

The ambiguity and connective power of spider Considerations on the central symbol of tarantism

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Abstract

The *taranta* – the central symbol of the mythical-ritual complex of tarantism, in Apulia, Southern Italy – had the power to motivate and influence local representations of suffering, healing practices, the imaginary, social life and the relationship of the peasants to their land. Through an analysis of the behaviour of the two spiders that occupy a prominent role in tarantism, the relationship of the peasants with the land they inhabited and a re-reading of ethnographical accounts about some aspects of the mythical-ritual complex of tarantism, I propose that the power of *taranta* resides in its ambiguity, in its ability to establish connections between the natural, human and spiritual worlds and the physiological, psychological, social and spiritual dimensions of the human being. Crossing ethnographical data with an analysis of the behaviour of the two spiders in tarantism, I also propose an explanation for the prominence of *Lycosa Tarantula* over the *Latrodectus Tredecim Guttatus* in tarantism, although the second spider has a much more poisonous sting which produces many of the symptoms attributed to the *taranta*.

Keywords: taranta, spider, tarantism, ritual symbols, human-nature relationship

Introduction

«Questa è la terra di Puglia
e del Salento,
spaccata dal sole
[...]
È terra di veleni
animali e vegetali:
qui esce nella calura
il ragno della follia
e dell'assenza,
si insinua nel sangue
di corpi delicati
che conoscono
solo il lavoro arido
della terra, distruttore
della minima pace del giorno.
[...]»¹.

¹ This is the land of Apulia/ and of Salento/ split by the sun/ [...] It is a land of poisons/ animal and vegetal/ here, out of the heat,/ comes the spider of madness/ and of absence,/ it creeps into the blood/ of delicate bodies/ which know/ only the arid work/ of the land, destroyer/ of the least peace of the day [...](Mingozi 1961).

These words of the Italian poet Salvatore Quasimodo accompany the images of the 1961 documentary *La taranta*, by Gianfranco Mingozzi, in which tarantism is described by its essential features: the work in the fields, the poisonous sting, the domestic ritual and the liberatory music, the orchestra, the visit to the chapel of Saint Paul in Galatina to ask for mercy, the disaggregation of tarantism in the second half of the twentieth century – which manifested in the impossibility of controlling the crises of *tarantati/e* because of the prohibition of music in the chapel – and the overcoming of the neurologic and psychiatric paradigm.

The *taranta* was the central symbol of tarantism, which formed in Apulia – as a mythical-ritual complex centred on musical-choreutical therapy for the spider sting and the annual re-presentation of symptoms – probably between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries, and which began to decline in the middle of the twentieth century, when the Neapolitan anthropologist Ernesto de Martino conducted an interdisciplinary study with his team, that resulted in his classic work *La terra del rimorso*². This work had great influence in the subsequent studies on tarantism; anyway, Palmisano (1999) points out the limits of De Martino's ethnographic research and analysis, based on a juxtaposition, in Italy, between the rural and irrational “magic world” of the agricultural South, and industrialized North.

In local representations of and relationship with the *taranta*, different elements were organized into a mythical-ritual complex, «a symbolic universe, expression of an *imago mundi*» (Palmisano 2018), built on the basis of spiders and other animals, the relationship of the peasants with the landscape, social life, past experiences, stories about exceptional events implicating spiders, the survival of pre-Christian magical-religious cults and traditional healing practices, and the figure of Saint Paul, who, in the eighteenth century, assumed the role of healer from the *taranta*'s sting. In tarantism, many pasts, of different temporal thickness, which can refer to a much vaster spatial context, are encrusted³.

The therapeutic ritual intensified and condensed the experience and the imaginary around the *taranta*, in its polysemy and multivocality (Turner 1967), through different sensory means⁴, since symbols are expressive and have the power to motivate:

«Symbols create and are recreated by action. [...] Symbols, through ritual, shape the ways in which social actors see, feel and think about the world (Ortner 1994: 375), which result in action toward that reality created in ritual»⁵.

² The term “rimorso” acquires the double meaning of “re-sting”, since the symptoms of the spider's poison reappeared every year – at the beginning of the summer, close to the feast of Saint Paul – and of “remorse”, for a bad past that comes back to torment people.

³ As Carlo Ginzburg observes for folk traditions. See Ginzburg 1989, p. xxxv.

⁴ These are characteristics that Victor Turner identifies in ritual symbols (see Turner 1967).

⁵ Langdon 2007, p. 15.

Mingozi's documentary presents a vivid description of the "land of tarantism", broken by the sun and hosting poisonous animals, and points out the deep relationship between Salentine peasants and their land, which offered the means of survival, paid for with hard work, and hid dangers. The landscape forges the way of inhabiting and living among human beings as well as human-nature relationships, of which I propose an analysis following the ecological approach of Tim Ingold⁶, considering the *taranta* to be an aggregate of vital flows, integrated into the cycles and dynamics of life and the environment.

By analysing the two spiders that appear in tarantism – the *Lycosa Tarantula* and the *Latrodectus Tredecim Guttatus* – as well as some elements of the ritual of tarantism – the relationship of *tarantate/i*⁷ with their *taranta* and the figure of Saint Paul – I argue that the power of the *taranta* as a central symbol of tarantism resided in its ambiguity and in the fact that it occupied an "in-between space"⁸, establishing relationships among different domains of existence connecting human, animal and spiritual spheres. This conjunctive property of ritual symbols also favours healing through ritual.

The connection of the testimony given by the *tarantata* Rosina to Chiriatti about the nature of her *taranta*⁹ with regard to the behaviour of the two spiders in tarantism, and the comparison with other ethnographical contexts, allows me to propose an answer to the question raised by Ioan Lewis (1991) about the preference, in tarantism, for the less poisonous *Lycosa Tarantula* over the *Latrodectus Tredecim Guttatus*, although the latter spider causes severe symptoms and eventually death.

The *taranta* as a synthesis of natural, human and supernatural elements

The *taranta* appears as an animal and as a social and supernatural being. It was a part of and shaped the landscape people inhabited and worked, and it achieved the imaginary. It interacted with human beings and moulded their experience and expression of suffering. It influenced people's relationships; had will and inclinations of its own; a predilection for certain songs, colours, dances and objects; and entered into negotiations with the afflicted person about how to achieve a cure/mercy. In many cases, the *taranta* was identified/fused with Saint Paul, who was considered to have the power to heal from its venom.

⁶ Ingold 2000; 2010.

⁷ De Martino (1997) observes the predominance of women among people stung by the *taranta*, related to women's social conditions and suffering.

⁸ Bonet 2013.

⁹ Chiriatti 2011.

The spiders that were at issue in most cases of tarantism were essentially two: the tarantula or *taranta* (*Lycosa tarantula*), larger but less poisonous, whose sting produces only local effects; and the *Latrodectus tredecim guttatus*, whose sting is not painful but can cause serious effects. These two spiders were not clearly distinguished from each other in local representations and were fused/confused with each other; they were often described with fantastic features (such as great speed and capacity for displacement) and different colours (red, green, blue, yellow etc.). Other poisonous spiders and animals (such as scorpions and serpents) contributed to the formation of the symbolism of and imaginary around the *taranta*, since the eighteenth century classifications catalogued different poisonous animals (such as serpents and scorpions) under the name tarantula or *taranta*.

In the biographies of *tarantate/i*, reports of real stings and symbolic events appear involving spiders, scorpions, snakes, dogs, the sea, dreams and fears¹⁰.

Figure 1: *Latrodectus tredecim guttatus*.



Source: Wikimedia Commons¹¹.

¹⁰ De Martino 1997.

¹¹ Available at: <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=331021>>. Accessed Oct. 2021.

Figure 2: *Lycosa tarantula*.



Source: Flickr¹².

The *Latrodectus tredecim guttatus* is only 15 mm long, and has a bright black colour with red patches on the back. It moves slowly and weaves an irregular and strong web among the branches, where it waits for its prey. It lets itself hang from its web and be carried around by the wind. Its sting provokes neuro-toxic effects: sweating, nausea, vomiting, fever, headache, tachycardia, convulsions, abdominal pains, muscle spasms that spread throughout the body, anxiety, psychomotor agitation, contraction of abdominal and facial muscles, sight disturbances, hallucinations and delirium. In the most severe cases, it can cause fainting and even death. Symptoms such as fatigue, arthralgia, headache and somnolence may persist for months.

The brown-coloured *Lycosa tarantula* has larger dimensions (25–30 mm) and usually lives in the fields. Its sting causes immediate pain, but only local effects. Although it is hidden during the winter, in the summer (when it reproduces and deposits its eggs) it appears more often in the fields, the female being accompanied

¹² Available at: < <https://www.flickr.com/photos/blainatura/5933873622>>. Accessed Oct. 2021.

by its numerous spiderlings. It digs its den in the ground. Its behaviour presents frightening aspects that have entered into the popular image of the *taranta*: it moves quickly and reaches its victims with a broad jump.

The fusion/confusion of these two spiders culturally melded the symptoms of the sting and the mythical-ritual complex of tarantism. That is, the poisonous sting was commonly attributed to the *Lycosa Tarantula*. A first explanation can be detected in its frightening aspect and in the fact that the sting of the *Latrodectus tredecim guttatus*, more poisonous, does not cause immediate effects, so pain and symptoms are perceived only later, and, looking around, the more numerous and bigger *Lycosa tarantula* may be more readily encountered. I will take this analysis further along the path of a relationship with cosmological aspects, as suggested by Lewis (1991) in his analysis of pangolin among the Lele and other Congolese cultures.

In tarantism, the *taranta* appears as a “thing” according to Tim Ingold’s definition: «porous and fluid, permeated by vital flows, integrated to the cycles and dynamics of life and environment»¹³. In fact, in the perception of the peasants, the spider figured «in our perception as an object that can be set in motion, and became instead a movement that resolves itself into the form of a thing. One could say the same, indeed, of a bird-in-the-air, or of the fish-in-the-water»¹⁴.

The *taranta* was its poisonous sting and the symptoms it provoked (in addition to those of the *Latrodectus tredecim guttatus*, intense sexual appetite and aggressiveness or melancholia), its jumps, its speed and displacement capacity, its hanging from its web, its emerging from underground, and the dread and the fear that it provoked. The *taranta* was also the music and the liberatory dance, the colour and the objects that it liked, and the typical scream of the *tarantate/i*: «A-Hi!».

Fantastic elements added to the characteristics of these two spiders, such as the possibility of having different colours (red, yellow, blue, green etc.), and human and supernatural traits, yielding a more intense and meaningful human-animal relationship.

Many *tarantate/i* referred to the spider as “Lady Taranta”, assigning it a human identity and feminine gender. In fact, De Martino (1997) lists different names of *tarante*, all female, such as Rosina, Peppina and Maria Antonietta. The same affective tonalities manifested by the stung person were attributed to the *taranta*: there were, thus, “dancer” and “singer” *tarante*, sensitive to music, dance and singing; “sad and mute” *tarante*, demanding melancholic chants and songs; “stormy” *tarante* that led to aggressive behaviours; “libertine” *tarante*, producing an uncontrolled sexual desire; “asleep” *tarante*, not reacting to music; “spinster” *tarante*, wishing for a wedding dress; and *tarante* who assumed attitudes of high society and wanted jewels and ornaments. In more ancient rituals, there were also

¹³ Ingold 2010, p. 25.

¹⁴ Ingold 2010, p. 8.

tarante/tarantate/i who identified themselves with high positions in the army and danced with swords¹⁵. As pointed out by Leiris (1958) and Palmisano (2018) about the *zar* in Ethiopia, the identification of the spirit responsible for the affliction opens the way to the possibility of knowing its personality and wishes, so that it can be satisfied and, so, open the path for the cure.

The colour and music to which the *tarantato/a* reacted were the same as those of the *taranta*: popular tradition affirms that this was the music that the *taranta* emitted while stinging. These beliefs agree with the affirmations of the physician Luigi Marra in the *Sertum papale de Venenis*, of 1362 – the first document that relates the use of music and singing to cure the venom of spiders in Salento – where he criticizes the popular belief that the music to which the *tarantato/a* reacted was the same that was emitted by the spider at the time of the sting; and those of Leonardo da Vinci, who, in the *H.18 Codex. V*, asserts that the sting of the *taranta* keeps a person in his or her intention, that is, what he or she was thinking or making when stung. In fact, according to tradition, the return of the *tarantato/a* to the place where he or she was stung had therapeutic effects, so that he or she could overcome the shock of the event where his or her mind was fixed.

With regard to the weakness of animal/human borders, the approximation between natural and supernatural domains adds up, as is evident from the mimesis of the *taranta* by the *tarantato/a* (that induced some authors, such as Lapassade¹⁶ to defend an adoristical interpretation of tarantism) in the first phase of the therapeutic ritual¹⁷, when the *tarantato/a* looks “to be acted upon”¹⁸ by the *taranta*, in the dialogues and relations that many *tarantati/e* established with it¹⁹ and in the fusion/confusion between the *taranta* and Saint Paul.

As Sandro Portelli maintains in his introduction to the work of Luigi Stifani:

«The recurring figure in their ‘biographies’, the one by which the tarantato becomes the animal that stung him – becomes a snake, becomes a spider, until he obtains the

¹⁵ Gala (2013) observes the great variety of music and dance styles that comprised the repertory of tarantism (usually the same ones that animated festive occasions) and signals the presence, in the region, of *moresque* (generally a choral combat dance, with swords, which spread in varied forms across all of Europe at the beginning in the fourteenth century). At the time of the first sting, the musicians began an exploratory phase, in which several rhythms and tones were played, in order to find the one that stimulated the liberating dance.

¹⁶ See Lapassade 2020.

¹⁷ A detailed description of the therapeutic ritual is presented by De Martino (1997), who, while giving an exorcistic interpretation of tarantism, underlines the mimesis of the *taranta*'s behaviour.

¹⁸ Palmisano (2018) observes that, in some cultures, this condition is expressed by the metaphor “to be ridden” (by a spirit, an angel, a demon), or, in the case of tarantism, «to be stung by the hairy tarantula and tied and moved by its multi-cloured lines, by its long hair full of reflections: to finish into the web, to get entangled into the net» (Palmisano 2018, p. 144).

¹⁹ See, for instance, De Martino (1997) and Chiriatti (2011).

mercy of Saint Paul – finally puts all the phenomena that are witnessed on another threshold: between the human and the nonhuman, the animal on one side, the divine on the other, the ‘sacred’ on both sides»²⁰.

During the ritual, and in daily life, the *tarantato/a* established a dialogue with the spider responsible for his or her affliction, tried to communicate with it and negotiated the duration and the details of the ritual, satisfied its desires, and got angry when he or she did not hear its answer, when the requests went beyond his or her capabilities or when the cure seemed far away. In this dialogue, the *taranta* could be replaced by St. Paul (with whom, sometimes, it was confused), since the saint was believed to have the power to heal its venom, and was, at the same time, the protector of spiders, snakes and scorpions.

Mingozzi’s documentary *La taranta*²¹ presents the dialogue of a *tarantata*, known by the pseudonym Maria from Nardò²², with Saint Paul, who materialized in a picture held by a child,²³ during the choreutical-musical ritual. Since her request for being cured was answered with a demand for a mass, she responded that she did not have money, got angry with him, punched the image and started dancing again with resignation.

In his description of the same case, De Martino (1997) stated that Saint Paul also appeared as a heavenly groom.²⁴ In fact, the *tarantate* were called “Saint Paul’s brides”.

The case of Maria from Nardò is exemplary. She was stung on a Sunday at noon, while she was at the window; she was eighteen years old and was unhappy because of the failure of her wedding plans with the man she loved. Saint Paul appeared to her, ordered her not to marry and invited her to a mystical wedding with him. But she was forced, through deceit, to marry another man and the Saint threatened her again. Thus, her disobedience of his orders compromised her attainment of mercy and her cure.

Other traces of the identification/confusion of the *taranta* with Saint Paul can be detected in the songs that accompanied the music in the therapeutic ritual, were transmitted up to the present and are part of the *pizzica*²⁵ repertory of many musicians. In the following verses, Saint Paul appears to be giving mercy and healing, but is also the poisonous *taranta*:

²⁰ Stifani 2000, p. 9.

²¹ Mingozzi 1961.

²² Maria from Nardò is a central figure in De Martino’s research on tarantism (see De Martino 1997).

²³ Lévi-Strauss (1952) points out that children are considered, in many cultures, as intermediaries with the supernatural world and the spirits of deceased people.

²⁴ De Martino 1997, pp. 65–76.

²⁵ *Pizzica* is the music and dance that gained relevance with the rediscovery of the traditions of Salento and became the emblem of tarantism.

Pizzica di Santu Paulu

Ah i Santu Paulu meu de le tarante
Pizzichi le caruse, a mezzu l'anche
E Santu Paulu meu de le tarante
Pizzichi le caruse tutte quante
Santu Paulu meu de Galatina
Famme 'na grazia a mia ca' sun la prima
Santu Paulu meu de Galatina
Fammela 'ccuntenta 'sta signurina
Ahi Santu Paulu meu de li scurpioni
pizzichi li carusi li pantaloni
Ahi Santu Paulu meu de li scurpioni
pizzichi li carusi, a li kujuni
E Santu Paulu meu de Galatina
Lassatila ballare sta signorina
Ahi Santu Paulu meu de Galatina
facitece 'na grazia, 'sta mattina²⁶.

In the mythical-ritual complex of tarantism, Saint Paul's figure manifested great ambiguity and ambivalence, and provoked fear, respect, gratitude, devotion and feelings of guilt. He was, at the same time, the protector of spiders, snakes, scorpions and crawling animals, and the dispenser of healing from poisonous stings; an avenger who punished anyone who ill treated or killed his creatures, or sent spiders and snakes to punish those who had committed some infraction; and a provider of immunity from spider stings to the land of Galatina, a mystical groom who expected fidelity from his brides, protector of love, and a Saint who eroticized the afflicted (since the sting of the *taranta* could stimulate uncontrolled sexual impulses); with his sword, he could cut the spider's web and offer mercy, or identify with the *taranta* and its sting.

Chiriatti (2011) adds another remark, establishing a relationship between the three terms (human, animal and supernatural) and offering a possible explanation for the attribution of feminine names, human desires and predilections to the *tarante*.

²⁶ *Pizzica of Saint Paul*. Ahi my Saint Paul of tarantulas/ Sting young women between the hips// And my Saint Paul of tarantulas / Sting all young women // my Saint Paul of Galatina/ Give mercy to me, since I am the first // my Saint Paul of Galatina/ Make this young woman happy //Ahi my Saint Paul of scorpions // You sting young men in their trousers// Ahi my Saint Paul of scorpions// You sting young men, in their testicles// And my Saint Paul of Galatina// Let this young woman dance// Ahi my Saint Paul of Galatina/ Give me mercy this morning. Source: <http://www.simmbriganti.it/testicanzoni.htm>. Accessed Oct. 2021.

From Rosina – *tarantata* of Uggiano La Chiesa, who continued to cry and scream in solitude because of the shame caused by her situation, and visited the chapel of Saint Paul – he collected the following account:

«My taranta was one of those that make you cry and shout; because, you know, the tarante assume the characters of dead women who reincarnate in them and transmit their characters to the women they sting. Therefore, there are tarante that dance, sing, shout, cry»²⁷.

The identification of the *taranta* with the spirit of dead women may shed new light on other ritual and mythical aspects; we can also presume the presence of a chain of transmission, since a destiny of pain and a particular character and taste (for colour, music, dance and objects) could pass from a dead woman to a *taranta* and, through its sting, to another woman. Following this reasoning, we can hypothesise that the cure from the spider's venom and the interruption of the annual cycle of re-stinging also implied an interruption in the transmission of the human-spider chain of suffering.

The conjunctive power of *taranta*

Rosina's account allows us to also attempt a partial explanation of the power of the *taranta* as a ritual symbol in tarantism and the preference for *the Lycosa Tarantula* over the *Latrodectus Guttatus*. There is an analogy with Ioan Lewis's analysis about the ritual importance, among the Lele (and other Congolese cultures), of only one of the two local species of pangolin²⁸. Lewis opposes Mary Douglas's interpretation of the ritual centrality of the pangolin among the Lele – as a consequence of its anomaly and difficulty of classification²⁹ – by proposing a positive meaning, since the pangolin «offers a powerful generic, or conjunctive, symbol»³⁰. He says:

«Its actual mystical significance for the Lele does not in fact seem to derive from this negative taxonomic status, but stems rather from its varied, positive and multidimensional properties which link it directly and comprehensively with human, animal and spirit kind. Its power seems to flow from these literally perceived attributes, linking to several cosmological domains»³¹.

²⁷ Chiriatti 2011, p. 55.

²⁸ See Lewis 1991.

²⁹ See Douglas (1966).

³⁰ Lewis 1991, p. 522.

³¹ Lewis 1991, p. 522.

Analogously, we can also argue that, in tarantism, the power of *taranta* as a ritual symbol is connected to its liminal nature, encompassing animal, human and spiritual domains.

In therapeutic rituals through music, dance and colours, the healing power of the symbol of *taranta* may be connected to its “inductive property”³²: its ability to establish connections among different domains of existence, in analogy with the chants of a cuna shaman called to intervene in a difficult childbirth, analysed by Lévi-Strauss in his essay *L’efficacité symbolique* (1949). Other authors stress the connective property of ritual symbols that can also be detected in tarantism. Alfredo Ancora (2019), in his comparison among psychoanalysis and traditional healing practices in different cultures, observes that shamans, besides being technicians of ecstasy, are builders of relationships with visible and invisible worlds.

Sônia Maluf states that:

«These ritual operators are worked as mediators, i.e., they establish relationships among different planes, first as operators of the ‘therapeutical relation’ or rituals, but then also as mediators between collective myths and personal narratives, between a public and a private experience, and an individual and private experience etc.»³³.

Fátima Tavares and Francesca Bassi point out that «ritual efficacy goes beyond symbolic efficacy, submitting to the enactment of relations at the moment of the performance»³⁴. Symbols have the power to build connections, relationships and to create webs. Healing rituals and deaths for witchcraft or a taboo infringement reported by Marcel Mauss (2003) are phenomena that stay «in the contact surface between symbolic and material dimensions of the world»³⁵. Octavio Bonet adds that:

«What is known as symbolic efficacy is produced because the different dimensions that compose the person – I include here the social and material environment – relate to each other in metaphorical form (Wagner 1973; 1981). This means that the ones can be ‘properly’ translated into or extended to the others, and that they behave as ‘context’ for the others. Secondly, I consider that, in the direction signaled by Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, it is possible to think of a conceptualization of symbolic efficacy which does not separate social from biological and psychological dimensions, since they are intertwined with lived experience»³⁶.

³² Lévi-Strauss 1949.

³³ Maluf 2013, pp. 53–54.

³⁴ Tavares and Bassi 2013, p. 25.

³⁵ Bonet 2013, p. 102.

³⁶ Bonet 2013, p. 102.

The possibility of establishing connections and fluxes in a therapeutic encounter fulfils, through the “in-between space”, a concept proposed by Bonet as a condition for the possibility of a lived world: «This ‘in-between’ manifests whenever we began to perceive the possibility that borders become ‘porous’[...]»³⁷.

“In-between” spaces allow for ritual assemblages to hybridize³⁸, and for the different instances of the person (physiological, psychological, social and spiritual), which «build those webs of humans and nonhumans»³⁹, allowing «the power of relationships [to arise], i.e., the power of an interconnected world»⁴⁰. Palmisano (2003) points out that the substantive *trance* (that shares the Latin preposition *trans-* with the words *translation* and *traduction*) suggests a movement (of condition, of place, of time, through the body borders, that become porous), since it derives from the verb *trans-eo*:

«This verb in its intransitive form indicates ‘to pass, to bring oneself to go from one condition to another,’ and thus ‘to transform oneself to change one’s state,’ as well as ‘to cross’ or ‘to go through something.’ The transitive form expresses even more clearly the meaning of ‘to go through, to cross over’ when speaking of places, conditions, or time itself. This verb seems to manifest clearly the effort of the subject in his action of modification, in his overcoming and transformation of a changing condition (the English substantive ‘transition’ derives from this verb), hence attempts by the subject to effect a passage»⁴¹.

Therefore, the *taranta*’s power to build connections among different domains of experience (physiological, psychological, social and spiritual) and existence (natural, human and spiritual), from a state of consciousness to another through trance, to “translate” (moving from nonunderstandable to understandable, from the interior world of the *tarantato/a* to the social world) contributed to healing in tarantism. In this respect, it is interesting to mention a consideration of Pizza (2012), although it is in another area of Southern Italy, the region of Campania (where phenomena similar to tarantism were also present). Analysing local representations of feminine anatomy, the author pointed out after his conversations with a midwife, that the metaphor of the spider was used to describe the uterus and gynaecological problems.

These considerations also allow an attempt to answer a question left unresolved in tarantism. Making a parallel of the ritual importance, among the Lele (and other Congolese cultures), of only one of the two local species of pangolin, and

³⁷ Bonet 2013, p. 107.

³⁸ In the sense of Wagner 1981.

³⁹ Bonet 2013, p. 111.

⁴⁰ Bonet 2013, p. 115.

⁴¹ Palmisano 2003, p. 145.

the preference, in tarantism, for the *Lycosa Tarantula* over the *Latrodectus Tredecim Guttatus*, Lewis (1991) proposes a cosmological explanation and subverts the thesis of Mary Douglas (1966), who based the importance for the Lele of pangolin on its anomalous nature with respect to their classification of nature.

We can point to one aspect that answers the question posed by Lewis about tarantism by proposing an analogous connection to the local worldview and the possibility of *Lycosa Tarantula* building connections among human, animal and spiritual domains. Rosina's account⁴² established a relationship between the spirits of dead women and *tarante*, and may add an element of preference for the *Lycosa Tarantula* in tarantism, since it digs its den in the ground. Thus, when it comes out, it may appear to emerge from the underworld. This behaviour may have favoured the relationship and identification of the *taranta* with the spirits of the dead and the underworld⁴³. Analogously, Tiziana Leucci (2019), in her study of the worship of the Indian snake goddess Nagamma, shows the connection, in Indian mythology and iconography, of cobras with theriomorphic divinities connected to Mother Earth and her wealth (metals and precious stones), to the reign of the dead and to the sovereignty of the territory because of their association with the underworld.

The relationship of spiders and poisonous animals with the earth is also present in medieval literature, where spiders, snakes and scorpions were referred to with the word "serpent", indicating their crawling on the earth. Mario Cazzato (2000) cites manuscript No. 5 of vol. 13 of the catalogue of the Library of Lecce, which uses the term "serpent" to indicate all poisonous animals, including tarantulas and worms. The author observes that the name "serpent" in Latin presents ambiguities and in older writings it is used as the present participle of the verb "serpo", to indicate all the animals that move in long and wide motions and crawl on the earth, even with feet, like scorpions and lizards. He adds that poets like Virgil called all poisonous animals by the name "serpent".

The *taranta*'s influence in the moulding of landscape and human-nature relationship

The landscape forges the inhabiting and living of human beings, animals and plants, which in turn contribute materially and symbolically to its transformation⁴⁴. In Salento, the *taranta* intervened in this process through its encounters with peasants during their agricultural work and close to their houses, but also through its absence,

⁴² Chiriatti 2011.

⁴³ The connection of the dead with the underworld may be linked to burials and to Ancient Greek beliefs about the destiny of spirits after death, who continued their existence in the underworld reign, dominated by the god Hades.

⁴⁴ Ingold 2000.

since the landscape was symbolically moulded by its presence and since the fear of encountering it and being stung accompanied daily activities during the summer.

Spiders, in the mid-twentieth century, were not numerous and continued to diminish because of the use of chemicals in agriculture, but it is likely that, previously, they were plentiful, considering the attention devoted to them in the medical and naturalistic literature of the Middle Ages, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Around the ninth century, the term “tarantola” appeared in Greek-Latin glossaries for the first time, for translating *Arakne-Falanx-Falangium* into *Tarantola-Aranei*⁴⁵.

In particular, medieval chronicles bear witness to the great presence and aggressiveness of spiders in the Mediterranean area in two historical events, both situated in the eleventh century, during the time of the Crusades and of the encounter between Christians and Muslims: the attack of the Norman army by spiders during the siege of Palermo and the attack of spiders on the Christian army camping on the bank of the river Nahr el-Kebir during the First Crusade. This last report mentions the belief that the practice of the hot oven and sex brought improvements in the symptoms of the spiders’ venom.

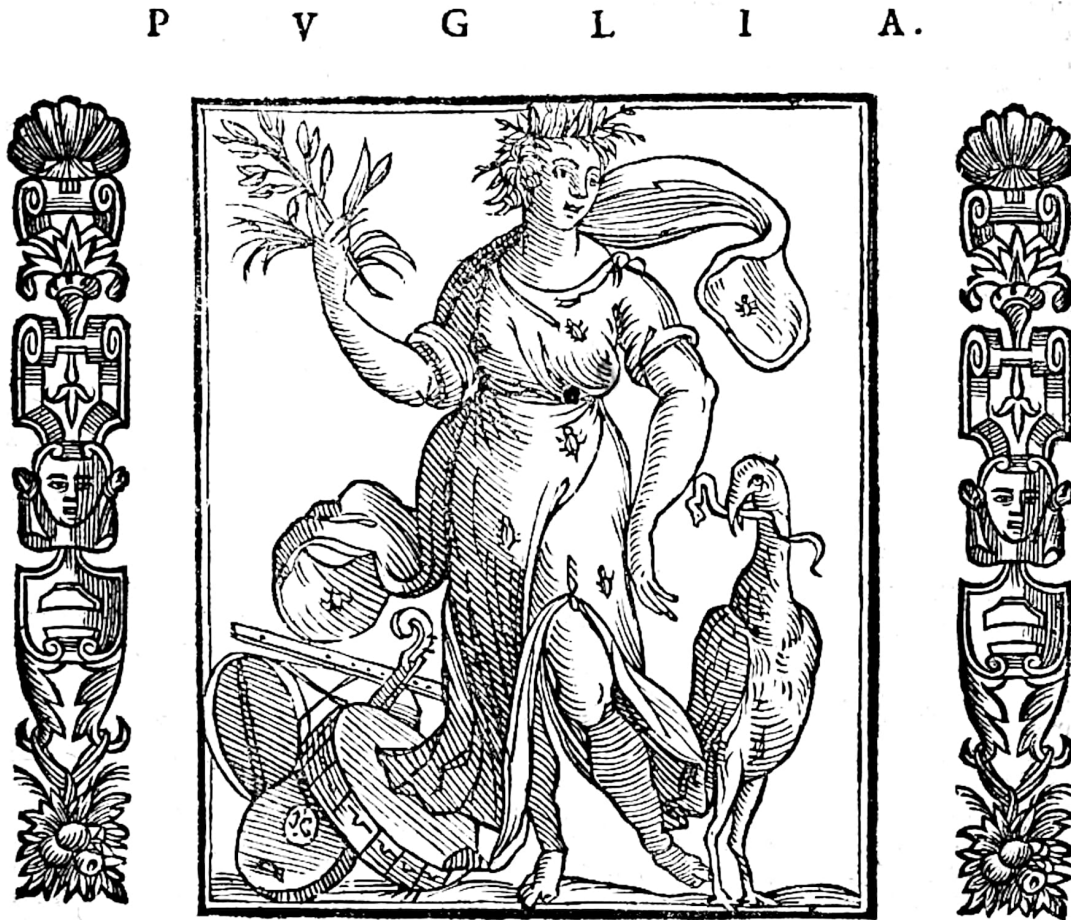
In the three dialogues of Vincenzo Bruno – published in Naples in 1602⁴⁶ – one carries the title *Dialogo delle tarantole* (Dialogue of the tarantulas) where two philosophers, Pico and Opaco, discuss a number of extraordinary events that took place in Venosa some years before: after a comet apparition, the air warmed up and the population was attacked by tarantulas. These facts would have caused strange and extraordinary behaviours, such as talking in unknown languages; behaving like a nun, a famous musician, or a lord; love declarations to the nuns of a convent; spirit invasion; and erotic behaviour in women. An interesting description given in the text presents a young maidservant dancing with borrowed dresses, under the orders that her lady, Caterina – an invisible being – was giving her through a lute. The maidservant invoked the Madonna and spoke in verses, till she fell exhausted to the ground.

Cesare Ripa, in the sixteenth century, was the first to associate the spider and the Apulia region, in his *Iconologia* – an influential book at the time – with his representation of the region as a beautiful girl who dances with a dress dotted with spiders and, at her feet, a tambourine and other musical instruments used in the tarantism ritual.

⁴⁵ Di Lecce 2000.

⁴⁶ Bruno 2005 and Imbriani 2004.

Figure 3: Representation of Apulia by Cesare Ripa.



Source: *Iconologia* di Cesare Ripa⁴⁷.

Spiders reproduced, moved through the fields and were more aggressive during the summer, when the heat and the work in the fields were also more intense.

It was women who suffered most from the *taranta*'s sting, since they remained more in contact with the soil, did the harvesting of wheat and tobacco, and were less protected by their clothes. They were also the most exposed to suffering: cultural, social and economic marginality added to their subordinate position in a society in which strong sexism predominated (women passed from submission to parental authority to that of their husband, who was often imposed on them) and

⁴⁷ <https://limes.cfs.unipi.it/allegorieripa/puglia-scheda/> Accessed on Feb. 2021.

strong social isolation⁴⁸. Palmisano (1999) observes that trance rituals express limited situations in which men and women reflect on themselves, and:

«also have a particular will, a will of exit and not so much from society, as from an existential situation, that is an exit from him- or herself. And this is nothing but a cultural wish, that is a project, to move, to venture, to investigate, to go forward into a path. And this investigation, this path, is also a path of trance; is also a path of modification of consciousness states, a path of alterations of states of consciousness»⁴⁹.

The moulding of the landscape by the relationship among humans, *tarante* and Saint Paul was also evident in the belief that in the city of Galatina (where, according to tradition, Saint Paul was hosted) and in its lands the *tarante* were not poisonous and, in fact, in the region, no cases of tarantism were recorded at the time of De Martino's research or mentioned in previous works⁵⁰.

The chapel dedicated to Saint Paul in the village of Galatina became a place of pilgrimage for the *tarantati/e*, and the water from its well was considered miraculous for healing the venom of poisonous animals.

Tarante and *tarantati/e* transformed the Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Galatina during their visits and, above all, during the patron saint feast of 29 June: not only did the offerings allow restoration and renovation of the church and the chapel, and the ex-votos visually marked the relationship between *tarante*, *tarantati/e* and St. Paul, but the *tarantati/e* dominated the visual, sonic and emotional landscape.

During the feast of Saint Paul on 29 June 1959, De Martino (1997) observed clear signs of the degradation and disintegration of the ritual. To the extent that the prohibition of music and dance by the Church prevented any ritual control over the crisis of *tarantati/e*, a chaotic situation was created when suffering was expressed through disordered movements, throwing oneself to the ground, shouting, running, hints of singing and dance, aggressive behaviours and attempts to approach the image of St. Paul⁵¹.

The occasions and the time of the sting also showed recurrences and strong symbolic value in the narratives of the *tarantati/e*. The time was concentrated around noon (the same time in which St. Paul used to grant his mercy), when the sun was highest in the sky and the heat most intense, during rest or sleep, at the window or during the prayers. These times and places have in common a liminal, in-between condition, establishing points of connection between different periods of the day,

⁴⁸ De Martino 1997.

⁴⁹ Palmisano, 2018, p. 142.

⁵⁰ Chiriatti (2011) offers a critical analysis of this belief.

⁵¹ The 1961 documentary *La taranta* by Gianfranco Mingozzi presents this situation.

between the domestic and external environment, a particular state of mind or the junction with the spiritual domain.

Many first stings and, above all, their annual representation, were concentrated in the month of June, near the time of the Feast of Saint Paul, a time of passage, a critical period of the year in the existential plan, since the peasants collected the fruits of their annual work and sowed for the next year. Thus, summer was the period in which economic and existential debts were paid, and unresolved conflicts broke out, calling for expression and resolution⁵².

Moreover, many biographies of *tarantati/e* collected by De Martino present the first sting during critical occasions of existence, some of which denote a liminal condition, such as a «crisis of puberty, death of some dear person, unhappy love or wretched marriage. [...] The various family conflicts, misery, hunger, the most varied organic diseases»⁵³.

In the choreutical-musical ritual, the *taranta* was present in different forms: in the ritual environment, in which the scene of the sting and the fields were reconstructed, in the particular elements of the *taranta* responsible for the sting, and in the bodies of the *tarantati/e*, who manifested the dynamics between mimesis and struggle with the *taranta*, between irruption and control of animality, through dance, gestures, behaviours and words.

The *tarantato/a* repeated the same sequence several times with small intervals: initially on the ground mimicking the behaviour of the spider (advancing lying belly up, spinning, rotating the head from one side to another), as if he or she were incorporating it. Then «imposing his or her own choreutical rhythm to that of the spider, forcing it to dance until it got tired»⁵⁴, he or she would get up and start a symbolic fight with it: «Follow it as it flees in front of the foot that advances, or crushes it and tramps it with his or her foot, which violently stomps on the ground, to the rhythm of Tarantella»⁵⁵. Finally, he or she would run in a circle along the perimeter of the ritual space.

The death of the *taranta* was desired in order to attain the cure: music and dance were believed to make the spider dance together with the *tarantato/a* until it died of fatigue or lost the fight with the *tarantato/a* in the mimesis of dance. However, the dance might need to be repeated with a yearly cadence if the spider left its heredity to its offspring or was still alive.

⁵² De Martino 1997.

⁵³ De Martino 1997, p. 53.

⁵⁴ De Martino 1997, p. 63.

⁵⁵ De Martino 1997, p. 63.

Figure 4: The *taranta* mimesis in the therapeutic ritual.



Source: De Martino.⁵⁶

The room where the ritual took place was usually decorated with flowers, branches and leaves, in an attempt to reconstruct the natural environment of the fields where the sting took place, since it was believed that returning to the place where the *taranta* sting occurred could facilitate the cure.

A bucket filled with water allowed the *tarantato/a* to find relief from the heat and replace the stream at whose margins the therapeutic ritual took place until the beginning of the twentieth century. In fact, the *tarantati/e* showed attraction to and a predilection – sometimes repulsion – for water, streams, puddles and the sea, where they bathed and refreshed themselves from the heat and the fatigue of dance.

⁵⁶ De Martino 1997.

Figure 5: The agonistic phase of dance.



Source: De Martino.⁵⁷

Water not only eased suffering, but could also provoke the crisis through the noise of the waves and even inducing suicide by «throwing oneself into the sea», as witnessed in the first lines of the song *U Rusciu te lu Mare* (the Noise of the Sea), that narrates the impossible love between the king's daughter and a soldier:

U Rusciu te lu mare

Nu giurnu scei 'ncaccia a li patuli
e 'ntisi na cranonchiula cantare.
A una a una le sentia cantare
ca me pariane lu rusciu te lu mare.
Lu rusciu te lu mare è troppu forte
la fija te lu re si ta la morte.
Iddha si ta la morte e jeu la vita
la fija te lu re sta se marita [...]⁵⁸.

⁵⁷ De Martino 1997.

⁵⁸ *The noise of the sea*. One day I went to hunt in the marshes/ and heard a frog croaking// One by one, I heard them singing// They seemed to be the noise of the sea.// The noise of the sea is very strong/ the king's daughter gives herself death// She gives herself death, and I life/ The king's daughter now gets married [...].

In tarantism, nature assumed an ambiguous character: it was, at once, the scenery that hosted the therapeutic ritual, and also what threatened or triggered the crisis – in the form of poisonous spiders, snakes and scorpions, barking dogs and the noise of the sea – or exerted an attraction to suicide (there were cases of *tarantati/e* who threw themselves into the sea or hanged themselves from a tree).

Another element that points to the ambivalence of nature in tarantism is the tradition of placing, in the room where the therapy was held, a sheet hanging from the ceiling, in which the *tarantato/a* could suspend and support him- or herself. Previously, when the ritual was carried out in the fields, usually near a water source, a rope was tied to the branch of a tree.

The rope and the sheet may be connected to the classical rite of the *aiôresis*, the wing, used in ancient Greece as a practice of cathartic magic and for fecundity of the harvest⁵⁹. According to Greek mythology⁶⁰, the feast of Aiôra was instituted to soothe the fury of Apollo who (after Erigone's suicide by hanging, following the murder of her father Icarus by drunken winemakers) led the virgins of Attica to madness and hanging. During the feast that took place in the spring, young women oscillated in swings and dolls were hung from the trees.

During the dance, the *tarantato/a* performed a mimesis of the spider, hanging on a wire and letting him- or herself oscillate in the wind, but the sheet or rope also recalls cases in which the suffering ended with suicide by hanging.

Conclusions

The *taranta*, as a central symbol of the mythical-ritual complex of tarantism, is a *bricolage* of heterogeneous elements, where many pasts and cultural influences entangle, in a land that has always been a crossroad of peoples and cultures thanks to its position in the Mediterranean Sea. The *taranta* emerges as a powerful, multivocal and polysemic symbol.

In this paper, through a re-reading of historical and ethnographic data and interpretations and an analysis of the behaviour of the animals called into cause in tarantism, I have argued that tarantism's power (in the local representations of affliction, in ritual practices, in the local imaginary and in human-nature relationships) resides in its ambiguity, in its "in-between" nature – connecting the natural, human and spiritual worlds, and the physiological, psychological, social and spiritual dimensions of human beings. The behaviour of *tarantate/i* with their *taranta*, in fact, may oscillate among conflict, dialogue, identification, fear and condescension. And Saint Paul is, at the same time, the saint who can offer mercy, the protector of

⁵⁹ De Martino 1997, pp. 209–218.

⁶⁰ Nilsson, Martin Persson. *Die Anthenesterien und die Aiôra*, 1918, cit. in De Martino 1997, p. 229.

spiders and snakes and the *taranta* itself; and the one who can both cure the poisonous sting or send a *taranta* to punish those who misbehave or mistreat his creatures.

The connective power of the *taranta* with different domains, and especially with the world of the dead, has allowed me to propose an interpretation of the predilection, in tarantism, for the *Lycosa Tarantula* over the more poisonous *Latrodectus Tredecim Guttatus*, since the first has a stronger connection with the ground, where it digs its den and crawls, while the *Lycosa* may be frequently encountered interwoven among the branches.

As an aggregate of flows-of-life, the *taranta* has also mediated and shaped the relationship of Salentine peasants with the land they inhabit and work, and modified the architectural, sonic and spatial form of the Chapel of Saint Paul in Galatina, with the peasants' votive offerings and pilgrimages.

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