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## **From Folklore to Intangible Cultural Heritage**

(Alessandro Testa, *Ritualising Cultural Heritage and Re-enchanting Rituals in Europe*, Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2023, 253 pages)

In his research, Alessandro Testa emerges as an anthropologist and ethnographer, analysing festivals, festivity, and rituals in their current form in European societies. He transcends the boundaries of previously established categories of what is traditional, indigenous, and archaic, focusing on contemporary societies' and political authorities' adaptations of ritual mechanisms. The monograph (Testa, 2023) is divided into two main parts: a theoretical first part and a practical second part, which is based on the author's own field research. The first chapter precedes both these parts and can be described as an introduction. As the author notes at the outset, the book is a collection of essays, some previously published as chapters or articles. In this book, these texts have been enhanced with up-to-date research data and the author's reflections, summarizing a decade of gathering research materials and analysis of the topic.

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In the introduction, the author explains his perspective on why the study of festivals, festivity, and rituals remains important, despite being a topic frequently discussed since the inception of comparative studies in anthropology, ethnography, and religious studies. He also outlines the disciplinary boundaries within which he operates in his work. He delineates the disciplines of social anthropology and European ethnology as boundaries for the study of ritual categories but acknowledges the complexity and long history of these disciplines, as well as their evolution over time. In his work, the author draws on the methodological achievements of these disciplines, while constantly crossing disciplinary boundaries, making this work undeniably transdisciplinary. In the later part of the introduction, Testa demonstrates that the study of festivals and festive time is approached from various scientific perspectives, emphasising that critical research on festive events and rituals is based on three fundamental methodological pillars: critical comparison, the ethnographic method (particularly participant observation), and critical study of source materials. The chapter concludes with an issue that will recur throughout the book: the relationship between power and festivals and rituals.

In the second chapter, Testa refines the categories of festivals, ritual concepts, and the various dimensions of festivals; a historiographical review of studies on festivals and rituals is also provided, presenting leading researchers in this field, such as Durkheim, Eliade, Gramsci, Bakhtin, Turner, Geertz, Bourdieu, and Handelman. This chapter significantly references Testa's earlier text from 2014, "Rethinking the Festival: Power and Politics" (Testa, 2014). At the beginning of the chapter, the author enumerates certain patterns and similarities that are characteristic of festivals as such: the public dimension, the ritual dimension, festive atmosphere, festive behaviour, and a high degree of cultural codification. Although Testa introduces some categorisation of common features, this does not imply that he wishes to reduce the diversity of festivals in different cultures to a single common denominator. He transitions from the functionalist approach of classical scholars to a new mode of interpretation, initiated, among others, by Mikhail Bakhtin, who began analysing the political dimension in medieval and contemporary festivals and rituals, up to the interpretative turn in European anthropology. In the second part of this chapter, the author also introduces issues of power and politics in relation to social rituality. He attempts to explain the power of the festival as a tool of politics in both authoritarian and democratic societies, where festivals serve as a mirror of social order.

The third chapter introduces a specific theory of rituality developed by Testa. Again referring to the work of scholars such as Durkheim, Turner, Sahlins, and Handelman, the author distinguishes several key elements of rituals: formalisation, tradition, transmission, and repetition, as well as symbolism and its intensity. Rituals, as a specific form of communication, use ordinary objects, words, and gestures, but they must take on an “extraordinary” form of action that distinguishes the ritual moment from everyday behaviour, thus imparting new and additional meaning to it. Rituals are thus a way in which societies assign significance to their practices, making them exceptional and distinct from everyday routines.

In the fourth chapter, the author presents how the theoretical and methodological changes in historical and social sciences (particularly in anthropology, ethnology, cultural history, and folklore studies) presented in the previous chapters have influenced institutional and academic approaches to the concepts of “folklore” and “intangible cultural heritage” (ICH), especially in the context of his ethnographic research in Molise (Italy) and the Czech Republic between 2010 and 2020. This chapter of the book is a transition from the theoretical aspects to the empirical aspects, which are discussed in detail in the following chapters. The author attempts to elucidate the connotations of the term ‘folklore’, which for a long time was used in the context of studies on folk traditions, cultural practices, and heritage passed down orally. However, to prevent practices imbued with Eurocentrism, colonialism, and pejorativeness, a more inclusive term began to be sought. Consequently, the concept of “intangible cultural heritage” (ICH) gained popularity and was formally adopted by UNESCO as a new category of cultural heritage. This, of course, required gradual changes in the acceptance of this term by all interested parties. However, as the author notes, the concept of “intangible heritage” is not without controversy, given that it often has tangible material manifestations.

The fifth chapter, though very short, touches on a crucial theme in festival research which will be developed throughout the second part, based on Testa’s ethnographic studies. The author notes that while festivals in pre-modern societies (in this chapter, he also narrows his research scope exclusively to Europe) were a crucial element of “sacredness” that ensured the fertility of the land in predominantly agrarian societies, this essence was gradually forgotten with progressing industrialisation and modernisation. The revival, reinterpretation, and re-functionalisation of festivals respond to the needs of new political, social, and cultural contexts. Postmodern societies are re-exploring their historical,

cultural, and social identities. In this chapter, Testa outlines a process that helps understand why, despite numerous predictions by researchers, festivals have not disappeared in postmodern society but find new expression.

The sixth chapter is the most extensive and detailed of all, containing a presentation of the three main ethnographic cases on which the author bases this book: the deer carnival in Castelnuovo al Volturno, Italy, and the Masopust festival in the Czech Republic. As Testa himself notes in the title, he follows the path of “popular Frazerism” in this chapter. Both rituals described in the text are linked to fertility cults, although they were first recorded by ethnographers only in the 19th century. Both rituals underwent a process of forgetting in the second half of the 20th century and were revived with new significance. The author notes that with transformative changes in rural areas, ancient rituals initially begin to fade into oblivion. However, with the popularisation of tourism and the internal needs of small communities, entire ritual performances have undergone reconstruction and reinterpretation. It is worth noting, however, that Testa’s observations indicate that participants perceive contemporary forms not as re-enactments but as “the same ritual” as before the decline. Even if modern festival participants, due to their different mindsets and socio-economic backgrounds, interpret the sacred essence of fertility differently, they still, in Frazer’s opinion, create modern interpretations of their own traditions: unique post-secular images of re-enchanting the disenchanted.

In chapter seven, Testa returns to the political aspects of festivity and ritual, first posing the key question of why certain events should become heritage. The author’s starting point is an analysis of “heritage sensitivity”, which he observes among various groups of “actors”, both creators (organizers, animators, performative actors) and recipients. The author discusses the process of vernacularisation of heritage discourse and practices, transferred from the academic level to local communities. This process is crucial for understanding how festivals become carriers of cultural heritage, transforming from local traditions into recognized elements of national and international culture. Testa highlights how local communities adapt and reinterpret theoretical concepts, integrating them with their own traditions and practices. This process is not merely a passive acceptance of external ideas but an active reinterpretation and adaptation, leading to the creation of new local cultural forms. Besides theoretical aspects, the author also relies on research materials gathered during his historical and anthropological travels. In addition to the already known examples from Italy and the Czech Republic, Testa also cites

a highly political “interpretation” or even creation of local heritage. This example is the Solsona Carnival in central Catalonia. This festival became and still is a symbol of Catalan cultural and political opposition to the Franco regime and its actions. Despite cautious approaches to the Catalan issue in early liberal democracy periods, Solsona Carnival has been recognised as intangible heritage by UNESCO. The festival is still expanding and gaining structure, including the development of individual ritual and performative motifs.

In the last two chapters, Testa returns to the three main concepts: enchantment, (re)traditionalisation, and heritage creation. The author applies these concepts to the three main ethnographic cases and an additional example of the Krampus tradition. Focusing on the relationship between myth and the past, the author analyses the symbolic creation of social identity and the mobilisation of community imagination. He demonstrates how rituals, myths, and heritage are used to build and sustain cultural identity at both local and supra-local levels. Testa shows that rituals and myths have the capacity for adaptation and reinterpretation, allowing them to survive and thrive in changing social and cultural contexts.

## Summary

*Ritualising Cultural Heritage and Re-enchanting Rituals in Europe* represents the culmination of a decade-long exploration of European festival culture. Drawing from previously published materials, the book synthesises these resources in order to derive significant theoretical insights, particularly regarding the transformation of professional heraldic discourse into vernacular forms. Despite structural challenges, this work is invaluable for scholars and students alike, delving into themes of religion, festivals, and European cultural dynamics.

The book serves as an essential resource for academics and students engaged in the study of rituals, festivals, and European culture. It not only offers additional analyses but also presents detailed research illustrating practical applications of theoretical frameworks. Demonstrating how rituals and myths adapt to contemporary social and cultural conditions while remaining rooted in tradition, the book provides invaluable tools for understanding how modern society shapes and sustains its cultural heritage, offering pathways for identity and imagination.

Beginning with theoretical underpinnings from Max Weber, Alessandro Testa challenges Weber's notion of the "disenchantment" of European cultural practices. Through three ethnographic field studies across different countries, Testa analyses a spectrum of cultural phenomena and local customs tied to regulated rituals and calendar festivals that preserve rural traditions. Central to Testa's discourse is how these festivals respond to the challenges of industrialisation, urbanisation, migration, conflict-induced displacement, and commercialisation of social relationships in Europe since the 19th century. These rituals serve as mechanisms for reinforcing identity and cultural resilience amid profound societal transformations.

Critically engaging with the concept of "folklore" and its contemporary counterpart in UNESCO categorisations, namely "intangible cultural heritage", Testa emphasises the material aspects inherent in cultural practices. Through empirical research, Testa illustrates that festivals are not merely relics of ancient practices but are actively shaped by early ethnographers, enthusiasts, and cultural advocates. Acknowledging the influence of macro-historical factors, Testa underscores how festivals, despite their perceived finality, are deeply embedded in historical contexts.

Furthermore, the book highlights festivals as performative acts, imbued with narratives rooted in natural cycles and fertility concepts, as posited by Frazer. It explores their relationship with Catholic Church influences and the structure of religious calendars. These festivals operate within a framework of "tradition" that permeates European cultural landscapes, resisting attempts at alteration or suppression. They embody resilience against external pressures, creating imaginative worlds that endure through generations.

In conclusion, *Ritualising Cultural Heritage and Re-enchanting Rituals in Europe* by Alessandro Testa meticulously examines diverse ritual practices, enriching ethnographic research with a blend of historical and contemporary theoretical perspectives. Through comprehensive analyses, the book navigates the complexities of cultural dynamics, offering profound insights into the endurance and adaptation of European rituals.

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## Od folkloru do niematerialnego dziedzictwa kulturowego

Recenzja monografii naukowej *Ritualising Cultural Heritage and Re-enchanting Rituals in Europe*, autorstwa Alessandra Testy (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2023, 253 ss.).

**Słowa kluczowe:** recenzja, „Ritualising Cultural Heritage and Re-enchanting Rituals in Europe”, niematerialne dziedzictwo kulturowe; władza i świętowanie; postsekularyzm, dynamika kulturowa

## From folklore to intangible cultural heritage

This article is a review of the study entitled *Ritualising Cultural Heritage and Re-enchanting Rituals in Europe*, authored by Alessandro Testa (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2023, pp. 253).

**Keywords:** review; “Ritualising Cultural Heritage and Re-enchanting Rituals in Europe”; intangible cultural heritage; power and festivities; postsecularism; cultural dynamics

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