

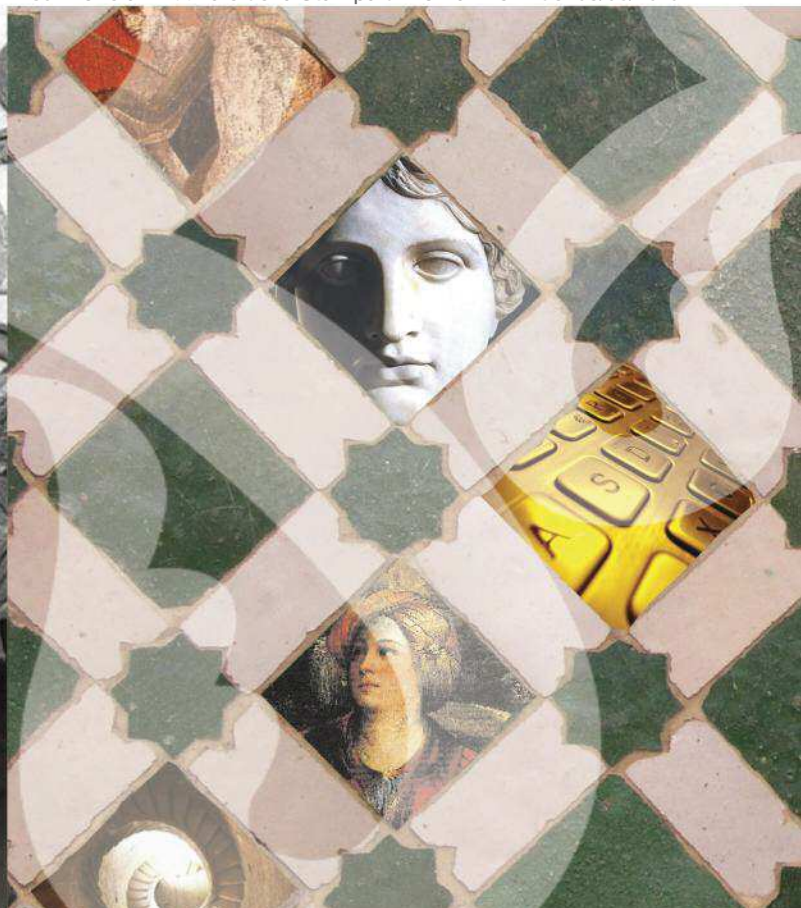
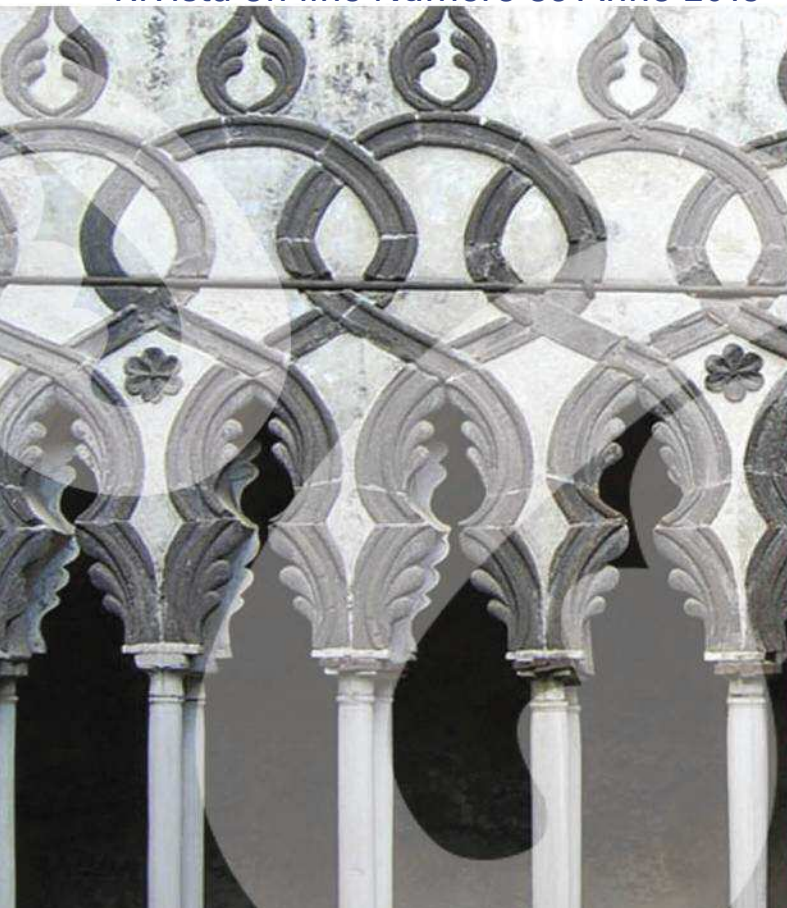


Centro Universitario Europeo  
per i Beni Culturali  
Ravello

# Territori della Cultura

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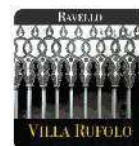
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# Looking at Carnival and feasts as a mechanism of governance and of global understanding<sup>1</sup>

Mas é Carnaval!  
Não me diga mais quem é você!  
Amanhã tudo volta ao normal.  
Deixa a festa acabar,  
Deixa o barco correr.<sup>2</sup>

Chico Buarque de Holanda, Noite dos Mascarados

## Disruptive feasting

Carnival is a festival that has developed in Christian Europe, with roots dating back long before our era, in which excesses mark the end of the winter (Vilhena, 1985). It is actually a rite of passage: from a period of deprivation, famine and cold, to another more than often of famine and drought. It's an interval, a balance keeper. In times where there is a constant effort to preserve customs and traditions, the Carnival has emerged in many places, as a time for celebration and hope, a sort of temporary compensation for permanent oppression and distress.

Carnival were the days of celebration of the pleasures of the flesh and earthly delights, so important in societies that only offer sacrifices in return for brighter futures that, in fact, may never come.

In some regions, though, this kind of primarily profane festivity was not encouraged, or even less, tolerated. This is the case of Portugal, and part of Spain, where an early process of State central control, related to a war and warfare almost permanent condition during the Middle Ages, imposed an overarching presence of institutional Church and religious behaviour, that was needed also as a core identity component. This is largely why very few carnival ancient traditions are to be found in Portugal, and why those that exist, such as the "Caretos" feast, occur in small and relatively isolated areas, i.e., where the strength of the centralized power of the State was less present.

But even where that type of compensation Carnival was not tolerated, the willingness to have fun and be extravagant (even if restrained) persisted, often within religious festivities (Lopes, 2000). This is why, for instance, wine and other sort of alcoholic beverages are so present in the moments that follow, or precede, some major festivities, such as the Holy Spirit

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this text was prepared in the framework of the "Carnival" project, funded by the European Commission.

<sup>2</sup> But it's Carnival! / Don't tell me again who you are! / Tomorrow all goes back to normal. / Let the feast end, / let the boat run.



processions that occur in several contexts in Portugal or in Brazil, for instance. In the absence of a proper profane, and even sinful, accepted space, disruptive and profane behaviour occupied often the religious territory, generating a quite tolerant and flexible understanding of the strict rules of hierarchy and moral constraints. The “Festa dos Tabuleiros” in Tomar, or the “Festa dos Rios” in Constância, are good examples of this.

There are four major dimensions related to disruptive feasting that help explaining its cultural and social relevance.

First, defining moments and spaces for irregular behaviour, enables to frame tensions arising from a major and recurrent contradiction in complex societies, between official Law and unwritten traditional rules (the *agrapha nomoi* that allowed Antigone to defy the Law, in the famous play by Sophocles). Allowing scattered and often contradictory traditions to keep existing within controlled scales of action, prevents ruptures and facilitates the shaping of wider, and therefore less consistent, identities.

Secondly, such feasting were and are not shows, as often some contemporary Carnivals became today. Certainly there is a display non negligible dimension, which from the origins tended to attract the attention and presence of people from afar. But the core dimension of Carnival feasting is performance, i.e., being part of a process in which representation is recognised and enhanced. In such a performative process, the moment of the big feast is simply a final episode, often leading to a so-called “burial”. In cultural and social terms, the preparatory period, often involving several month of preparation, is in fact much more important for social cohesion, since whilst not being a feast in itself, it becomes a permanent announcement of the disruptive moments to come. The feast, then, plays a role as other rites in society: they organize the time frame (as a sequence of performed rites, that are scattered across the year and associated to major moments in individual itineraries as well) around a certain number of references that remain invariants beyond question (myths or alike). In the tradition of communal feasts (Mauss, 1966), Carnival, as an identity process, is major ritual of passage into or from winter, according to the cultural traditions, but always associated to compensating privation through enacting wealth.

Hence, it is largely in the preparatory period that cultural cohesion is consolidated, because the preparatory period already



involves a certain degree of social bridging. If this was not the case, the social affiliations among different segregated ranked groups would generate diverging cultures alone. Yet, one major trait of complex societies is that alongside social, corporative or kinship cultural divides, an encompassing global cultural unity prevails. Sharing tasks and performing common rites are fundamental for the later to become dominant, and communal feasting, because it involves shared work without tangible profit aims, even when these may also occur. This is also why, in many traditions, the tangible results of long periods of work are, in the end, simply destroyed (namely by fire, but also through abandonment and other processes). This is, actually, a re-enactment of a very early behaviour, known as *potlatch* among indigenous groups of the Canadian Pacific coast, for instance, but also among Australian aborigines and other traditional societies.

But Carnival is not a mere performance, it is a performance about reversing social roles, and this corresponds to its fourth global dimension: to promote governance through diminishing the understanding of social divides as impossible to bridge. The process of affirming alterity that is characteristic of Carnival type of feasting (even in religious contexts), generates an intercultural competence that tends to generate intersocial acceptance. Whereas masks are on occasions present, to enhance such alterity and categorise the respective roles of a major common play, even when formal masks are not used

the dimension of transfiguration, so common in religious celebrations, allows for individuals to become "other". This otherness, so praised in contemporary society as a value not to lose, is in fact a complex human competence, directly in contradiction with the consolidation of identity, and therefore requiring relevant social investment.

There is, therefore, a fifth characteristic of Carnival, not intrinsic as the other four, but contextually determinant, which is the social, including financial, investment that it requires. The lesser this investment is, the lesser the cultural impacts on social cohesion will

Fig. 1 Easter procession in Mação  
(photo permit and credits: Instituto  
Terra e Memória archive).





be. To a large extent our contemporary societies that invest mainly in short term tangible profits, even framing feasts under such scope, are destroying a crucial backbone of their intercultural competence.

### Feasting impacts

The disruptive, and yet regulatory, feast, as described above, has therefore several structural impacts on social dynamics. These may be clustered in three axes that involve six areas: Cultural (identity and diversity), Reflective (imagination and performance) and Functional (consumption and equity). The cultural axe comprehends and anthropological dimension that builds from cultural divides into the unity of overarching cultures, and an historical dimension that contextualises the diversity of cultures in time and space. This binomial trend of cultures is often not too well understood, having led to different academic disciplines that are complementary but non-rarely opposed to one another. It is important, though to frame Carnival within such ambivalence, since at the same time it consolidates the unity of a group, it generates two sequences of divides: internal, since it defines a boundary beyond which stay the viewers, i.e., those who do not perform but simply observe and are, hence, excluded from the socio-cultural play of re-enacting the social structure; external, since it fosters the discontinuity with those, foreigners, who not only do not take part in the performance, but do not even have the opportunity to join its crucial preparatory period.



Fig. 2 The three axes and 6 areas of feasting (author's scheme).



The reflective axe paves the way to foresee the future, beyond the days of the feast. It includes one component of socially shared imagination, embedded in the cognitive competences informed by the cultural axe, and an individual positioning in face of the performances, through the psychological assumption of specific otherness roles. This is the axe in which alterity of the self (individual or collective) is released, a fundamental pre-condition to later engage into intercultural relations, since it is this exercise that enables the reflection that leads to questioning the absolute value of own's views.

These two primary cultural and reflective axes, framing past and future behaviour, are integrated in the feast, as in other life dimensions, through social functions related to the consumption to satisfy perceived needs (stressed by the attractiveness of Carnival as a major consumption event) and the compensation in face of unequal access to resources that cope with those needs. This social and economic axe, in fact the present life of people, cannot be understood through time out of its cultural and reflective dimensions, but it remains the stage of performance itself, and this is why it becomes relatively easy to take Carnival, in the short term, as being primarily an economic or social event.

Carnival became such a prominent feature through such triple-axe also because it engages and integrates critical dimensions of resilient behaviour: a full immersion into a multisensorial experience that is rationally prepared for a long period; the integration of such emotional and knowledge dimensions through critical thinking, as expressed by means of jokes and caricatures; the bridging of generations, beliefs and other gaps, through reversed performative roles, of which the King of Carnival is the epitome; the capacity to perceive short term investments in energy and labour as being part of mid and long term processes, thus fostering complex reasoning.

### **Middle Tagus**

The Middle Tagus corresponds to a NUTs III region, in the centre of Portugal. It includes 13 municipalities, involving circa 250.000 inhabitants and 5% of the continental territory of Portugal.

Although with no tradition of major carnivals, as in the rest of Portugal, it hosts excellent examples of popular festivities



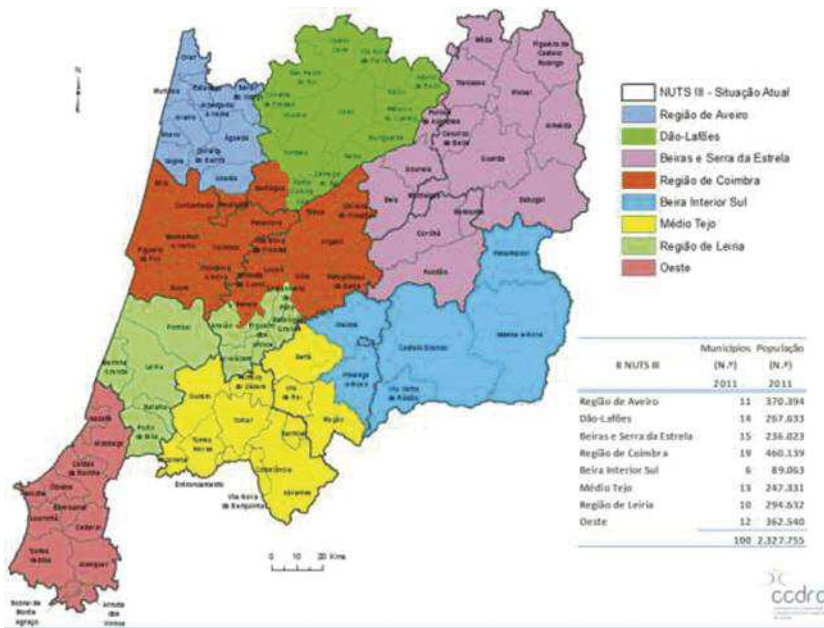


Fig. 3 The Centre Region of Portugal. In yellow, the Middle Tagus region (adapted from official map of the region, available online).

that do have a long tradition, but tend to be of smaller regional scope (less visible) and to be associated to religious traditions, thus converging with the global trends described above. The main popular feasts occur mainly in the end of spring (June) and in the dawn of winter (All Saints), since Easter is the most important Christian season, thus less flexible to integrate disruptive behaviour. In the last decades, the June festivities expanded over into August, to accommodate the periodicity of summer vacations and the seasonal return of emigrants. In this context, the partners of Carnival in the region focused attention on promoting those festivities under a debate on how do they relate to social regulations and historically designed cultural traditions. This allowed to follow a two senses direction: looking into the past, we may enlighten the roots of diversity but, also, its often similar triggers; looking into the future, we strengthen regional strategies based on traditions that build diversity within common trans-European concerns. This way, present events may be framed in a temporal sequence, fostering memory and foresight through pleasure. Actually, Carnival is about promoting dream, because Carnival is the moment of dream, of secured disruption; a moment of redemption and social smoothness that helps consolidating identities beyond social divides. And, for tourists, more and more it will be the authenticity and not the marketing alone that will attract people<sup>3</sup>. Disruptive feasting, as discussed above, entails a recognition that local behaviour and actions are intrinsically related to wider processes and features that may be distant in time and in space (Barrows & Room 1991). It is a powerful tool for improving intelligence and critical thinking, and therefore it is a relevant tool for the global understanding of the connections

<sup>3</sup> This is why the major tourism destinations are no longer the beach and the recreation parks, but the cities with historical depth.



between lives at a local scale and those same lives at a global scale that individuals cannot understand without reflective thinking. Global Understanding (Werlen, Oosterbeek & Henriques, 2016) was the topic of the International Year that has been proclaimed, jointly, by the three international councils of science: ICSU, ISSC and CIPSH<sup>4</sup>.

Certainly, it is possible to explain the deep connections between everyday local behaviour and global cultural, social, economic and environmental processes, taking as starting points Carnival and feasts, i.e., main moments for recovery of people, but also of consolidation of their belonging awareness. But Carnival and Feasts are, also, a powerful tool for Integrated Landscape Management (Oosterbeek, 2017), since this one requires relating, through cultural perceptions and understandings, two main relations: between needs and available resources; and between existing logistics and individuals' accessibility as regulated through the social divides.

The Carnival and feasts, in their origin, were moments of fluidity in the universal access to the logistical networks and moments of greater universal access to resources. Today, feasts contribute for social harmony, but became mainly a locus of business. They implicate almost all people, though, and so they can foster thrust within society. This is also why the topic of feasting is so relevant in cultural terms, namely amidst contexts of war, violence, social inequity or unpredictable tragedy.

<sup>4</sup> International Council of Science (ICSU), International Social Science Council (ISSC) and International Council of the Philosophy and Human Sciences (CIPSH).



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