case studies, the dichotomy local vs foreign arises. Doing comparative ethnography has enabled me to understand the foreign through the local for then interpreting the local as the foreign, which means seeing the local field as a global social phenomenon instead of an isolated folk celebration. Unlike multi-sited ethnography, which aims at unveiling “the relations between sites” (Burawoy et al., 2000: xii), comparative ethnography seeks to identify patterns and the political meanings (Simmons and Smith, 2019) beneath traditional folk practices. This is of great significance for cases such as Northern Catalonia and Latvia, which have undergone periods of occupation and their national folklore has become a non-violent resistance tool.

The process of decoding the dichotomy local vs foreign has entailed the effort of getting acquainted with the environment of the Latvian festival and the national traditional celebrations. This highlights the fact that observing the spaces of the festival’s community before and after the event is as equally important as taking field notes during the festival time. Another example of doing ethnography outside the festival time is the collection of biographical narratives of former and current festival participants, which allows being there through the eyes of performers or festival’s attendees. I chose the methodology of biographical narratives because our family story, our experiences and memories related to a folk festival shape our understanding of the concept of national identity and the traditional. Each individual experience eventually encounters the sense of collective identity, which is shaped by the festival narrative, the strategies of cultural centres and related exhibitions of museums. Lastly, there is the process of data collection through archival research, which intertwines the notions of folklore, community, history, and politics.

Doing festival ethnography through a comparative study ultimately allows to identify shared patterns between territories that have undergone similar historical and political processes, rendering visible the power of festivals as platforms that give voice to cultural minorities or communities that have confronted cultural assimilation.

### *Conclusion*

Our final remarks on this presentation highlight again the significance of festival studies for other subdisciplines within the field of ethnography. Festivals as research subjects offer a much greater flexibility for the ethnographer and the interpretation of the data since they

are a sociocultural phenomenon that is constantly evolving according to the community's needs and perceptions. Secondly, the reduced timeframe of the festival constraints the ethnographer to choose key moments of the event to record or observe. However, these conditions free the ethnographer from the traditional research process of observing a community in isolation and for a lengthy period of time. It is important that within this process of condensing the ethnographic research, the ethnographer makes use of his or her sensibility to identify potential new meanings or aspects that can shape the outcome of the research. As Schatz and Pader (2006) point out, "ethnographic sensibility" does not necessarily "require the long-term immersion in field sites or participant observation methods. [...] What matters most is *how* scholars approach the material gathered from these sources; that is, paying attention to the political meanings embedded in these materials" (Simmons and Smith, 2019: 358). The extraordinary circumstances that Chiara has also illustrated with her case study make visible the potential of festivals for doing ethnography online, overcoming the boundary of physical presence.

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