

CHAPTER 8

Aesthetics, functionality and rituality in work songs

Danilo Gatto [Conservatorio 'Tchaikovsky', Catanzaro].

Introduction

Having edited two volumes of the Lomax Archive relating to Calabria,¹ the one on Vibo Valentia and Pizzo Calabro containing the tuna fishery songs, and the one on Scilla and Bagnara containing the cries of the swordfish sighting, as well as the coded commands that took place on the small traditional rowing boats, I asked myself several questions as to why these working tools (the songs, the voice) had taken on this “musical” dimension.

Sometimes, as in the case of the tuna fisheries, they corresponded to an ergological function, coordinating the actions of the group of fishermen, or conducting the work cycle, but at other times, as in the case of the entire swordfish hunting (hunting, not fishing) cycle, this function was totally absent, and therefore the presence of musical elements must have had different cultural motivations.

In order to understand the nature of the work songs of the sea between Calabria and Sicily, we must therefore leave behind the conception we have today of work, which is an exclusively technical, material fact, a performance in exchange for a salary or expectation of earnings, even when it develops in its most creative or cognitive dimension, and enter into the depths of folk culture, recovering the dimension of ritual, and of the sacred.

Work as ritual

Sacred does not mean religious, although it is often equated with it. Sacred means: separate. It is that piece of reality that is unknown, indistinct, mysterious, irrational, in which good and evil are not subject to a criterion of justice, but of arbitrariness. God's will, in the Bible, is inscrutable, incomprehensible, it has its own logic that man cannot comprehend in its entirety, but only try to interpret. Faith is the connecting ground between what cannot be known, because it is beyond our ability to foresee – that is, the sacred, and concrete human experience, of everyday life on earth. And the instruments of faith are prayer, sacrifice and ritual.

Before a God gave man nature as a gift, telling him that it was an instrument at his service to be exploited and dominated by technology and science, his worldview was completely different, in many ways the opposite.

In pre-Christian cultures, starting with the Greeks, man's relationship with nature is one of subordination, respect, awareness of limits, and therefore integration to its laws and the cycles of the seasons. Nature has within it that unknowable element of irrationality, unpredictability and injustice that is contained in the idea of the sacred.

Nature has its own circular rhythm, and on the maintenance of this rhythm, on this repetition of cycles, depends the possibility of mankind's existence. And if one year nature does not renew its cycle, because the harvest is not plentiful or is ruined by rain, drought or locusts, because the nets do not catch enough fish or the boat capsizes in the sea, it will be a tragedy for entire communities, which will go into decay, or exodus, or subjection to an enemy.

The man of three or two millennia ago knows all these things, but has no power to

determine them. Nature is the prime mover, and technology is far weaker; it cannot compete with the power of nature. That is why Prometheus is chained and condemned to eternal torture, because he dared to defy this law.

But if man is unable to determine the cycles of nature, only a God can do it, and this God must be held in the highest regard. He must be honoured, honoured with gifts, with sacrifices. The killing of an innocent animal and the shedding of its blood are pleasing to God, who in return will be magnanimous and make it rain, make seeds blossom, or make nets fill. So it was in the distant past; so it is written in the sacred texts of today. An evidence of nature does not explain to us why the wolf must necessarily eat the lamb or whether this is right, it simply is. But since we cannot explain it, it takes on the character of a sacred law, in which death is necessary to nourish life. The fisherman gives death to the fish, the shepherd gives death to the beasts he raises for this purpose, the farmer gives death to the grain, but if they did not do so they would starve, because a God has decided that this is how it should work. Culture has given different names to man's attitude towards that which belongs to mystery and cannot be decoded, but somehow at least ingratiated: magic, superstition, mythology, religion. They all function in the same way, involving propitiatory rites and prayers, or formulas, that have the power to move nature, or its God, or the God of all things, to compassion in order to achieve a vital result and make something happen

And if a God has established that it is necessary to give death in order to live, every time one performs this gesture one enters the sacred. Even today, in all Mediterranean religions, before eating a meal, thanks are given to God for having granted it to us. The sacredness of giving death in order to eat is confirmed by mythologies present in all our civilisations, preserved down to us in small folkloric gestures or even in the form of songs, such as the *Fiore di tomba* transcribed by Costantino Nigra at the end of the 19th century, from which, among other things, the famous and still widely sung *Bella Ciao* is said to derive, according to Roberto Leydi. In all these civilisations there is a God who dies himself and then comes back to life in another form, making the cycle of nature death-rebirth something sacred.

Attis, Adonis, Osiris are divinities who die, but from their blood, from their seed, from their genitals buried in the ground, life blooms again, every year, their sacrifice symbolising the possibility of rebirth, through the flowers, branches and plants in which they are reincarnated.²

This being so, every time one gives death for one's nourishment, one renews the sacrifice of a God (who is not Christ, however, since Christ's appearance interrupts the cyclical time that always repeats itself within nature, and introduces historical, linear time: his resurrection is forever, it takes us into another world made of spirit and eternity, no longer of constant renewal as we see every spring). The act of work that involves death (catching a fish, killing a goat or a pig, mowing wheat) thus becomes a sacred act, of respect for the victim, and must therefore be sacralised. Nothing to do, in short, with the useless slaughter of bison carried out for sport by Buffalo Bill, or with the robbery fishing carried out in the seas around the world by super-technological Japanese fishing boats.

Songs in tuna fishing

In the traditional mode of fishing, as it was performed up to about 60 years ago between Calabria and Sicily, this cultural structure and this perception of nature and the supernatural have been maintained with strong continuity, albeit with the obvious substitutions of religious figures of reference. The entire device of procedures responds to a ritual order, in which singing plays an irreplaceable role.

In the songs of work at sea, the voice is an autonomous instrument of work, just like the harpoon or the nets. In tuna fishing, even, the figure of a main cantor is indispensable. He stands alone in a boat, in the middle of the area where the *mattanza* takes place, and his

exclusive task is to sing: through a consolidated form, and therefore modulable according to the need of the moment, he commands the action, gives indications and information on what to do and what is happening. The crew of fishermen, as many as 50 or 60, distributed over four barges forming a square (called the 'castle at sea') respond in a responsorial manner, according to the metrics and rhythms of the song. The repertoire of tuna songs recorded in Calabria and Sicily consists of approximately ten melodies to which a greater number of texts are sung. In all of these, recurring incitations appear: *Jamu pari cu la vuci*, *Fundimu la vuci*, *Respondemu a tutta vuci*, *Accordamu tutti a vuci*, which we encounter over and over again in the course of the various performances. They are not "expressive" indications at all, but a sign of the concern to keep the group united and coordinated through singing: *jamu pari*, *fundimu la vuci* means let's all go together, let's fuse the voices into a single block, that is, let's move in unison, because a good performance of the song means good execution of the work, optimisation of movements and timing, success of the central event of the whole economic year, but also success of the rite, because the slaughter must take place in a pre-established manner in order for it to produce the effects for which one prepares throughout the year, and which must last until the following year.

An initial indicator of the ritual dimension is provided by the indissoluble link between physical gesture and sound gesture. Alberto Favara,³ who first documented these songs scientifically at the beginning of the 20th century in Sicily, recounts that in order to reproduce (on the shore, on the beach) what was happening on the boats, the fishermen instinctively had to mime the gesture of pulling up their nets. Even in Lomax's recordings made in the tuna nets of Calabria in the summer of 1954, one notices a marked difference between those made in situ, during the hauling (?) of the ropes, and those made ashore in the absence of the working act: the latter are metrically and melodically disordered, a potpourri of disconnected phrases randomly mixed together without logic, as if the separation from the context had deprived them of their own internal musical syntax, thus making them unrepresentative.

It is therefore not only the muscular action that needs singing to be co-ordinated as a group, but also the voice that needs physical accompaniment, since in ritual one cannot separate text and context. Merging the voices, aligning the frequencies and rhythmic pulsations of the group guarantees the perfect sequence of actions, unites the fishing community into a single coordinated and strong body, frees it from the impending anxiety of uncertainty and hunger, and removes the fear of death through another death inflicted on the tuna, whose sacrifice is converted into the possibility of continuing to live.

And every time death is ritualised, it is no longer a natural fact, it is not even hunting or fishing, but becomes tragedy, the cultural device that allows man to reconcile with fate, to be reborn through the sacrificial gesture of an innocent paying the tribute of blood to what life shows as inescapable. And of the ancient tragedy, the *mattanza* has all the elements: the presence of the divine – from the putting into the sea of the nets until their withdrawal, at the end of the season, it is a succession of blessings, prayers, invocations and requests for protection to the new Olympian divinities: Jesus, Our Lady of Graces, SS. Maria Annunziata, St. Joseph, St. Catello (who fills the boats), St. George (protector of Pizzo), St. Anthony (protector of the poor, but also of fertility), St. Francis of Paola (protector of sailors) whose statue, or even some relics specially brought in from the Sanctuary of Paola, was lowered into the sea (*ex-machina*) in years of scarcity for propitiatory purposes; also the time of performance, from midday (the same time indicated in Jn 19:14 to recall the moment when lambs were sacrificed in the temple during the Jewish Passover) to 3-4pm, which has a profound historical-religious significance for Christianity; the centrality of the choir; the iteration of the melodies in a persistent form, an element present in all sacred music; and finally also the presence of the public, particularly the nobility, who watched from a boat slightly apart, as if at a performance.

And it is also for this reason that at the very moment when the whole sea around them is

red with blood, with the large animals struggling and wounding themselves maddened by the fate awaiting them, harpooned and hoisted onto boats, the stories and songs (*Forza figghjoli, domana mangiamu / e a tutti li tunni cercamu perdunu!*)⁴ speak to us of ritual gestures of pity, of caresses and intoned words with which the fishermen begged forgiveness for the death inflicted on them out of painful necessity, almost a plea for understanding between two figures somehow united by the harshness of existence.⁵

Hence singing, as well as support and guidance for motor coordination, is also a sacralisation of the rite,⁶ and this is as much in the verses of entrustment to the divine as in the lightness and licentiousness of the love songs. Within the 'work' repertoire, we also find texts of mockery, of mockery, of veiled eroticism. But there is nothing more exorcising, during the sacrificial act of killing, than celebrating life by singing about a woman who wants to unite with a man, that is, the generative act of life (see the song *La campagnola*), just as mocking the master or the boss or oneself and the rest of the comrades gives the time of work the time of celebration, with a liberating and refounding function.

The voice in the swordfish hunt

Even more ancient is swordfish hunting, whose traditional mode is intrinsically adapted to nature: it does not force it, it does not plunder it, but adheres to it according to the techniques that the orography, the currents, and the conformation of the Strait of Messina allow. That type of hunting strongly connotes the traditional soundscape with signal-sounds, that is, practical information, which is transmitted over great distances by voice, in a formalised and ritualised manner. These are the shouts of sighting the swordfish by the land-based lookout, and the cheers for the paddlers by the boat-mounted *antenniere*. It is a musically formalised shouting, a chanting in which the work of the lookout consists, who must stand on a turret all day to scan the waves and recognise the slightest ripple or change of colour, and announce the presence of the fish. From that sound event onwards, the mechanism is set in motion that leads, in the best of cases, to the harpoon and thus to the catch. The vocal ability, together with a concentration of very special technical skills, of the oarsmen as well as of the Bowman, is therefore the first and fundamental requirement of the technical system that makes up swordfish hunting: in fact, the lookout-bandit has a greater share, compared to the rest of the crew, of the parts into which the fish is divided.

It is precisely this formalisation, which takes on melodic and rhythmic characters that have also been stratified over the centuries, that questions us about a 'technical system' that adopts organised sound as a working tool. Why do the cries of sighting, and then those for approaching, take on such a strongly musical character? What is the need to "sing" the sighting, even to "duet" the approach?

To answer this question we must go to the meaning of this hunt, to its antiquity, to the nobility it has inherited from Greek culture. Hunting swordfish is not considered fishing; rather than an economic activity or a job, it is an art, a challenge that has been repeated for hundreds of years against the most warlike, the most cunning, the most authoritative of the sea's inhabitants.

The swordfish is the descendant of the Myrmidons, the brave and powerful tribe of warriors that Achilles had brought with him to the Trojan War, who, having failed to avenge the death of their beloved leader, preferred to let themselves be drowned. But the goddess Thetis, mother of Achilles, took pity on their noble gesture and wanted to save them by turning them into fish with swords. The fishermen, after catching one, still repeat a ritual gesture of which they have completely lost the meaning, but they do it "because it has always been done this way". *The crucian carding*, the incision with the nails of the middle three fingers of a sort of cross next to the fish's eye, is said to recall a sign of piety and respect towards the soul (which is also blessed in this way) of the Myrmidon, i.e. the man imprisoned in the fish, who can thus get out and go to heaven.

Vittorio De Seta, who in the same years as Alan Lomax and Diego Carpitella made a historical documentary entitled *Il pescespada (The Swordfish)*, describes the agitated dialogue between the *antenniere* and the *fiocinatore* with the term *giaculatoria* 'which means "Short and fervent prayer, not necessarily with a fixed formula, which can also be recited mentally during common occupations. Insistently repeated lamentable request"'.

If we now listen to the recording, even better at slightly slowed speed, we get exactly this feeling

Tuttu paru
 Tuttu paru
Tuttu paru
 Tuttu paru comora
Tuttu paru comora
 Tuttu paru comora
All paru comora

[*Go out*
 All goes out
Go away
 Go away
Go away
 Go away]
Forti Sasà
 Tuttu paru
 Forti Sasà

Tira Sasà
 Tira Sasà
Tira Sasà
 Tuttu paru comora
Tuttu paru comora
 Tuttu paru comora
Tuttu paru comora
 Tuttu paru c'on a zippi
Tuttu paru comora
 Tuttu paru comora
Tuttu paru comora
 Tuttu paru comora [...]

The alternation of the two voices, the almost identical textual repetition in the manner of question/answer, the cadenced rhythmicity of the phrases is in no way connected to a motoric necessity, as might be, for example, that of giving rhythm to the oars, but occurs in a "psalmodic" mode in an emotional crescendo that culminates in the sacrificial act, which in the local dialect is not by chance called *fari sangu*. 'When a fisherman addresses a harpooner, he does not ask him how many swordfish he has caught, but "if he has made blood", that is, if blood has been spilt in the boat, blood that will be washed immediately as soon as the swordfish is hoisted aboard.'⁷

Returning in the traditional expression is the image of the blood of the God who by dying waters and fertilises the earth, making human life possible. Even the use of Greek words that remain as a magical element (ancient legends claimed that if the swordfish had heard different words the catch would have been impossible) being disallowed in the spoken language, contributes to affirming its ritual character.

In fact, the whole technical and cultural device of swordfish hunting (as was already evident in the case of tuna fisheries) is steeped in religiousness and magic. Meanwhile, all the boats are always named after saints or Madonnas, and under the prows of the *luntri*, whose black, red and green colours, as well as having a technical meaning (the black of the hull is confused by the eye of the swordfish) refer to a symbolic content, coexist the images of the Madonna of Polsi with a beautiful pair of apotropaic horns; for centuries, the fishermen have paid to the church of the Madonna of Porto Salvo in both Bagnara and Scilla (built and maintained almost exclusively with their contributions) the same as the blacksmith's fee for renting harpoons; the boats were always blessed by the priest, but if the swordfish did not appear, then a woman had to intervene to “*sciumbicari*”, i.e. to remove the evil eye, and if this did not work, *u sumbugghju* or *a bampata* had to be practised, more powerful rites performed with smoke and fire; and if these did not work either, in ancient times, recourse was had to the *runzata*, which we had seen practised for the nets of the tuna-fishing nets as well: a girl of puberty age was called upon to pee on the prow of the boat before putting it to sea. At the moment of harpooning, the fishermen would shout: *Benedittu!* or *Maccà benadittu!*, and the harpoons themselves bore a cross engraved at the base. And once the swordfish had been hoisted into the boat, and the *carding da cruci* had been carried out, another series of ritual gestures took place, from putting a piece of bread in its mouth to taking *fileddha* of meat from the *bbotta* (the area where the rod has penetrated) or from the *pinna 'i cozzu* (the dorsal fin) or from the rostrum itself, to be immediately eaten raw.

The fundamental difference between the world of fishermen and the world of farmers lies in the unpredictability of the harvest (fishing), in the lack of signals that could indicate, before putting the boats to sea, how the day will go. Serge Collet⁸ writes in this regard:

This instability and precariousness, linked to the very activity of predation and its aleatory character, shape the fishing mental universe. (...) Wheat, olive trees will sooner or later bear fruit that the small farmer can count on even before the harvest has taken place; nothing similar happens with fish, which is only valued when the fishing is done. Every exit is an exit into the unknown and the unforeseen, except for the swordfish which is the unseen and the invisible. The fields of the land make one see, speak; the sea, the world of waters remains silent to those nearby signals such as the smell and the presence of flocks of birds. The elusive, dangerous and mute bird world remains irreducible to the land world. (...) It is a world full of risks, in which the categories of representation of strength, cunning and astuteness still have, after millennia, among 'traditional' fishing societies, a predominant role that explains the wealth of magical-symbolic practices aimed at controlling the relationship of men with nature. Everything happens as if the instability of the fishing world demanded the existence of a stabilising principle in return. This is provided by religion, and not by chance. (...) It is a profoundly believing world, all the more believing because, due to the unequal power relationship between man and nature, the divine order is necessary to come to the aid of man's weakness.

And so if it is God and the saints – and not the work of men – who are primarily responsible for the success of the catch, the whole device in all its elements must be sacralised, ritualised, and thus “musicalised”. Because only music has the power to create a pause in chronological time, to modify or interrupt it through a different scansion of it, which thus emerges from its everyday, profane dimension to acquire a “sacred” one. The chanting of the sighting suspends time (“*when the guardian cried the call, the whole village would stop and be silent*”, recounts fisherman Francesco Alfonsetti, born in 1948) and initiates the rite whose function, as Mircea Eliade⁹ reminds us, is not to remember, but to renew the act of creation, which means regenerating the possibility of life.

That kind of musical formalisation makes this possible.

NOTES

1. D. Gatto (ed.), *Canti della tonnara. Immagini e suoni dalla ricerca in Calabria di Alan Lomax e Diego Carpitella (Vibo e Pizzo, 1954)*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2021; and (ed.), *Bagnara e Scilla. Immagini e suoni dalla ricerca di Alan Lomax e Diego Carpitella*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2024.
2. It is the tears of Aphrodite in despair at the death of Adonis (adopted and cared for as a son, but who must share with the goddess of the underworld, Persephone) that cause long stems of red, blue and purple flowers to sprout. From the blood that tasted of earth, Adonis is reborn to new life as an anemone. Born from a tree (the myrrh tree, into which his mother had been transformed), he returns to the earth as a flower that withers in winter, to renew itself in spring and return to be in harmony with the nature of the forest. It is fascinating how oral tradition has preserved traces of this mythology. The theme of the song “Tomb flower”, first attested by Costantino Nigra is, according to Roberto Leydi, also the one that gives rise to the now international song “Bella Ciao”: If I die as a partisan / you will bury me/ Bury me up there in the mountains / under the shadow of a beautiful flower. / And the people who pass by / will tell me what a beautiful flower. / This is the flower of the partisan / who died for freedom.
3. A. Favara, *Scritti sulla musica popolare*, ed. T. Samonà Favara, De Santis, Roma, 1959.
4. We do not find this verse among the Lomax-Carpitella recordings, but it is reported, from the voice of the tuna fisherman Rocco Grandinetti in D. Curatolo, “Tonni, tonnare e tonnarotti”, in *Le tonnare di Pizzo. Materiali, documenti, ricerche*, Qualecultura-Jaca Book, Vibo Valentia, 1991, pp. 10-35.
5. Another indirect testimony is found in the poem by David Donato in *Le tonnare di Pizzo. Materiali documenti ricerche*, Qualecultura-Jaca Book, Vibo Valentia, 1991, p. 62: “(...) and with our harpoons we killed the tuna / singing: This death that we give you / is necessary for the bread we eat / At home we have children with wives / the food stores don't give us what we need / Today we certainly eat more than yesterday / that brings money to the boss / And we end the litany / with *requiem aeterna* and so be it! (...)”
6. On the significance of slaughter as ritual see E. Guggino, *I Canti della memoria*, in V. Consolo (ed.), *La pesca del tonno in Sicilia*, Sellerio, Palermo, 1986, pp. 85-111; and M. Sarica, “Canti e devozioni in tonnara, con una testimonianza di Giuseppe Cambria, tonnaroto della tonnara del Tono di Milazzo”, in G. Alibrandi (ed.), *Archeologia delle tonnare messinesi*, Provincia Regionale di Messina, Messina, 1997, pp. 101-119.
7. S. Collet, *Uomini e Pesce. La caccia del pesce spada tra Scilla e Cariddi*, Maimone, Catania, 1993 (or. 1989), p. 150.
8. *Ibidem*, pp. 143-4.
9. M. Eliade, *Il sacro e il profano*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2013 (first Italian ed. 1967).