

Inherited space of active participation: a village in Abruzzo, a collaborative approach, an ecomuseum

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Abstract

Cocullo, a small village facing socio-economic challenges, is - through collaboration with anthropologists - renewing values of the local heritage according to a universalistic and global perspective. This cultural transformation is embedded with the creation of an ecomuseum focused on the village's unique ritual—the procession of St. Dominic with snakes. Additionally, the municipality aims to inscribe this ritual on UNESCO's list for the protection of intangible cultural heritage.

This cultural mediation between traditions and innovations is the result of a three-decade collaborative ethnography by anthropologists studying the social functions and meanings of the rite of St. Dominic Abbot with the snakes. From a cultural perspective, the ritual of Cocullo represents a cultural diversity and a biodiversity, whose traditional culture helps safeguard the natural milieu, despite appearances to the contrary. This “heritagization process” is the fruit of the forty-year alliance between the anthropologists and the local community which has invested its resources in the study and reflection on the most emblematic of its traditions: the religious procession of St. Dominic with the snakes.

The village's “reflexive turn” led to the municipality launching the ecomuseum in 2004. Over twenty years, nearly two hundred events - training meetings, decisional meetings, international conferences and presentations - have taken place there. The ecomuseum, therefore, serves as a public attraction alongside the ritual itself. By reinforcing ties with an ancient devotional network of Apennine villages that today share values of environmental respect and traditional devotion, the community hopes to gain support from regional, national, and international institutions.

Keywords: Cocullo, snakes, ecomuseum, ethnography, cultural anthropology

1. Tradition and anthropology together as ecological and dynamic force

Can a little municipal museum become an opportunity for a village that is demographically collapsing? What is the role of cultural anthropology and cultural studies in this situation? How can a collaborative ethnographic approach shape creative ideas about a local heritage? What methodologies and theoretical knowledge can be mobilized in the anthropological practice that come into a museum? How can anthropological creativity challenge the institutional and bureaucratic constraints?

Cocullo (AQ) is a village in mountainous Abruzzo: all the area is in a deep socioeconomic crisis¹. This topic is important because, in this village, a process of cooperation is renewing values of the local heritage according to a universalistic and global perspective. All this cultural change is embedded with the creation of a museum focused on the local rite. Added to this, the municipal intention is to inscribe the ritual of St. Dominic with the snakes in a UNESCO List for the protection of intangible cultural heritage².

This “heritagization process” is the result of the forty-year alliance between the anthropologists and the local community which goes against the negative tendency to leave the place and invest its resources in the valorisation of the most emblematic of its traditions: the religious procession of St. Dominic with snakes.

In the last three centuries, the festival in honour of St. Dominic involves every year a procession carrying the wooden statue of St. Dominic, draped with living snakes, through the streets of the village. The snakes are caught a month before the festival, i.e. in March, in the green areas around the village. The snakes are kept secretly in the houses, with great care. These wild animals are essential to carry out the religious festival which has made the village famous throughout the world for at least three hundred years.

In the First of May, early at the morning, thousands of pilgrims enter the village for the festival. After Holy Mass, the old statue of the Abbey is brought out from the church, completely covered in non-venomous snakes and surrounded by the *Serpari* (a hereditary local brotherhood of snake-charmers) who are also draped with snakes. Those who espouse this belief - there are thousands of people - are convinced the power of the Abbot can erase the evil through the specific ritual of manipulate snakes and ring the shrine bell with the help of their teeth. This religious performance with snakes is related not only to the body and the sacred, but also to strategies of recognition and affirmation of roles and social hierarchy. The ritual event of the First May is performed in the St. Dominic Sanctuary and in the main Piazza.

For at least four centuries, the villagers have been capturing and handling non-venomous snakes in honour of Dominic Abbot - Saint of the Catholicism who resided in the area in the XI century - and they did it basically for religious and economical needs³. The modern and contemporary handle of non-venomous snakes is a

¹ We dealt with this topic in one of the last issues of DADA (See Lia Giancristofaro, *meek snakes in a mediterranean religious rite: an intercultural path towards an anti-speciesism dimension*, in “DADA”, 2 (2023), pp. 137-152); so, in this article, we will refer to this issue for every detail that cannot be explored here.

² I wrote it in my book Lia Giancristofaro, *Cocullo, un percorso italiano di salvaguardia urgente*, Patron, Bologna, 2018, to whom I send for details that cannot be explored here.

³ St. Dominic of Sora (951-1032) was born in Foligno, he became benedictine monk and founded several hermitages in the central Italy. He was famous for his charisma, for his preaching and as a reformer of monastic life. The last village he spent his days was in Sora (in Lazio), where he died. The prodigies of St. Dominic include the cure of snake bites. He was proclaimed saint in 1104 and was

significant example of cultural stratification. Indeed, from hagiography we learn Dominic Abbot showed the locals how to survive despite the presence of wolves and snakes, which he tamed as St. Francis of Assisi did later with the wolf. But, as is well known, touching snakes means breaking a Christian taboo which assumes, as the Bible says, snakes are a dangerous incarnation of Satan, and in Christianity wolves are also a symbol of the evil. So, this is an extraordinary tradition of using real snakes in a Catholic rite, which has been handed down to the present day.

Today, snakes are becoming extinct, and, because of a new policy, after the festival the snakes are released in the forest, in compliance with a zoological monitoring plan sponsored by the Italian Ministry of the Environment. This cultural mediation between traditions and innovations is the result of a three-decade collaborative ethnography, due to the anthropologists who have analysed the social functions and meanings of the rite of St. Dominic with snakes.

From a cultural point of view, the ritual of Cocullo represents a cultural diversity and a biodiversity, whose traditional culture helps safeguard the natural milieu, although from the outside it may seem the opposite. This case-study suggests practicing a cultural mediation in a comprehensive perspective, because “tradition” is not radically opposed to “innovation” and works as a dynamic and perpetual restructuring force.

Today, by lubricating ties with an ancient devotional network of Apennine villages that today find themselves around values of respect for the environment, the village hopes to obtain special cares and attention from regional, national and international politics. But in Cocullo this local snake tradition is an ecological, musealized, self-conscious and dynamic force only since villagers meet the anthropologists, in 1974, i. e. when Alfonso M. di Nola began to realize a long collaborative ethnographic campaign in the village.

2. Cultural and natural heritage: a village-museum beloved by anthropologists

As we said in the previous paragraph, the annual procession of St. Dominic in Cocullo revolves around snakes, which are placed on the wooden statue of St. Dominic, carried in procession and so has been for at least three centuries. The sanctuary of St. Dominic in Cocullo is one of the most popular pilgrimage centres in Central Italy for an ancient Catholicism, intertwined with magic. Today the archaic elements of this cult have intertwined with a new awareness of the natural environment, of how much it must be preserved and protected; so, the sanctuary it is

richly celebrated in January (in the day he died) and in April-May. In the Christianity, he is invoked against the bite of wild animals, against storms, against earthquakes and against fevers. See Grossi 2008; see Heffernan 1992; see, for general questions, my book *Cocullo*, 2018.

also part of one of the most interesting landscape projects in Europe, being located between three natural parks which make Abruzzo named as “green region of Europe”. During the festival, more than twenty thousand pilgrims come to the Sanctuary, but this happens only one day a year: the feast day, precisely May the First. The Sanctuary of St. Dominic Abbot in Cocullo consists of a XVI century church, where there is a cave from which pilgrims take silicon powder considered miraculous. This church was seriously damaged by the earthquake that destroyed L’Aquila in 2009, so worship takes place temporarily in the nearby XIII century Church of the *Madonna delle Grazie*, where the elements of worship have been temporarily placed: the wooden statue of St. Dominic Abbot with his tooth-relic set in the wood, the bell that pilgrims ring to ask for protection from the Saint, and basins of silicon powder to take away as talisman. The other fundamental elements of the cult are the live snakes, which until 1960 were manipulated also inside the church; today snakes are manipulated only outside the sacred buildings.



Foto Cocullo 1

Ethnologists have extensively studied this ritual. Historical research of the district began with the Neapolitan “Storia Patria” association (1875) and cast light on the serious socio-economic problems of the new Italy unified as a nation in 1861. The ritual of St. Dominic and the particular social rules in force in Cocullo and neighbouring towns, namely, to catch and manipulate non-poisonous snakes for religious use, were documented and analysed by local ethnologists and foreign travellers like Thomas Ashby, Edward Lear, Anne Macdonell and Estella Canziani, who have highlighted the uniqueness of this ritual⁴. Also, writers and artists like Gabriele D’Annunzio and Francesco Paolo Michetti described the “bizarre ritual” of Cocullo in their masterpieces.

From the end of the XIX century, influenced by Positivism, the social, historical, and archaeological researchers have sought to reconstruct the diffusion of cultural patterns and to explain the persistence of this cult, which the Church of Rome viewed with concern on the one hand and on the other tried to understand as the apparently crude local interpretation of religion adapted to the natural environment, to misfortunes in every period, and the passing seasons. Of course, the ethnological perspective in those searchers was evolutionistic, which is to say they described Abruzzo as a “primitive culture” and Cocullo’s ritual as a relic of Roman and pre-Roman cultures, in the erroneous belief that this culture was static and unevolved⁵.

The inhabitants of Cocullo often earned their living as healers and enchanters in the towns, in Roman times, but also in the Middle Ages, up until the XIX century, as is proven by numerous historical sources⁶. However, the snake is an important symbol of the medical arts, seen in the image of the snake coiled around a stick: the so-called staff of Asclepius, or Aesculapius, who was a mythical healer able not only to cure the sick, but even raise the dead. Just like the snake, which hibernates in the cracks of the earth, Asclepius is a chthonic divinity, arbiter of life and death. Maybe, this pagan characteristic has been transferred to the figure of the Benedictine abbot, Dominic, who in the X century gave his care and knowledge to the local villagers and later was canonized by popular demand.

The snake is clearly present in the transition from Roman polytheistic religion to Christian monotheism. Hidden by the figure of the Christian saint, the people of

⁴ The ritual is described exactly as we said in the previous paragraph by E. Lear, 1846; A. Macdonell, 1908; T. Ashby, 1909; E. Canziani, 1887.

⁵ In the XIX century, the ritual was described by the local ethnologists De Nino, 1897, p. 175; and Pansa, 1924, p. 38, as I summarize in one of the last issues of DADA (*Meek snakes in a mediterranean religious rite*, 2 (2023), pp. 137-152). De Nino and Pansa saw Cocullo’s ritual as a “mixture” between paganism and Catholicism. According to them, the sacred handling of snakes in this area is a long tradition for over two millennia. Many historical sources mention the strange local custom of keeping snakes in the houses; the sources describe snake cults in the local area since roman times, when farmers and shepherds developed the ability to handle snakes to obtain medications and talismans, and perhaps even to eat in times of famine.

⁶ For a summary of these quotes, see Di Nola, 1976.

Cocullo continued their sacred activities with snakes and broke a fundamental rule of Judeo-Christian culture, which perceive the snake is a symbol of the devil and a sort of taboo. Cocullo culture, since the Middle Age, appreciates the non-poisonous snake, because it protects from mice and brings prosperity to the home. The positive value of poisonous and non-poisonous snakes is handed down in Cocullo and in others Mediterranean Christian cults⁷.

The history of this cult is deeply described by Alfonso M. Di Nola. After the Second World War, a new generation of ethnologists in Italy changed its approach to folklore and observed the social implications of religion and of folklore itself. This new approach perceived that historical event shaped societies, whose strange ancient rituals were nonetheless functional to keeping cultures alive and creating satisfactory socialization, concentrated on a village, social hierarchy, and natural resources. This new interpretation derived from the revolution instigated by Ernesto De Martino and his anthropological studies on the Southern Italian magic and religion, as I summarize in one of the last DADA issues (*Meek snakes in a mediterranean religious rite*, 2023).

In this way, Cocullo religious rite can be seen as part of the broader context of lay devotional practices in Italy and “experienced religion” methodology. In this way, we place this practice in the broader context of the work that anthropologists of religion are doing at this moment in time between the 50s and 60s. The new key reference is *La Terra del Rimorso*, written in 1959. Based on fieldwork conducted in Southern Italy in 1959, De Martino deals with the “tarantism” in Puglia, a form of possession thought to be linked to the bite of a mythical tarantula and its ritual cure through the “tarantula dance”⁸. So, in Cocullo and in many other Mediterranean villages, the rigidity of the rural framework could explain why the magic therapy – as solution to human distress – did not inspire people to seek improvement of their condition⁹. In short, villagers continued to rely on the comfort of magic and religion, which numbed pain.

Based on this new perspective, a revolutionary analysis of Cocullo’s ritual was held in the 1970’s by Alfonso M. Di Nola by doing a materialistic interpretation, with deep ethnography and historical analysis¹⁰. According to Di Nola, the Italian

⁷ For example, small snakes are a feature of the Orthodox Christian feast of *Our Lady of the Snakes*, in Marcopoulos, on the Greek island of Kefalonia. About the Greek cult, see Andrianopoulos 2009, pp. 85-98.

⁸ De Martino in Puglia collected the contributions of various specialists who participated in the fieldwork, and the result is a compassionate, compelling account of the Tarantism as kind of belief. Therefore, tarantism is no longer seen as mental illness or “surviving” shamanistic irrationality, but as a product of a cultural history defined from above, endowed with its own forms of rationality.

⁹ V. Crapanzano, *Foreword* to De Martino, *The land of remorse*, 2005.

¹⁰ As I summarize in one of the last issues of DADA (*Meek snakes in a mediterranean religious rite*, 2, 2023, pp. 137-152), the history of the Cocullo’s cult was deeply analysed by Di Nola and published in his famous book *Gli aspetti magico-religiosi di una cultura subalterna italiana*, Boringhieri, 1976.

Catholicism is based on “material dialogue with the Saints”. This is important for understanding why the devotees to St. Dominic in Cocullo still turn to him for a “miracle” or a “favour”. Hence, the persistence of Cocullo’s cult is not a “survival” of irrationality, but a rational choice to feel better in difficult times. Following De Martino’s patterns, Di Nola argues the chaos and uncertainty of boundaries between human and nature (i.e., danger dominates) create a “crisis of presence”, namely an overwhelming fear of being wiped out by uncontrollable forces. Sacred, stereotyped behaviour offer - yesterday as today - solid solutions, able to manage old and new problems.



Foto Cocullo 2

According to Di Nola, the wooden statue covered with non-poisonous snakes creates a “fiction ritual”. So, the procession with snakes is a reassuring “popular show” to confirm St. Dominic was able and still can transform snakes (and all that is negative or dangerous) into something good and safe. In this way, the Saint still

The long ethnography Di Nola held in Cocullo is also told in his posthumous double book *Scritti rari* (2000-2002).

reassures the population, keeping danger away¹¹. The public snake handling ritual, enacted as part of the patron Saint's feast day; public exhibition of snakes and their consecration to the patron; pilgrims arriving and the long procession inside the village, symbolizing purification; repetition through images and gestures, periodically modernize the events to which the community refers to expel the negativity from the public scenario in the Cocullo village.

As I summarize in my last issue about this topic (*Meek snakes in a mediterranean religious rite*, 2023), Di Nola leads scholars and students in Cocullo to realize ethnographic workshops. In these workshops, the anthropologists themselves experiment how their repulsion for contact with snakes, considered aggressive, could be transformed into liking. Touching the snakes under St. Dominic protection, therefore becomes a rite of passage for the lay community, so people free themselves from negative emotions. This explains the presence of over thousands of visitors every year in the First of May.

The publication in 1976 of Di Nola ethnography paper (*Gli aspetti magico-religiosi di una cultura subalterna italiana*) increased the self-awareness of the Cocullo's villagers and devotees, at a time when the village depopulated and shrank into a little size¹². The village intensified the dialogue with Di Nola to achieve a better overview on its history, but also to understand his demographical crisis and to face it. The interests of anthropology interweave in a profound and empathic way with the fear and the aim of the local community; to allow continuation of the ritual in the village even if the number of inhabitants is only one hundred. Di Nola felt impossible – and secondary – to demonstrate the cult of Cocullo is the residue of a general snake cult in the Mediterranean Area. The actual problem, today, is that Cocullo, like many Apennine villages, risk being left and without villagers.

When Alfonso Di Nola died in 1997, his anthropological and collaborative research was continued by Irene Bellotta and Emiliano Giancristofaro. They set up in Cocullo town hall the “Alfonso M. di Nola” Study Centre for Popular traditions, where scholars engage in a profound knowledge and action about the local setting. Cocullo's culture overcomes the macroscopic tensions between local traditions and universal rights by the moral obligation to safeguard the environment and the ritual, which is a cultural legacy of collective interest.

¹¹ See Di Nola, 1976, pp. 125-127.

¹² The book contains the field research conducted by Di Nola in the years 1973-1975. Di Nola kept his involvement on the ground until 1993. His key was the collaborative and interpretative ethnography; this critical path becomes central to the Italian cultural anthropology, as attention to the local diversity of Christianity and to the relationship between the humans and the animals.

3. Conceived by collaborative anthropology: an Ecomuseum realised in Cocullo (2004)

We are living in a time of profound and complex transformations in how the “heritagization processes” carry out their daily activities and their permanent relations with society and social groups. In Cocullo’s heritage, new challenges arise, bringing new actors and requiring new skill sets, because shifting human behaviors compel us to rethink the role of this heritage in contemporary society. At the same time, the increasing and persistent threats to human rights and the future of humanity demand that heritage, museums and museology unequivocally embrace their “social responsibility”, as outlined in UNESCO’s 2003 Convention, in UNESCO’s 2015 Recommendation and in ICOM’s 2022 updated definition of museums.

What are the beliefs involved in the St. Dominic Abbot cult today? To heal the sick persons are traditional remedy in many cultural settings and this here can involve the popular role of Saints, drawing the real or imagined evil out of the body and the life of the person. This power is applied through the narrative power of prayers, ritual actions and charms. Deep ethnography highlights psychological functions and re-call the ideas of De Martino (1959) of the rite as a symbolic solution for expelling negativity from the contemporary life¹³.

To understand the beliefs involved in a contemporary “heritage alive”, the main tool is ethnography, better if collaborative, as recommended by Lassiter since 2005¹⁴. My fieldwork in Cocullo was undertaken together with Di Nola and Bellotta and was conducted refining tools and increasing the collaboration with the *serpari*¹⁵. A thick description explains the concept of the rite as being conveyed by informants in the researched community and they never see it as something “bizarre”. The significance was then analysed through the tools offered by the anthropological theory (among others, Rappaport 1999, Gluckman 1962, Turner 1982). The theoretical and methodological references accompanying my research drew on religion, ritual, corporal, heritage and the Central Italian setting. Regarding Cocullo’s rite (and the rite in general), the theorizations of both Malinowski (1954) and Radcliffe-Brown (1952) suggest seeking public legitimacy of important collective values. In addition to these, Tambiah (1985) points us in the direction of gestures, words, significance. Finally, Arantes (2007) points us in the direction of heritage and explores the intersection of cultural diversity, heritage, museums and political discourse with a clarity that illuminates my ethnography since 2010, the year I meet him, and I introduced him to Cocullo’s heritage¹⁶. In essence, Arantes approach is

¹³ See E. Giancristofaro, 1971, p. 14.

¹⁴ See Colajanni, Giancristofaro, Nericì 2024.

¹⁵ See Geertz 1973.

¹⁶ Antonio Arantes (2007) examines how cultural heritage is constructed, contested, and mobilized within broader social and political contexts. He focus on cultural politics (he delves into how cultural

situated within the field of cultural theory, which examines the role of culture in shaping social life and individual experiences; Arantes contributes to a broader understanding of how cultural heritage is shaped by and, in turn, heritage shapes both social and political dynamics. This new perspective in Cocullo favours the diachronic line of research (many years monitoring the same village), making room for questions of eco-humanism, social inequalities and gender¹⁷.

All these issues are discussed by anthropologists with villagers and visitors. This, over time, creates a perspective on the territory's development that indirectly draws on the work of Hugues de Varine on ecomuseums and social museums (De Varine 2005) as well as on the commitment of intellectuals in the fields of memory, subjectivity, and popular creativity. As is known, an ecomuseum is a museum focused on the identity of a place, based on local participation and aiming to enhance the welfare and development of the local communities. As highlighting in the term "eco", an ecomuseum refers also to a new idea of holistic interpretation of cultural heritage, in opposition to the focus on specific items and objects, performed by traditional museums. Thus, in the long discussions between villagers and anthropologists between 1980 and 1990, the idea of an ecomuseum on the Cocullo's rite as an expression of local development gained traction, even though it was slow to materialize with the opening of a full-fledged museum. The ecomuseum, however, was founded in Cocullo as a form of public relations and as a series of intellectual events involving the community.

Through participant observation, I observed Cocullo's villagers and the large brotherhood of devotees to St. Dominic Abbot, which goes from Umbria to Abruzzo and Lazio. It was a long process to observe the development in relationship in each family and group I met in the village. Field survey highlights that the ritual, aiming to care people, are appreciated by the young generation, and controlled by the older members of the community, creating a strong focus in a large net of many villages, groups and families. Through the interviews, I understood that the Cocullo cult is a "Southern Catholicism", which markers are the ritual actions in the Sanctuary; the local prayers asking protections to St. Dominic Abbot; the veneration of the material image; the daily tension forward the annual festival; the large brotherhood of participants.

heritage is not a neutral entity, but rather a site of negotiation and power struggles); he focus on diversity (he analyzes how the "diversity" is used in different cultural and political settings, and how it relates to the preservation of heritage); he focus on heritage and identity (he explores how heritage is linked to individual and collective identities, and how the construction of heritage can be used to shape identities); he focus on political dimensions (he examines the political implications of promoting particular aspects of heritage while neglecting or marginalizing others). All this is the foundation of Cocullo's safeguard project from 2010 onwards.

¹⁷ In Cocullo, I am attempting to give some indication of the status of the people I have spoken to, but I think this article fits with museums and heritage studies, rather than the critical theoretical fields.

Exploring the reasons for the establishment, persistence and local diffusion of this cult, our focus offers some general considerations on Southern Italy. This festival probably originated in ancient times, from pre-Christian fertility cults, as Di Nola wrote in his book (1976). Similar rituals and beliefs have also been studied and described in other regions in the world¹⁸. We might then place this practice in a broader context in terms of the anthropological research into religion and holiness over a century or more. As Ernesto De Martino wrote in *The Land of Remorse*, the culture of Southern Italy was one of violence towards and repression of women and children, and this triggered an erratic reaction. The goal of this cultural and religious system is to adjust painful emotional elements, restoring in people their physical strength to work and survive, under the protective value of local religion. The symbolic dialogue with the Saint explains why expectation of miracles – namely the special intervention through a Saint – persists in Central and Southern Italy as we see in Cocullo.

To better explain such complex concepts to visitors, in 2000, together with scholars working in Cocullo, the municipality decided to create an Exhibition-Museum of the Rite of the *Serpari* of Cocullo. The creation of an ecomuseum wasn't part of the plan, but that's what happened. Therefore, reality exceeded expectations. The project was given to the anthropologist Valerio Petrarca, who managed the research group in which I also worked. In 2004, the museum was inaugurated, which completes the other elements of the Cocullo Study Center: a Herpetological Exhibition and an Archive-Library of Popular Traditions.

The Exhibition Museum is a multi-sensory and multimedia installation which, thanks to sound, photographs and objects, simulates the progress of the procession. This setup allows visitors to observe the ritual at any time of the year, and to know better about his reasons. A team of specialized workers prepared the visual panels and the audio-video system under the scientific supervision of Valerio Petrarca, at the time professor at the University of L'Aquila. Our team, together with Cocullo villagers, worked in an innovative way by creating the "heritage map": in short, through the ethnographic work, we identified the meanings of the ritual, and we placed the museum at the center between the position of the devotees, that of the municipality, and that of the observers. The result is an ecomuseum that helps to understand the ritual, involving the communities in an exercise of self-representation that is scientific, but at the same time colloquial and simple. In fact, the museum, alongside the multisensory installation, displays archaeological finds of the area, pastoral and agricultural tools, embroidered clothing, ancient documents and stones; among the most interesting materials, the medals which, from the XVII century, depict St. Dominic the Abbot with snakes, proving the antiquity of the cult (Fig. 1, 2 e 3).

¹⁸ See Andrianopoulos, 2009, pp. 85-98.



Foto Cocullo 3

Cocullo's museum is maybe a "Cinderella Museum", to use the critical words of Italian museographers: this small-town museum needs a specialized staff and in Cocullo it's not easy to find the grants to pay the professionals¹⁹. Anyway, thanks to the volunteering of anthropologists, this museum carries out projects and makes a great effort to respect the vision of the villagers, and to also give a scientific vision that has been breaking boundaries²⁰. This small museum can be read critically, as a union of interests, a temporary alliance, an attempt to give voice to a village before it dies. Anthropology is in productive dialogue with all this and, by collaborating with the village, seeks to moderate inequalities as aiming by the nature of this science (Taussig 1987). This was of course the goal of the researchers, building the Exhibition Museum with villagers, using municipal grants and fundings to realize projects. From 2004 to 2025, the museum hosted almost two hundred events (training meetings, decisional meetings, international conferences and presentations) and is the second public attraction in the village, after the ritual

¹⁹ See Padiglione, Lattanzi, D'Aureli 2015.

²⁰ About the ideas to keep/break the boundaries, see Barth 1969.

performance (Fig. 4). Shortly, Cocullo's ecomuseum has had a constant flow of active visitors and participants since 2004.

After the terrible earthquake of 2009, the Municipality of Cocullo asked me to monitor the problem of depopulation of the village and to organize a new set of cultural events to safeguard the local cultural heritage. From this moment on, as a volunteer I strengthened the collaborative approach and activated community participation in the safeguarding process and in the local museum. The theoretical basis of this new set of activities is applied anthropology, that is, forming a plural - or even holistic - public discourse where the anthropologist speaks to the interlocutors, not to himself or to other anthropologists.

According to Lassiter, anthropological critical scrutiny can weaken especially now of writing and restitution (2005). If anthropological theory (from Malinowski to Geertz) invites us to maintain our distance, Lassiter instead invites us to collaborate throughout the entire epistemological process, including that of writing or museum restitution, to recognize the role of the interlocutors as decisive for anthropological knowledge as co-construction. This serves to purify anthropology from ethnocentric, evolutionary and colonial waste and to overcome the absurd ambition of "pure" and "theoretical" anthropology which persisted until the end of the XX century. The collaborative approach is equivalent to postcolonial criticism, founded when Said's *Orientalism* (1994), inspired by Michel Foucault's discourse theory. As Rappaport argues, anthropology is the tool for thinking not only about the world, but "on behalf of the world" (1995: 292). Connecting science and action to grapple with the gigantic problems facing the world – poverty, hunger, ecological degradation, inequality, racism, oppression – can develop creative solutions.

The collaborative approach transforms the ethnography into a story of "double consciousness", allowing indigenous people to participate in movements in which non-indigenous actors and agents operate. With collaborative anthropology, a new figure of organic intellectual is born who merges shamanic visions with the global discourses of environmentalism and social justice. For example, Davi Kopenawa, a Yanomami shaman who, with the French anthropologist Bruce Albert, wrote a book denouncing and criticizing the destruction of the Amazon forest and the peoples who they inhabit (Kopenawa & Albert 2013).

4. The ecomuseum of Cocullo: intersectional participation to keep local heritage alive

A cultural heritage is a self-conscious tradition. Thanks to the openness of the community and public discussion of the festival with writers, journalists and anthropologists, public respect for animals has increased in Cocullo. The first step was to change how the snakes were treated after the ritual because until the XIX

century they were killed and sometimes even cooked for a ritual meal. Since the end in the XIX century, however, snakes were being released back into the same habitat where they had been captured, to ensure survival and allow them to return to their earth²¹.

Meanwhile, many wild species were in danger and listed by the United Nations *Convention on Biological Diversity* (Rio de Janeiro, 1992). International agreements set conditions to combat the cruel handling of animals used in public events and popular festivals, urging respect that would educate young people. Europe acknowledged these international policies for the environment with its Habitat Directive (EEC 92/42), implemented in Italy in 1997, raising restrictions well-known to organizers of traditional festivals using wild animals and domestic animals, like bullfighting and home butchering.

Following regulation of the treatment of wild animals, Cocullo municipal council, which is the “legal representative” of the snake festival, appointed a professional consultant (a veterinarian herpetologist) to monitor the health of the snakes and ensure ethical capture for the ritual. This new ethos in the treatment of snakes made it possible to request an exception to the law (Habitat Directive EEC 92/42), and today public handling of snakes is permitted on the day of the festival. In short, veterinarians and herpetologists examine the health of the specimens and research the endangered species, partnering the inhabitants of Cocullo who capture snakes. Veterinarians report Cocullo’s data to the Ministry.

I have been observing the ritual and its political nuances since 1980²² to summarize this tradition intertwines with ecology, attuned to biodiversity and facilitating the conservation of natural and protected habitats around the village²³. Since 2007, the village has pursued an outright snake protection project going by the name of *Da Cercatori di Serpenti a Ricercatori Erpetologi* (*From Snake Seeker to Herpetological Researcher*). The conservation project unites herpetologists and *serpari* (snake handlers) in a mutual exchange of information that derives from scientific experience while the experience of one generation is bequeathed to the next. The depopulation of the village has also changed the patriarchal and chauvinist tradition: in the past, *serpari* were always men but nowadays the role is open to women.

Thanks to Alfonso M. Di Nola and his pupils, it was thus the anthropologists who brought modernization of the village’s tradition. Thanks to interaction with the anthropologists, the villagers (the only owners and guardians of the snake rite) overcame the troubling friction between traditional snake handling and wildlife protection regulations. This interaction, embodied in the local ecomuseum, made the

²¹ For many centuries, Cocullo’s expert snake handlers have been called “ciaralli”; today they are called “serpari”.

²² See my book *Cocullo. un percorso italiano di salvaguardia urgente*, Patron, Bologna, 2018.

²³ The village is part of Abruzzo, Lazio & Molise National Park, and Sirente-Velino Regional Park.

snake procession sustainable, improved the local environment and created a virtuous example of modernization, protecting the village from new socio-political exclusion affecting usually immigrants, but also indigenous people. Globalization impacts the symbolic dimension of nation-states, reworked, and commodified through educational and expressive experiences such as ethnic revivals and tourism, which have grown considerably in the last forty years²⁴.

The economical and demographic crisis in Cocullo – the village with the oddest festival in Italy – worsened after the 2009 earthquake, and the number of the inhabitants decreased to one hundred. The village struggles to accommodate safely the thousands of visitors who arrive for the First May festival each year, and for which no charge is applied. The snake handlers (*serpari*) freely allow visitors to touch snakes if they wish. The number of young people in the village is in sharp decline, especially the under twenty, to whom the art of snake-catching must be passed down to keep it alive. In short, this cultural heritage risks becoming extinct. The presence of the ecomuseum cannot stop this decline. On the other hand, the number of snakes is decreasing because of pesticides and aggressive human behaviour.



Foto Cocullo 4

²⁴ I mention one to mention all, Appadurai 1996.

The various solutions adopted by villagers included contacting the international community of states cooperating for the application of the 2003 *Convention for Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Villagers of Cocullo conceived an innovative project to stop decline, establishing a sustainable development scheme and applying for registration in the *Urgent Safeguard List*, a type of application to support the patrimonial communities at risk and in need of help. Thus, in 2018 Cocullo municipal authority applied to the Ministry of Cultural Heritage as the intangible element *Wisdom, Knowledge and Practices related to the Cult of St. Dominic Abbot and the Serpari Rite of Cocullo*: it's a project that brings together twenty-one villages of Abruzzo, Lazio and Molise partnering to revitalize an environmental and cultural heritage at serious risk. The project is aimed to submit the intangible element to the Urgent Safeguard List.

Unfortunately, in 2025 the little community of Cocullo is still waiting for a positive response from the Italian government, while grows the danger of abandonment of this extraordinary village.

5. Involving the natural and human sciences: how is this ecomuseum changing the villagers?

Certainly, the ecomuseum – being related to the local traditions - arises emotions and passions that keep the village alive, but we should always consider the risk of a colonial action. Marshall Sahlins commented on the anthropology of modernity (namely the triumph of Western culture over indigenous traditions) following long observation in Oceania. At the end of the XVIII century, at the height of the European Enlightenment, French philosophers invented the concept of “civilization”, which is really an ethnocentric concept. Imperialism and colonialism over the last two centuries have not diminished the contrasts between the West and cultural diversity. On the contrary, the concept of “civilization” served to animate Western ideologies of “modernization” and “forced development”²⁵. This view reduces or eliminates the capacity of non-Western peoples to adapt and understand the global world. Indigenous peoples relate to history and are culturally capable of rational actions. The reactions of each group are different, depending on the context and the external forces to which it relates. And these external forces include the point of view of the anthropologist²⁶.

The modernization in the cult of St. Dominic Abbot – also known as the snake festival – demonstrates that people can rise above the level of mere religious belief and mere festive practice. However, some anthropologists express an adverse reaction

²⁵ Many anthropologists believed the indigenous are in a “dependent” condition and subjugated by “Western civilization” (see for example Lévi-Strauss 1955).

²⁶ See for example the perspective of Sahlins, 1972, 1976, 2008.

to the progressive choices made by the Cocullo community. As Sahlins pointed out, when the hegemonic class changes perspective, it defines its solutions as “progress” or as a new form of awareness, but when the indigenous adopt characteristics that distinguish intellectuals or in any case the elite, this process is seen as a kind of moral corruption²⁷. According to this view, if the local population asks for support to government organizations such as UNESCO, it loses their pristine innocence for which it was appreciated. So, the inhabitants of Cocullo should not emancipate themselves, becoming extinct while the anthropologists passively observe this process without intervening, unable to seek collective improvement through new tools of citizenship, public education, and democracy.

The ecomuseum of Cocullo suggests practicing a cultural mediation in a comprehensive perspective, because “tradition” is not radically opposed to “innovation” and serves as a dynamic and perpetual restructuring force. Clearly, anthropology is sometimes more conservative than the communities it observes. Today, the Inuit as the Amazonian peoples, as the people of Cocullo, they all claim their “culture” and proclaim their fragility in the face of national or international threats²⁸. It is an admission of weakness, but also of awareness, courage, and responsibility. These grievances do not convey a simple nostalgic desire for ancient, fetishized receptacles of idealized identity. The most vital activity is the indigenization of modernity: just as the people of Cocullo did when they “tame” European and national regulations, reviewing their tradition in the light of new environmental standards

Cocullo’s ecomuseum contains the diversity of anthropologies practiced around the world today, and the ways in which the globalization might allow anthropologists to benefit from this diversity. Even among anthropologists, to take up one’s diversity is a strategy, in a globalized world²⁹. Cocullo’s ecomuseum also contains a new perspective about the delicate topic on the human-animal relationship. Zoo-anthropology, as a «radical and descriptive science of human-animal interaction», makes anthro-po-de-centrism its goal³⁰. This new approach in the XXI century configures the post-human studies, i.e., the path towards an anti-speciesism dimension, which overcomes anthropocentrism and investigates the non-human subjectivity as a field. The true moral examination of humanity is its relationship with those who are at its mercy: animals and plants. And here lies the fundamental failure of humankind, so much so that all the others derive from it.

²⁷ See Sahlins, 1995.

²⁸ See Berliner 2018.

²⁹ Ribeiro-Escobar 2006.

³⁰ Martinelli 2010.

In Italy, 2025 opens with the Government's decision to accompany small mountain villages to their death³¹. This governance risks destroying the last form of narration of these places, stories and diversities, a popular narration still alive and demanding attention. For now, following the "ecomuseum pattern" as a trail of analysis, it is possible to understand the cultural context - past and present - of Cocullo and the relationship between wildlife and human life.

Cocullo's ecomuseum – to keep heritage alive – needs a new group of engaged professionals aimed at recognizing the importance of fostering reflection and clarifying perspectives to contribute to a revision of local heritage, to better serve the local challenges. The new group of engaged professionals should be opened as well as to anthropologists, museographers, biologists, academics, and activists who are interested in engaging in this discussion, which are critical and believe heritage must be guided by the practice of social responsibility in service of human dignity.

In the fall of 2025, renovation work will begin on the municipal building that houses the ecomuseum, which will have to be temporarily closed or set up elsewhere. Will this be an opportunity for a relaunch bottom to up, or an excuse for a closure up to bottom? Ethnography, still in progress, shows the village's determination for the first solution. Despite the difficulties, the natives are determined to fight the decline and ask for my help. I had an idea: we could ask for a grant from the Abruzzo region, which has a specific law that supports the ecomuseums. It seems clear that to support the village we must start with the ecomuseum. We'll see what happens.

³¹ The National Strategic Plan for Internal Areas, published in March 2025, declares an "objective 4" that is causing a great scandal, because it plans to accompany the most fragile villages to a good death, a kind of hospice for villages with a few hundred inhabitants, like Cocullo, without making any effort to stop depopulation.

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