

Testa, Alessandro

**Ritual zoomorphism in medieval and modern European folklore:  
some sceptical remarks on a possible connection with a  
hypothetical Eurasian shamanism**

*Religio*. 2017, vol. 25, iss. 1, pp. [3]-24

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/137282>

Access Date: 18. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

# *Ritual Zoomorphism in Medieval and Modern European Folklore: Some Sceptical Remarks on a Possible Connection with a Hypothetical Eurasian Shamanism*

ALESSANDRO TESTA\*

An interesting ritual motif can be studied transversally throughout Europe, roughly from late antiquity to modern times. This ritual motif is the pantomimes of men<sup>1</sup> disguised as – and acting like – animals at certain times of the year, and especially, but not exclusively, in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> In the past, these performances did not usually occur during official celebrations, but instead during popular festivals like Carnival, and were normally considered “pagan”, “vulgar”, or, more recently, “folkloric” (this terminological fluctuation depending on the specific age taken into consideration).

In their typical forms, these carnivalesque pantomimes involved the participation of one or more men covered in furs and goatskins and performing some actions. These actions are more or less known depending on

---

\* I would like to thank Giovanni Casadio, Sergio Botta, and the two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments that helped to improve the manuscript.

1 The literary and iconographic sources from the Middle Ages refer quite explicitly to men only, not women. Likewise, in European folklore, until a few decades ago, zoomorphic pantomimes and rituals were mostly performed exclusively by men. These aspects related to gender differences are treated in several works in the scholarly literature, though always briefly and unsystematically. Some of these works are cited in the next five footnotes.

2 Other themes/phenomena usually associated with European folkloric ritual zoomorphism (and/or with Eurasian shamanism) in the scholarly literature are witchcraft, initiation, and possession. Given the extent of this scholarship, it is impossible to discuss all of these topics here. The former is evoked, however, at certain points in the following pages along with a few bibliographic references. With regard to the latter, a recent and thorough discussion can be found in Davide Ermacora, “Sulla costruzione della ‘possessione europea’ I: Il ragno: A proposito di un libro recente di Giovanni Pizza” [online], *I quaderni del ramo d'oro on-line* 6, 2013/2014, <<http://www.gro.unisi.it/frontend/node/171>>, [10 June 2017], 161-194. European ritual zoomorphism and initiation is briefly discussed in Alessandro Testa, “Mascheramenti zoomorfi: Comparazioni e interpretazioni a partire da fonti tardo-antiche e alto-medievali”, *Studi Medievali* 54/1, 2013, 63-130.

the quality and the quantity of sources, as we are about to see.<sup>3</sup> The common trait shared by all the documented pantomimes is the use of masks, which can therefore be considered as a cultural, performative, and more generally speaking symbolic constant.<sup>4</sup> Literary and iconographic documentation allows us to observe in some detail these actions, which seem to have always been fairly standardised, formalised, and repeated over time with relatively few changes (as far as we can assume at least). These characteristics of formalisation and repetition, together with the prescribed use of masks, allows us to hypothesize about the ritual or pseudo-ritual nature of the pantomimes, which usually involved actions such as the following: a) at the beginning, coming from / at the end, returning to an actual or symbolic “beyond the village”; b) behaving like beasts, for example acting grossly and violently and chasing women (usually unmarried); c) performing dances or mumming, performing door-to-door processions, d) simulating a hunt, at the end of which, sometimes, a killing of the masked figure is mimed. It is important to stress that, according to almost all sources, the masks not only looked like animals, but the mask-wearers acted “like animals”.<sup>5</sup> The beastly appearance and behaviour are the features that

- 
- 3 Generally speaking, the more further back the time taken into consideration, the poorer and more scattered the sources, and conversely, the more recent the historical period, the richer the sources. A sources survey can be found in A. Testa, “Mascheramenti zoomorfi...”, 65-69.
  - 4 On the general functions, forms, typologies, and modalities of masks and masking in Europe in the Middle Ages and in the Early Modern Times, and on the values associated with the practice of masking and disguising, cf. Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, London: Temple Smith 1978, 178-204; Giovanni Battista Bronzini, “Dalla larva alla maschera”, in: Maurizio Bettini (ed.), *La maschera, il dop-pio e il ritratto*, Roma-Bari: Laterza 2001, 61-84; Jean Fraikin, “Traité contre les masques de Jean Savaron (1611)”, in: Piercarlo Grimaldi (ed.), *Bestie, santi, divinità: Maschere animali dell'Europa tradizionale*, Torino: Museo nazionale della montagna Duca degli Abruzzi 2003, 187-195; Jean-Claude Schmitt, “Le maschere, il diavolo, i morti nell'Occidente medievale”, in: id., *Religione, folklore e società nell'Occidente medievale*, Bari: Laterza 1988, 206-238; A. Testa, “Mascheramenti zoomorfi...”, 65-69; Meg Twycross, *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England*, London: Routledge 2002.
  - 5 Selected works about – or analyzing – European zoomorphic rituals and masquerades from the Middle Ages to modern times are: Sonia M. Barillari, “La maschera del cervulus: Fonti documentarie ed iconografia”, *L'immagine riflessa* XI, 2002, 61-105; Maurizio Bertolotti, *Carnevale di massa 1950*, Torino: Einaudi 1991; Edwin C. Cawte, *Ritual Animal Disguise: A Historical and Geographical Study of Animal Disguise in the British Isles*, Cambridge: Folklore Society 1978; James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion: Abridged Edition*, London: Macmillan 1922; Piercarlo Grimaldi (ed.), *Bestie, santi, divinità: Maschere animali dell'Europa tradizionale*, Torino: Museo nazionale della montagna Duca degli Abruzzi 2003; Terry Gunnell (ed.), *Masks and Mumming in the Nordic Area: Acta Academiae Regiae Gustavi Adolphi* 98, Uppsala: Swedish Science Press 2007; A. Testa, “Mascheramenti zoomorfi...”; Cesare Poppi, “The Other Within: Masks and Masquerades in Europe”,

scandalised the pious, provoking the Church's reactions to such practices: for centuries, these ritual or pseudo-ritual practices were harshly criticised – if not openly discouraged or even forbidden – by the representatives of the hierarchies, and especially by the clergy, who addressed them in a number of canonical texts and on numerous occasions.<sup>6</sup>

I have tried to interpret and explain the nature, functions, and historical development of these phenomena in a series of publications,<sup>7</sup> where I present and discuss also the rather numerous and diverse interpretations that have been proposed in the scholarly literature to date.<sup>8</sup> What is at the centre of the present paper is instead an assessment of possible historical and/or symbolic connections between these performances displaying ritual and religious<sup>9</sup> characteristics and a hypothetical Eurasian “shamanic substratum” which would constitute their cultural matrix, as has been variously

---

in: John Mack (ed.), *Masks: The Art of Expression*, Harry N. Abrams: New York 1994; Alessandro Testa, *Il carnevale dell'uomo-animale: Le dimensioni storiche e socio-culturali di una festa appenninica*, Napoli: Loffredo 2014; Arnold van Gennep, *Manuel de folklore français contemporain: Tome premier, III: Les cérémonies périodiques cycliques et saisonnières*, Paris: Picard 1947. The general literature is much richer, of course, but for obvious reasons of space it cannot all be cited here.

- 6 An annotated list of such texts (treatises, *epistolae*, sermons, etc.) and occasions (councils and other clerical gatherings) can be found in A. Testa, “Mascheramenti zoomorfi...”, 65-69.
- 7 Cf. A. Testa, “Mascheramenti zoomorfi...”, and id., *Il carnevale dell'uomo-animale...*
- 8 It is not necessary here to go through this rather complex history of studies. Nor is it necessary to explain in any detail the historical development of these pantomimes and masquerades. The reader interested in knowing more should refer to the aforementioned publications.
- 9 Due to reasons of space and thematic coherence, the topic of whether and in which terms these European practices can be considered part of ancient and medieval folk or vernacular religious practices – thus religious or “pseudo-religious” – cannot be problematised in this article. It is, however, discussed in several publications cited in the previous and following footnotes and was one of the topics of my lecture, Alessandro Testa, “Micro-history, Ethnography and the Study of European Carnivals (and Their Religious Characteristics)”, for the Czech Association for the Study of Religions, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic, delivered on 12 December 2013. As for the methodological and theoretical issues concerning the usage of the notion of religion, see Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion*, Oakland: University of California Press 1994; Thomas A. Idinopulos – Brian C. Wilson (eds.), *What is Religion?*, Leiden – Boston: Brill 1998; Johnathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1982, and id., *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2004; Bruce Lincoln, “Theses on Method”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8/2, 1996, 225-227; Luther H. Martin, “Biology, Sociology and the Study of Religion”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 5/1, 1997, 21-36; Ivan Strenski, *Understanding Theories of Religion: An Introduction*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell 2015 (on this last and particularly influential book, see also Alessandro Testa, “Religion: Evolutionism, Modernism, Post-modernism; What Comes Next? A Review Essay of *Understanding Theories of Religion* [Second Edition]

argued and proposed in a series of works,<sup>10</sup> and especially in a well-known book by the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg – this last point is clarified and discussed in greater detail in the following pages.

Although much of the literature and the theories reviewed and discussed in this paper are no longer new, the hypotheses that inform them have resisted somewhat both prior criticism and time. They are still in circulation inside and outside academia: outside, the belief in the existence of a Eurasian ancient or prehistoric shamanism (which, in fact, has always been hypothesised but never proved) is actually quite diffused, especially in neo-pagan and neo-shamanic *milieux*,<sup>11</sup> and inside, where some scholars still credit (or until recently credited) the hypothesis of Eurasian shamanism as one of the sources of European folklore, and of ritual zoomorphism more specifically, and/or, alternatively, of witchcraft.<sup>12</sup>

---

by Ivan Strenski”, forthcoming in *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni*, 83/2, 2017).

- 10 Between the sixties and the nineties of the past century, the most important works in which comparisons, allusions, or even veritable historical hypotheses suggesting that European pre-modern folkloric zoomorphism was a “degraded” form of some sort of shamanism that migrated westwards in antiquity are, *mutatis mutandis* (i.e., even though differences – even significant ones – exist in methods and conclusions): Maurizio Bertolotti, “Le ossa e la pelle dei buoi: Un mito popolare tra agiografia e stregoneria”, *Quaderni storici* 41/2, 1979, 470-499; id., *Carnevale di massa 1950...*; Roslyn M. Frank, “Recovering European Ritual Bear Hunts: A Comparative Study of Basque and Sardinian Ursine Carnival Performances”, *Insula: Quaderno di cultura sarda* 3, 2008, 41-98; Claude Gaignebet – Marie-Claude Florentin, *Le Carnaval: Essais de mythologie populaire*, Paris: Payot 1974; Carlo Ginzburg, *I benandanti: Stregoneria e culti agrari tra Cinquecento e Seicento*, Torino: Einaudi 1966 (English trans.: *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1983); id., *Storia notturna: Una decifrazione del sabba*, Torino: Einaudi 1998 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1989) (English trans.: *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, New York: Pantheon 1991); Jean-Dominique Lajoux, “Maschere animali e cortei mascherati d’inverno”, in: Piercarlo Grimaldi (ed.), *Bestie, santi, divinità: Maschere animali dell'Europa tradizionale*, Torino: Museo nazionale della montagna Duca degli Abruzzi 2003, 61-75; Michel Praneuf, *L'ours et les hommes dans les traditions européennes*, Paris: Imago 1989.
- 11 Cf. Alby Stone, *Explore Shamanism*, Wymeswold: Heart of Albion 2003, but the examples could be multiplied.
- 12 See, for instance, most of the authors/chapters in Enrico Comba – Daniele Ormezzano (eds.), *Uomini e orsi: Morfologia del selvaggio*, Torino: Academia University Press 2015; Gábor Klaniczay, “Shamanism and Witchcraft”, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1/2, 2006, 214-221; Damon Zacharias Lycourinos, “The Work of Carlo Ginzburg as the Researcher and the Reimagined Researched” [online], *The Religious Studies Project*, <<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/2014/06/06/the-work-of-carlo-ginzburg-as-the-researcher-and-the-reimagined-researched-by-damon-lycourinos/>>, 6 June 2014 [30 September 2016]; Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folks and Familiar Spirits*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press 2005; Bernard Sergent, “Tetewatte et les Lupercales”, *Nouvelle Mythologie Comparée* 3, 2016, 1-10. Criticism has been expressed concerning the possible connections between shamanism and a pan-European phenomenon like

## Zoomorphism, “Eurasian shamanism”, and European rituals

The relationship between shamanism and zoomorphism – just like the relationship between shamanism and animals, whether in flesh and blood or in spirit – is actually as old as the category of shamanism itself. I assume that the reader of this article already knows that said relationship is addressed in all the most important and classical studies devoted to shamanism. For instance, it is presented and thoroughly discussed in chapters three and five (and *passim*) of Eliade’s well-known monograph *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l’extase*.<sup>13</sup>

The association between shamanism and zoomorphism can thus be considered a constitutional element of the very category of shamanism.<sup>14</sup>

---

witchcraft (Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press 1999) or other specific elements of a certain culture or time (Jan Bremmer, “Travelling Souls? Greek Shamanism Reconsidered”, in: id., *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife*, New York: Routledge 2002, 27-40), but not, as far as I know, about the topic of a possible historical or symbolic relationship between zoomorphic masks and ritual zoomorphism in medieval and modern European folklore and a hypothetical Eurasian shamanism.

- 13 Mircea Eliade, *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l’extase*, Paris: Payot 1951 (for a recent assessment of the enormous secondary literature citing this text, cf. Giovanni Casadio, *Lo sciamanesimo prima e dopo Mircea Eliade*, Roma: Il Calamo 2014, and Alessandro Testa, “‘Ipsi sunt multi [...] et faciunt magnum strepitum’: Storici delle religioni, etnologi e sciamani in *Lo sciamanesimo prima e dopo Mircea Eliade* di Giovanni Casadio”, *Archaeus: Studies in the History of Religions* 19/20, 2016, 483-498). Due to its sprawling scope, trying to be exhaustive or even merely sufficiently convincing when citing scholarly literature about shamanism “in general” today cannot be but an arbitrary exercise. My personal selection of some of the best recent studies on shamanism includes Alessandro Saggiore (ed.), *Sciamani e sciamanesimi*, Roma: Carocci 2010 (particularly the chapter by Sergio Botta, “La via storicista allo sciamanesimo: Prospettive archeologiche e storia delle religioni”, in: Alessandro Saggiore [ed.], *Sciamani e sciamanesimi*, Roma: Carocci 2010, 59-86); Luca Arcari – Alessandro Saggiore (eds.), *Sciamanesimo e sciamanesimi: Un problema storiografico*, Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura 2015; Fiona Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 2006, 174-199; Roberte Hamayon (ed.), “Chamanismes”, *Religions et Histoire* 5, 2005 (monographic issue); Thomas A. DuBois, *An Introduction to Shamanism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009. Besides the previously cited review article of Giovanni Casadio’s latest book on the topic, one other contribution I recently published regarding shamanism is Alessandro Testa, “Estasi e crisi: Note su sciamanesimo e pessimismo storico in Eliade, de Martino e Lévi-Strauss”, in: Luca Arcari – Alessandro Saggiore (eds.), *Sciamanesimo e sciamanesimi: Un problema storiografico*, Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura 2015, 101-114.
- 14 It is perhaps not superfluous to recall here that zoomorphic traits appear in what is commonly considered the very first iconographic source that represents a Siberian shaman: the famous portrait of a “diabolical priest” (as it is called in the source), published in the year 1692 in Nicolaas Witsen’s travel book *Noord en Oost Tartarye*. Even in this early source the zoomorphism of the shaman is manifest, and would soon become

It could also be argued, pushing the generalisation even farther, that if, on the one hand, in the majority of historical and cultural settings where it existed or exists, shamanism can hardly exist (or be recognised) without zoomorphism or zoomorphic features, on the other hand zoomorphism can very well exist, and very often actually does exist, outside a shamanic framework. It is precisely this second point that I would like to discuss in this paper: what happens when ritual zoomorphism seems to exist outside a shamanic framework? Is there a risk of confusing – or overlapping – zoomorphic rituality with shamanism on the basis of isomorphism (i.e., formal similarities), and if so, what type of similitude exists?<sup>15</sup>

Over the centuries, European examples of ritual zoomorphism have expressed themselves mostly through manifestations of popular folklore such as winter festivals and carnival masks and masquerades. An exception to this pattern is shown in Scandinavian sources and “Nordic shamanism” – even though these sources are relatively rich (but also problematic, for a number of reasons), the question of a possible correlation between ritual zoomorphism and a hypothetical Eurasian shamanism in Scandinavia has been suspended in this article. The reasons for this suspension of judgement due to the “problematic nature” of the European northeast are diverse, among which are:

- a) The Scandinavian peninsula is somewhat peripheral to the body of the European landmass, making it a sort of small sub-sub-continent (Europe being itself a sub-continent of the much broader Eurasian landmass). Therefore, from ancient times and then even more during the Middle Ages, contact between the peoples of Scandinavia, the Baltic region, the Urals, and up to north-western Siberia (Germanic peoples and Vikings, Balts, Slavs, Finns, and Uralic people) was more frequent and reciprocally influential, as proved by religious, linguistic, archaeological, and genetic evidence.

---

iconic, as both the academic and popular interests in shamanism grew during the Romantic Period, and continued afterwards, until today (Andrei A. Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive: Shamanism and the Western Imagination*, New York: Oxford University Press 2010).

15 I will return to the important question of “what kind of similitudes?” (therefore: what kind of comparison?) in the central pages of this article as well as in its conclusions. As for the more general issues involved in operationalising comparison in religious studies, I have discussed them elsewhere: Alessandro Testa, “Discorso sul mito: Il mito greco interpretato dagli storici delle religioni italiani e dagli storici-antropologi francesi: Un’indagine epistemologica e metodologica comparativa”, in: id., *Miti antichi e moderne mitologie: Saggi di storia delle religioni e storia degli studi sul mondo antico*, Roma: Aracne 2010, 107-406; id., “Quale futuro per la comparazione in storia delle religioni antiche? Una lettura critica di *Comparer en histoire des religions antiques: Controverses et propositions*, a cura di Claude Calame e Bruce Lincoln”, *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* 80/1, 2014, 426-435.



- b) Systematic contact between Nordic and north-eastern peoples and central and southern Europeans was relatively weak – or is relatively poorly documented – until the late High Middle Ages, with a few yet important exceptions. This is a crucial point because the only indubitable form of shamanism on European lands ever proved, that of the Sami of Lapland, proves little or nothing considering that, as is highly likely, the Sami did not have any relevant and durable contacts with non-Scandinavian Europeans in pre-modern times.
- c) Lastly but perhaps most importantly, zoomorphism in the north seems to be related more to mythical and fairy-tale motifs than to ritual patterns, the latter being better documented only from the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Times.<sup>16</sup>

To sum up, although Scandinavian and Nordic sources in general deserve more space and a broader discussion, there are sufficient reasons to consider them only tenuously connected with the sources and the problems discussed in this article.<sup>17</sup>

As I have already argued, several interpretations have been proposed to explain the phenomena discussed in the pages prior to this Scandinavian digression. Some authors, however, have insisted on seeing and seeking a shamanic background in a ritual motif which could have been explained – and which has actually been explained – more easily and convincingly without referring to alleged – and highly hypothetical – shamanic origins. Some, as we are about to see, have thus found it appropriate to explain the lack of incontrovertible shamanic elements in European zoomorphism as the consequence of the historical degradation of a former Eurasian shamanism which did exist in prehistoric times, and that therefore existed

---

16 There is, of course, the exception of the northern *berserkr* (Norse *ber*, “bear”, and *serkr*, “skin”) and the *ulfhednr* (“wolfskin”). This is however a false exception, because, as far as we know, in the case of the warriors *berserkir* and the *ulfhednar*, zoomorphism and psychophysical alteration were performed not for religious but for military purposes. Besides, unlike the late-antique, medieval, and modern European examples which I discuss in this paper, this form of zoomorphism had no calendric connotation (again insofar as the sources tell us). In 1939, Georges Dumézil notoriously proposed to interpret the *berserkr* as a reminiscence of a juvenile rite of passage – or actually as a rite of initiation proper (Georges Dumézil, *Mythes et dieux de la Scandinavie ancienne*, Paris: Gallimard 2000 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1939]; a more recent discussion on the matter is in Bernard Sergent, *Les Indo-Européens: Histoire, langues, mythes*, Paris: Payot 2005 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1995], 316-320).

17 Shamanism in Scandinavia is discussed in a book whose conclusions are, however, only partly shareable: Clive Tolley, *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic*, Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Sciences 2009.



prior to both paganism<sup>18</sup> and Christianity. This Eurasian form of shamanism – so the hypothesis goes – was then forced into a sub-existence due to several historical factors, the main one being the hegemonic attitude concerning religious life that Christendom started to express in late antiquity, while being institutionalised, and then with its actual religious and political hegemony during the so-called High Middle Ages and beyond. Therefore – thus continues, *mutatis mutandis*, the argument – due to historical factors such as changes in religious habits and the intolerance of the institutional religions towards this kind of practices, Eurasian shamanism in Europe entered a dormant state, or a condition of “being in hiding”, only to re-emerge occasionally, sometimes merging or blending with other popular forms of religiosity that escaped the control of the hierarchies – especially, and understandably, in rural areas.<sup>19</sup>

It should also be clarified that the historiography of Carnival in the seventies and the eighties of the last century was particularly influenced by hypotheses of this kind, according to which, as we are about to discover in the next section, certain aspects of the most popular European festival – if not Carnival itself as we know it – had been borrowed, at some point in history, from apparently similar rituals of prehistoric cultures of hunters living and constantly migrating in the vast Eurasian area, roughly going from Siberia to northern Europe. Not even Frazer, the father of cross-cultural comparison in anthropology and the history of religion, had dared so

18 I use the word “paganism” in a contrastive and not analytical or normative way, basically to discriminate between pre-Christian or non-Christian religions existing from ancient times on (thus excluding alleged “prehistoric religions”) and Christianities, as many other authors do. The question of paganism as a descriptive but also normative category used for different purposes by different authors and social groups throughout Western history is a *vexata quaestio*. An assessment of the historiographical debate is in Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010, 15-25. Cf. also Alessandro Testa, “Paganesimo e Neopaganesimo”, in: Prudence Jones – Nigel Pennick, *Storia dei pagani*, Bologna: Odoya 2009, 283-300, 313-315 (the book is an Italian translation of Prudence Jones – Nigel Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe*, London: Psychology Press 1995); Ken Dowden, *European Paganism: The Realities of Cult from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, London: Routledge 2000, and my review essay of the Italian translation of the latter: Alessandro Testa, “Recensione di *Il paganesimo in Europa: Riti e culti dall'antichità al medioevo* di Ken Dowden” [online], <<http://grmito.units.it/content/rec-testa-k-dowden-paganesimo-europa-riti-culti-dallantichit-al-medioevo>>, [18 October 2016].

19 I repeat in this footnote that the purpose of this article is not to discuss in detail the old and vast topic of Eurasian shamanism, which has been discussed in a great number of studies, many of which have already been cited in the previous footnotes. I will focus instead on the related but narrower problem of whether the argument of ritual zoomorphism in European areas being historically related with a hypothetical Eurasian shamanism is historically plausible – and convincing – or not. When referring to Eurasian shamanism I insist using the adjective “hypothetical” because its existence is far from being a datum and is a rather hotly debated issue.

much: the origins of Carnival were not as “recent” as the Frazerian paradigm wanted them (Frazer considered Carnival as a “survival” of pagan rites such as the *saturnalia*<sup>20</sup>), but indeed very remote and actually dating back to prehistoric times. One of the most sophisticated of such hypotheses, whose paternity belongs to the French savant Claude Gaignebet,<sup>21</sup> claims that these archaic traits were actually characteristic of rituals performed by autochthonous European prehistoric hunters, and it goes on to assume that these aspects slowly amalgamated, over the centuries, into the form of Carnivals or carnival-like festivals that are documented since the Middle Ages. They would then be refunctionalised and revitalised over the centuries and until present times – or very recent times – when they subsisted or still subsist as “cultural fossils” or “survivals”.

### **European ritual zoomorphism: A component of an ancient religion, a degraded form of “Eurasian shamanism”, or both?**

Discussed, and either shared or criticised by many scholars, Gaignebet’s hypothesis and *modus interpretandi* actually strongly reminds us of another earlier scholar of European “survivals”: the British scholar Margaret Murray, whose studies deeply influenced, in turn, Carlo Ginzburg and his method and conclusions. This is not the place to recall and comment in detail on Murray’s extremely influential, long-lasting, and evocative arguments developed in her studies about European witchcraft.<sup>22</sup> Nor shall we linger on the vast literature that subsequent academic debates have produced.<sup>23</sup> It is sufficient here to remember that its core theory is that throughout the Middle Ages and sometimes up until modern times, the witches persecuted in European history were not the worshippers of Satan the Church accused them to be, but actually followers of a religion which originated in – and survived from – prehistoric times. Not a “degraded” cult, as in the case of Gaignebet’s (and others’) hypothesis,

---

20 J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough...* For an assessment of Frazer’s intellectual impact and legacy in the study of Carnival and other European festivals and public rituals, cf. Alessandro Testa, “‘Fertility’ and the Carnival 2: Popular Frazerism and the Reconfiguration of Tradition in Europe Today”, *Folklore* 128/2, 2017, 111-132.

21 Claude Gaignebet – Marie-Claude Florentin, *Le Carnaval: Essais de mythologie populaire*, Paris: Payot 1974.

22 Margaret Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1921, and ead., *The God of the Witches*, London: Sampson Low 1931.

23 R. Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon...*; Catherine Noble, “From Fact to Fallacy: The Evolution of Margaret Alice Murray’s Witch-Cult Theory”, *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 7/1, 2005, 5-26; Caroline Oates – Juliette Wood, *A Coven of Scholars: Margaret Murray and Her Working Methods*, London: The Folklore Society 1998.

but an actual, persistent, highly developed religion with its own set of beliefs and rituals. The main deity of this religion was what she calls the “horned god”, whereas the supreme being in Gaignebet’s Carnival religion was, more consistently with its (alleged) Eurasian origins, the bear, the (alleged) sacred animal of the Eurasian prehistoric hunters.

Just as with Gaignebet’s, and actually even more than his, Murray’s theories have undergone the scrutiny of historians and anthropologists for decades, since the publication of her first book on the subject, in 1921. In the sixties and the seventies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, those theories were usually considered plagued by irremediable methodological faults that undermined Murray’s research conclusions. However, more recently some of her arguments and hypotheses have been the object of a certain reconsideration and rehabilitation. For instance, during the eighties the Italian micro-historians Carlo Ginzburg and Maurizio Bertolotti, largely borrowing from Propp’s, Frazer’s, Gaignebet’s, and Murray’s survivalist hypotheses, further developed some of their implications. We come then to the years 1989 and 1991, when these two scholars published their main works containing some broad and audacious hypotheses that concern – and here we finally come back to the topic of this paper, after this necessary historiographical digression – zoomorphism and shamanism in Europe.<sup>24</sup>

The historical and anthropological assumptions and arguments in this hypothesis are numerous. However, it is possible to isolate four main points that can be drawn out of it as follows:

---

24 I refer to C. Ginzburg, *Storia notturna...*, and M. Bertolotti, *Carnevale di massa 1950...* Ginzburg’s book actually concerns witchcraft mostly, but it also touches on our main theme. It has in any case been very influential in the development of Bertolotti’s own method and has a strong presence in his conclusions. Ginzburg’s and Bertolotti’s books (but especially Ginzburg’s) have been variously received and have been the object of long-lasting academic curiosity. The first article-length reviews are still a good introduction to the history of the credit and the criticism these books have received: Cristiano Grottanelli – Pietro Clemente – Fabio Dei – Alessandro Simonicca, “Discussione su Storia notturna di Carlo Ginzburg”, *Quaderni di storia* 34, 1991, 103-130, and Osvaldo Raggio – Mauro Boarelli – Andreina de Clementi, “Discussione su Carnevale di massa 1950”, *Quaderni storici* 83/2, 1993, 595-623. Ginzburg’s shamanism as conceptualized, constructed, and used in *Storia notturna* is epitomised and critically discussed in Jeroen Wim Boekhoven, *Genealogies of Shamanism: Struggles for Power, Charisma and Authority*, Groningen: University of Groningen 2011, 1-30; Yme Kuiper, “Witchcraft, Fertility Cults, and Shamanism: Carlo Ginzburg ‘I benandanti’ in Retrospect”, in: Brigitte Luchesi – Kocku von Stuckrad (eds.), *Religion in Cultural Discourse: Essays in Honor of Hans Kippenberg on the Occasion of His 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, Leiden: Brill 2004, 33-60; Sergio Botta, “Lo sciamanesimo di *Storia notturna* e le tecniche arcaiche dell’estasi: Appunti sul dialogo a distanza tra Carlo Ginzburg e Mircea Eliade”, forthcoming in: Cora Prezezzi (ed.), *Streghe, sciamani, apocalittici: In margine a Storia notturna*, Roma: Viella 2017.

- a) The Eurasian range, which is necessary to explain the resemblances – and therefore allow comparison – between the rituals of the Siberian hunters and those characterising the festivals and performances in European folklore.
- b) The relevance and historical depth of the symbolisation of a particular type of animals, which in times past used to live throughout the Eurasian super-continent: the ursine creatures, most notably the Eurasian brown bear. The widespread symbolic importance of this animal in both Europe and Asia would be a proof of a prehistoric Eurasian shamanic religion that regarded the bear as the most powerful natural and supernatural being. The importance of this has actually been stressed, also after Gaignebet's, Ginzburg's, and Bertolotti's work and until today, in prehistory and religious studies as well, although the possibility of a widespread cult of the bear during Paleolithic and Mesolithic times is today mainly regarded as highly problematic to verify, if not improbable *tout court*.<sup>25</sup>
- c) The role of an alleged ecstatic flight or journey experienced, according to Carlo Ginzburg, by witches, were-wolves, and other folkloric figures all over Europe, and documented, in medieval and early modern times, by the Inquisition trials. With regard to this last conjecture, it is not superfluous to observe that Ginzburg shaped his theory by borrowing theoretical tools about the ecstatic phenomenon mainly – if not exclusively – from Eliade's *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*.<sup>26</sup> This book, however, by the time of the development of this hypothesis, had already been widely criticised precisely with regard to the nature, the role, and the characteristics of shamanic “ecstasy”. In particular, concerning carnival disguises featuring animal-like masking, in *Storia notturna*, Ginzburg proposed treating these animal disguises “as a ritual equivalent of the animal metamorphosis experienced during the shamanic ecstasy, or alternatively an equivalent of the ecstatic cavalcades astride animals which constitute a variant thereof”.<sup>27</sup>

25 Cf. Ina Wunn, “Beginning of Religion: The Belief of Paleolithic Man”, *Numen* 47/4, 2000, 417-444. This hypothesis informs – and is accepted as truthful in – most of the chapters by Italian and international scholars in the recent book E. Comba – D. Ormezzano (eds.), *Uomini e orsi...* The hypothesis of a prehistoric “ursine” background of Eurasian end-of-the-Winter rituals (*fond 'ursin' des rituels de fin d'hiver eurasiens*) has been recently re-proposed, although on the basis of different historical and folkloric material, also in B. Sergent, “Tetewatte et les Lupercales...”, 6 (Sergent, however, does not mention or cite Murray, Gaignebet, Ginzburg, or Bertolotti).

26 S. Botta, “Lo sciamanesimo di *Storia notturna*...”.

27 Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, New York: Pantheon 1991, 185-186 (originally in C. Ginzburg, *Storia notturna...*, 165).

- d) The main function of these European zoomorphic masquerades, considered as equivalents of the shamanic ecstatic rides, would not have been for healing purposes, or divination, or insuring a good hunt, as in the case of the “original” Eurasian prehistoric hunters, but for agricultural fertility and protection (from the spirits) of the rural communities where these ritual phenomena occurred. In other words, the shift that at some point, and for reasons and through cultural mechanisms unknown, would have occurred was from healing/divinatory/hunting-enhancing functions to fertility-bringing/apotropaic functions. Besides, these rituals would have been considered by these medieval and early modern communities so important that they were maintained over the centuries in spite of condemnations, persecutions, and prohibitions by the hierarchies, often existing until our contemporary times, although in a degraded state, and bearing only superficial similarities with the former manifestations.

As can be easily presumed, this hypothesis and its corollary rest almost completely on comparison, especially on a morphological and cross-cultural type of comparison. Often, actually, as I have argued elsewhere, this comparison rests solely on the formal level, and it hardly ever delves deeper into the functional, structural, or semiotic ones.<sup>28</sup> Its main scholarly influences are recognisable and can be summarised as follows: Ginzburg’s method (and also conclusions, partly at least) relies upon four main references: Propp’s typological-morphological “indiciary” method as developed in his ground-breaking book about the historical roots of the folk tale;<sup>29</sup> Murray’s model, according to which some European folkloric practices, documented mainly during medieval and early modern Inquisition trials, would betray their actually being *longue-durée* phenomena of a pre-Christian and even pre-Pagan religion whose followers worshipped a zoomorphic god; Gaignebet’s theory of Carnival considered as the relic of an ancient cult, which should also be categorised *sub specie religionis*, also of prehistoric origins, with the worship of the bear at its centre; and Eliade’s insistence on ecstasy being the centre of all phenom-

28 See my critique in A. Testa, “Mascheramenti zoomorfi...”. Paradigmatic examples of a plainly formal and uncritical comparison can be found in the recent collection of papers E. Comba – D. Ormezzano (eds.), *Uomini e orsi...*

29 Vladimir Propp, *Le radici storiche dei racconti di fate*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri 1985; originally published as: *Istoričeskie korni volšebnoj skazki*, Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo leningradskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta 1946. This book has been somewhat influential in continental Europe, but, unlike its more famous predecessor, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, not much so in the English-speaking world (it has been translated into Italian, Spanish, French, Romanian, and Japanese, but not into English).

ena deemed as shamanic.<sup>30</sup> As for Bertolotti, his theses about European ritual zoomorphism and its alleged connection with shamanism were partly autonomously formulated, partly influenced by Ginzburg. Bertolotti, however, put less emphasis on Eliade's model, and more on Gaignebet's hypotheses about the origins of carnival performances as coming from Eurasian prehistoric hunting rituals having the bear as the main worship object, an animal considered, if not a god, a mighty creature with supernatural powers.

### **What kind of comparison? And what does such a comparison suggest?**

I suggest that, however fascinating this theory may be, and in spite of the occasional convincing interpretations and intuitions that can be found in Ginzburg's and Bertolotti's works (and in their predecessors' of course), there is not sufficient historical evidence to bind the relatively well documented European zoomorphic rituals with a highly hypothetical Eurasian prehistoric shamanism. According to Ginzburg and Bertolotti, as well as their followers (see footnote n. 12), the problem at stake is not the individuation of a hypothetical cultural-polygenetic scheme of this kind of phenomena, or a model for their diffusion, or the existence of some sort of collective archetypes or other psycho-social reality that could justify their existence in different (sometimes radically so) cultural *milieux*. What they claim, in fact, is the existence of an actual, historical connection between European rituals performed by men disguised as animals and a(n alleged) Eurasian shamanism.<sup>31</sup> Hence, the examples of similitude in the rites they compare in their writings are treated, even though this is never made explicit (as far as I can recall), as homologies, i.e., similarities in different cultural facts (the Sabbath and the ecstatic flights, zoomorphic masquerades, and other "agrarian" rites) sharing a common ancestor: Eurasian shamanism. It is not superfluous, at this point of this treatise, to diverge

---

30 No wonder that Eliade himself praised Ginzburg's *I benandanti*, using it for his own analysis and concluding that "Carlo Ginzburg rightly compares the *benandanti* and the Lithuanian werewolves with the shamans" (Mircea Eliade, "Some Observations on European Witchcraft", *History of Religions* 14/3, 1975, 149-172; republished in id., *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions*, Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press 1976, 69-92).

31 "[In *Storia notturna / Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*] Ginzburg gives up undertaking a typological comparison – based on 'analogical' evidence – and affirms instead the existence of a 'real' connection [between the *benandanti* – who in Ginzburg's opinion were equivalent to men performing disguised as animals – and shamans], a connection to be understood therefore as historically verifiable" (S. Botta, "Lo sciamanesimo di *Storia notturna* ...", n.p.).

from the main topic briefly, and problematise the issue of historical comparison in general and that of comparison in the study of European folklore in particular.

Borrowing from the terminology used in biological morphology aimed at taxonomic classifications, homology (homological similarities) has been summarised by Jonathan Z. Smith as a “similarity of form or structure between two species sharing one common ancestor”, whereas analogy (or analytical similarities) is a “similarity of form or structure between two species not sharing a common ancestor”.<sup>32</sup> However, what is not taken into consideration are instances of *dissimilarity* of form or structure between two – or more – “species” having a common ancestor. We could call this “homogeneity” (or homogenous similarities).

What happens, then, if we transpose this scheme into cross-cultural comparison, thus substituting “species” with, say, “rituals” or “myths”? Taking for granted that cultural phenomena do not follow the same rules as the evolution of species and do not change as biological matter does, this typology of isomorphism (or disomorphism) could be schematised (and simplified) as follows (ancestor has been substituted with “origin”, a concept which, albeit not at all neutral, is nevertheless more appropriate if applied to cultural facts; the examples are chosen from case studies I have studied):

- Similar form, different origin: *analogy* (e.g., shamanic ritual costume with furs and deer or reindeer antlers from Siberia and the carnival ritual mask of the deer-man with furs and deer antlers in Castelnuovo al Volturno).
- Same origin, different form: *homogeneity* (the killing of the “mare” during *Masopust* in Hlinsko and the killing of the “donkey” during *Carnaval* in Solsona).
- Same origin, similar form: *homology* (*Procesión del Silencio* in Dolores Hidalgo Cuna de la Independencia Nacional and the *Processione del Venerdì Santo* in Isernia).

We could also substitute the principle of origin with that of function (but keeping the same synthetic terms; the aforementioned examples can be automatically transposed and associated to the respective entries – I chose them in order to be able to do so, but different examples might not fit equally):

- Similar form, different function: *analogy*.
- Same function, different form: *homogeneity*.

---

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, London: University of London 1990, 47-48.



- Similar form, same function: *homology*.

Things would of course get more complicated if we *united*, instead of substituted, said principles:

- Similar form, different origin, same function (in-house seclusion in girls' coming-of-age rituals among the Newar in Nepal and in-house seclusion in girls' coming-of-age rituals among the Ka'apor in Brazil).
- Similar form, same origin, different function (the Mesoamerican ritual ballgame *Ōllamalitzli* and the modern *Ulama* played in the Mexican state of Sinaloa).

And so on and so forth – the combinations are numerous. However, in adding one more principle to the different types, thus making a much broader typology, we would need to invent a different terminology. Other principles could be added (structure, meaning, etc.), making the combinations between them virtually infinite, and the usage of synthetic terms practically impossible.

Hence, the type of comparison made by Ginzburg and Bertolotti, among others, relies on the (“homological”) assumption of the existence of a Eurasian shamanism prior to later historical manifestations of, among other phenomena, ritual zoomorphism. However, as already mentioned, the type of formal comparison used by the authors who have developed this theory is not always methodologically sound and theoretically consistent, and has led, in my opinion, to overestimating these resemblances (allegedly homological, but actually analogical) at the expense of important differences. For instance, in the interpretations of this type of phenomena in European folklore, formal similarities (or continuities) have all too often been considered more historically and anthropologically significant than functional, structural, and semiotic/semantic dissimilarities (or changes).

Besides the questionable methodological approach, there are several counter-arguments that can be used to refute, or at least call into question, this Eurasian hypothesis and its historical conclusions, and to offer a more historical perspective. These counter-arguments can be summarised as follows:

- a) As already argued, the religious and more generally symbolic prominence of the bear, which is supposed to be a clue, if not the ultimate evidence of the alleged prehistoric Eurasian religion, is a *very* important argument in Gaignebet, Ginzburg, and Bertolotti. Let us cite a specific passage from the book *Carnevale di Massa 1950* by Bertolotti. This scholar, as we now know, in fact pushed this conjecture to its extreme logical conclusions, arguing:

The representations of Carnival and the European bear masks are parallels to the sacred figures of the Siberian and Indian hunters. In them, we can recognise 1) a powerful being, 2) bringing prosperity, 3) but from which the community could also expect harmful things. This figure 4) undertakes a journey to the hereafter, 5) where he is welcomed as an honourable guest, 6) he is then killed, 7) and afterwards he is reborn to return to the land of men.<sup>33</sup>

There are several problems with this very daring thesis. First, none of the written sources prior to the 9<sup>th</sup> century explicitly mentions bear-like masks. From the Late Middle Ages onwards, bear-like masks seem indeed to become more popular; however, the bear is only one of the animals that are the object of this process of folklorisation, along with the mare, the deer, the wolf, the goat, and others.<sup>34</sup> This process of differentiation and ritual diversification can be observed even in those areas where bears are or were very common, like in the Pyrenees, the Alps, and the Appenines, and where therefore we would expect a prominence that, on the contrary, we find not.<sup>35</sup> And, it goes without saying, no symbolic prominence, no religious prominence. We cannot but conclude that the symbolisation of the bear, and even more its symbolic pre-eminence, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, are, in European history, a cultural *variable* and not a cultural *constant*.<sup>36</sup>

33 My translation from M. Bertolotti, *Carnevale di massa 1950...*, 155.

34 Cf. A. Testa, "Mascheramenti zoomorfi...", 65-69, 94-99, and *passim*.

35 Legitimate curiosity might arise about whether the extent and rate of the fluctuations of ursine populations in certain Eurasian areas correlate chronologically with the developments of the symbolisation and ritualisation they may have been the object of. Perhaps quantitative, demographic archaeo-zoological data could help us understand this question.

36 There is indeed an abundance of archaeological ursine findings suggesting that in Europe's deep past the bear did have a particular symbolic significance, although it is difficult to ascertain whether of a religious nature or not. I, and others (I. Wunn, "Beginning of Religion...") find it more convincing, or at least more prudent, to answer this question in the negative. The debate, however, is still open. Whatever the right answer may be, it is actually a question that does not concern us, for what is in question here is not the existence of a prehistoric religion featuring a bear-like supreme being or god, but the claim that some sort of continuities and "survivals" of such an alleged religion persisted in medieval and modern forms of religiosity, and the presumed connection between said prehistoric ursine religion and a highly hypothetical persistence of genuinely shamanic traits in European ritual zoomorphism. More importantly, even if the existence of a prehistoric religion devoted to bear worship were to be confirmed by archaeologists and scholars of religion, a connection between any alleged prehistoric devotion and what we know today as "shamanism" would still be needed (see Paul G. Bahn, *Prehistoric Rock Art: Polemics and Progress*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2010). In fact, nothing indicates – although nothing excludes either – that prehistoric religions were shamanic religions. Last, but not least, it should be remarked that if we do possess enough evidence of prehistoric ritualism connected with the bear, no evidence whatsoever exists of a veritable religious cult of

Furthermore, many of the actions or features listed by Bertolotti are not to be found in the historical or ethnographic sources. For instance, the characterisation of the carnival or zoomorphic mask as a “powerful being” is mostly if not totally absent in European folklore. The same goes for the presumed journey to the hereafter, which is mentioned nowhere in European documents or ethnographic oral reports. Also, the zoomorphic masks of the Carnival or carnival-like European festivals are almost never welcomed as “honourable guests”, as Bertolotti writes. On the contrary, most of the time, they are treated as a scapegoat, which is to say, they are mocked, insulted, abused, before being the object of mimic killing.<sup>37</sup> This point, in fact, had already been rightly and clearly made by Arnold van Gennep, who, probably in an implicit polemic against Frazer, wrote that

[n]othing, in the sources at our disposal, suggests that the personifications of Carnival were ever considered as divinities, or the mannequins as gods. Therefore, it would be wrong to assimilate their “death” to a veritable sacrifice of a religious nature.<sup>38</sup>

As a consequence of the points made above, all theories that found their legitimacy in a presumed symbolic or historical prominence of the bear over other animals in European zoomorphic rituals, whether linking this prominence to a presumed prehistoric religion of Eurasian hunters or not, should be discarded, as they appear not to be sufficiently corroborated.

- b) A final point can be made concerning Eliadian’s thesis that ecstasy is the very core of the shamanic experience, and the related Ginzburgian idea according to which ecstasy would also characterise the performances of the European witches, were-wolves, and zoomorphic masks in medieval and early modern times, and that therefore all these figures originated from a common Eurasian religious substra-

---

this animal in medieval or early modern times, let alone in modern and late modern times.

37 The evidence suggesting that the representations of the character of Carnival (like the popular mannequins) have been traditionally and mostly treated as scapegoats – or were themselves a “type of” scapegoat – is overwhelming, just like the literature that has discussed this problem in the history and anthropology of European Carnivals. A thorough discussion about this debated topic is given, along with abundant references, in A. Testa, “Mascheramenti zoomorfi...”, and id., *Il carnevale dell’uomo-animale...*, 298-322.

38 “Rien, dans les documents qu’on possède, ne permet de regarder les personifications du Carnaval comme des divinisations, ni les mannequins comme des dieux; aussi, aurait-on tort d’assimiler leur ‘mort’ à un véritable sacrifice de caractère religieux” (A. van Gennep, *Manuel de folklore français contemporain...*, 874).

tum. In regard to this problem, it is important to note that it is extremely difficult to deduce genuine forms of ecstasy from historical sources concerning these phenomena. Actually, as far as I know, in neither historical sources nor in more recent ethnographic reports do we find a form of ecstasy denoting the psychophysical condition of the individuals impersonating the zoomorphic masks and performing the ritual actions.<sup>39</sup>

When observing cases of zoomorphic rituality in contemporary European folklore, the ethnographers often come across states of extreme fatigue caused by the performance, and also drunkenness, and overexcitement.<sup>40</sup> It can be argued that these altered psychophysical conditions could lead to veritable states of trance, caused precisely by contingent factors like the synergy between fatigue, rhythmic movements and/or dances, the possible consumption of psycho-active substances (alcohol, drugs), etc. However, we should not confuse general psychophysical altered states in European zoomorphic rituals with shamanic ecstasy, nor with religious ecstasy in general, for the simple reason that the religious motivation or framework is actually absent in the former. Although religious characteristics can denote European ritual zoomorphism,<sup>41</sup> never – or very seldom – in the historical sources or in the recent contemporary ethnographic cases is the purpose or nature of such pantomimes and masquerades conceptualised as religious *per se*. In brief, if ecstasy subsists in these zoomorphic masquerades – and this is virtually impossible to ascertain in the historical cases due to the nature of the sources, and very rarely observed in contemporary cases – it is not of a religious type.

- c) Finally, yet as importantly, a functionalist argument can be advanced that, I believe, might constitute a serious hindrance to the Eurasian shamanic hypothesis concerning European folkloric zoomorphism: is it not questionable, to say the very least, to advocate the existence of shamanic survivals in societies where divination and traditional healing were performed in different ways, and where the hunt had already long lost its primary economic role? And where therefore the central-

39 For an overview of the problem of masking, see Henry Pernet, "Masks", in: Lindsay Jones (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion* IX, Detroit – New York: MacMillan 2005, 5764-5772. See also Donald Pollock, "Masks and the Semiotics of Identity", *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1/3, 1995, 581-597.

40 I have myself observed these states in the performers of the zoomorphic pantomime that was the principal object of my doctoral research (then published as a book: A. Testa, *Il carnevale dell'uomo-animale...*, 511-520).

41 See footnote n. 9.

ity of animal symbolism itself had vanished or at least significantly weakened? How can we explain the centuries-long persistence of practices that could no longer exercise a “strong” sociocultural function for the respective communities? Evoking a very generic function of prosperity and agricultural fertility in lieu of divination, healing, and hunting-related function, as Ginzburg does, is not enough, in my opinion, to explain either a highly questionable persistence of these traits and practices as pseudo-shamanic, or their refunctionalisation as something different (e.g., fertility and apotropaic rites).

## Conclusions

The first goal of the sceptical remarks I have formulated in this paper is to persuade those who still perorate Ginzburg’s and Bertolotti’s views to accept the fact that historical or symbolic relationships or connections between European zoomorphic rituality (and popular culture more generally) and shamanism (whether “Eurasian” or not) is not only speculative but also, and in spite of the many and often striking formal similarities, very unlikely. My second aim is to inform those who have not yet formed their own opinion on the matter about the state of the art and the main arguments of the debate, which is perhaps no longer very urgent, but surely still an interesting issue. My third aim is, more generally, to advocate once again that more methodological prudence should be used when comparing different cultural phenomena on the basis of purely formal resemblances.

Historically speaking, the methodological tools and the theoretical models used to study cultural continuities and similarities across time and space have always constituted a rather undisciplined array of numerous and conflicting instruments. As a result, the field is swamped by the presence of different typological and morphological approaches to comparative studies, mostly dealing with a problematic comprehension of the analogy/homology/homogeneity issue. Trying to explain and interpret continuities and similarities of great diffusion and historical depth always implies entering into a tricky field where flourish numerous methodological and theoretical problems connected with typological and morphological comparisons, the polygenesis of cultural phenomena, and the existence of archetypes or other fixed structures of the human spirit. But these questions fall outside the scope of this article,<sup>42</sup> which cannot be, and does not

---

42 A proposal that tries to solve problems of emergence and diffusions of folkloric motifs has recently been developed by Julien D’Huy and applied to the development of cultural phylogenetic “trees” of narrative and mythical motifs on the basis of motif-types built through the juxtaposition of formal similarities (Julien D’Huy, “The Evolution of

seek to be, the place for a dispute between polygenetic, diffusionist, evolutionist, behavioural, and mentalist theories explaining cross-cultural similarities. None of these, after all, seems to be diriment with regard to the problem of European ritual zoomorphism.

In conclusion, although I think that the possibility of contact, influences, diffusions, and other kinds of historical relationships between soci-

---

Myths”, *Scientific American* 315/6, 56-63, and Julien D’Huy – Jean-Loïc Le Quellec, “Les mythes ont aussi un arbre généalogique”, *La Recherche* 517, 2016, 72-77). This method could be easily adjusted in order to be applied to the study of ritual motifs; in fact, this has already been done by D’Huy himself: Julien D’Huy, “Première reconstruction statistique d’un rituel paléolithique: Autour du motif du dragon”, *Nouvelle Mythologie Comparée* 3, 2016, 1-33. This article is of course no place for an extensive review of D’Huy’s approach, conclusions, and findings – about which I remain sceptical, even though I have enjoyed reading his studies and appreciated the intelligence and innovativeness of his proposal. In particular, I disagree with some of the very fundamentals on which this methodology has been theorised and implemented: the way the morphological units (which he calls “mythemes”) have been put together, isolated, and compared; his interpretation of prehistoric art-rock; his approach to periodisation, and the almost utter disregard of polygenetic, mentalist, or cognitive-behavioural paradigms, in exclusive favour of a diffusionist/evolutionary one. Concerning the use of his methods applied to the material discussed in this article, it seems to me that his diffusionist approach collides with the lack of historical sources (*realia* or other sorts of sources) and empirical evidence; a phylogenetic “tree” composed using J. D’Huy’s method and trying to depict the possible evolution of ritual zoomorphism in Europe (or even Eurasia) from a hypothetical shamanic substratum would, in my opinion, be flawed. In fact, in order to be credible, such a phylogenetic scheme requires the previous creation, of a model or type, built on the comparison of morphologically coherent elements or clusters of elements. The problem is that none of said elements or cluster of elements alone can legitimise the construction of such a model or type (or rather ideal-type, for such are the ritual motifs or “mythemes” isolated by D’Huy). Such an endeavour would result in a fascinating but futile exercise in the composition of a geometric phylogenetic scheme pointing to anti-historical conclusions, because it would not show the development and diffusion of a real cultural phenomenon, but only the ideal cultural genealogy of a model or type that would exist only in the researcher’s desktop. Consider how arbitrary the isolations of said hypothetical elements or cluster of elements would ultimately be: in the case of ritual zoomorphism in medieval and modern European folklore, we may include, say, rituals where real furs are used by the performers and exclude, say, rituals where masks have horns but not furs; we may include, say, rituals showing an apotropaic or therapeutic function, but exclude, say, rituals of fertility; we may include, say, rituals with dances but exclude the use of drugs or music to reach a certain psycho-physical state. On the basis of which criteria can the researcher decide which feature is more significant or representative than others? Alternatively, such a model or ideal-type (“European ritual zoomorphism possibly linked to Eurasian shamanism”) could be a category as wide and vague as to include all sorts of different phenomena, thus losing all historical pregnancy and heuristic credibility and usefulness, because ritual zoomorphism exists or has been recorded in thousands of different eras, locations, and cultures in Eurasia as well as elsewhere; mapping it for the sake of theorising a diffusionist and/or evolutionary pattern would make very little sense.



eties very far from each other in time and space should not in principle be dismissed as impossible, unprovable, or unthinkable only because of a lack of sources, I nevertheless propose that the possibility of an actual connection between (let alone a descent from) a hypothetical, prehistoric Eurasian form of shamanism and medieval and modern European forms of ritual zoomorphism is very weak or, even more likely, non-existent. In sum, it is not necessary to reach out to Palaeolithic hunters and Siberian shamans to interpret more recent European masks and rituals.





## SUMMARY

**Ritual Zoomorphism in Medieval and Modern European Folklore: Some Sceptical Remarks on a Possible Connection with a Hypothetical Eurasian Shamanism**

An interesting ritual motif can be studied transversally in European areas in a period of time that goes roughly from antiquity to modern times. This ritual motif is the performances of men disguised as – and acting like – animals at certain times of the year. In the past, these performances did not usually occur during official celebrations, but rather during popular festivals like Carnivals, and were normally considered “pagan” or “vulgar” or, more recently, “folkloric”. For centuries, these ritual or pseudo-ritual practices were harshly criticised – if not openly discouraged or even forbidden – by representatives of the different societal hierarchies, and especially by the clergy. In this article, I present a short overview of the rather diverse interpretations that have led to possible proposed connections between these performances and rituals and a hypothetical Eurasian “shamanic substratum” which would constitute their cultural matrix. In so doing, I also suggest that different conclusions can be drawn from these observations on this and other related topics.

**Keywords:** Carnival; European folklore; Eurasian shamanism; masks and masquerades; popular religion; ritual; survivals; prehistoric religion; zoomorphism.

Department of Social Sciences  
Faculty of Arts and Philosophy  
University of Pardubice  
Studentská 97  
532 10 Pardubice  
Czech Republic

ALESSANDRO TESTA

alessandro.testa@univie.ac.at