

# THE TARANTA – DANCE OF THE SACRED SPIDER

## TARANTISM

Tarantism is a widespread historical-religious phenomenon ('rural' according to De Martino) in Spain, Campania, Sardinia, Calabria and Puglia. It's different forms shared an identical curative aim and by around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it had already begun to decline. Ever since the Middle Ages it had been thought that the victim of the bite of the *tarantula* (a large, non-poisonous spider) would be afflicted by an ailment with symptoms similar to those of epilepsy or hysteria. This 'bite' was also described as a mental disorder usually appearing at puberty, at the time of the summer solstice, and caused by the repression of physical desire, depression or unrequited love. In order to be freed from this illness, a particular ritual which included dance, music and the use of certain colours was performed.

## RITUAL DANCING

The first written account of music as an antidote to the bite of the tarantula was given by the Jesuit scientist, Athanasius Kircher, who was also the first to notate the music and rhythm in his book *Antidotum Tarantulae* in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Among the instruments involved and used, the frame drum plays an important role together with the violin, the guitar or *chitarra battente*, a ten-string guitar used percussively, and the button accordion or *organetto*. This form of exorcism consisted in a ritual carried out in the home of the sick person and a religious ritual in the Church of San Paolo (Saint Paolo in Galatina (Lecce)) during the celebrations of the Saints Peter and Paul on the 28<sup>th</sup> June each year. Exorcism, i.e. the liberation of the tarantula's poison and freedom from the illness, was achieved by using of a very special kind of music called the *pizzica-tarantata*, with a very marked rhythm, which

forced the sick person to move, rocking backwards and forwards, until they burst into a frenzied dance with great leaps and contortions that represented the spider's behaviour and its final murder by the 'sick person'.

The first person to document this phenomenon in the Puglia region of Italy was Ernesto De Martino in his 'mythical' ethnographic expedition in 1959, which was described in great detail in the essay *La Terra del rimorso. Contributo a una storia religiosa del Sud* [The Land of Remorse. Contribution to a religious history of the South], the most detailed study on the subject. In the years following the publication in 1961 of *La Terra del rimorso* tarantism was the subject of numerous studies (often from diverse perspectives) and was provided with ample photographic and film documentation (such as *La Taranta*, a documentary in 1962 by Gianfranco Mingozzi and *Sangue vivo* by Edoardo Winspeare, a fiction film in 2000). In his essay, De Martino revealed that:

The classical antecedents of the symbolism of the bite and sting thus refer to the sphere of female orgiastic cults and indicate maenadism in particular, as well as to the corresponding existential crisis of which those cults were at the same time the revival and 'change of the sign'. (De Martino 1996: 217)

## WOMAN TARANTATE

Although De Martino believes that the *tarantate*, the afflicted women who fell into a hypnotic state of mind, are reminiscent of the crowd of maenads and bacchantes of the ancient world stirred by the rhythm of the drum, he believes that "the rite [...] is a 'remnant', the remains of a pagan world in a context of extreme poverty and misery" (De Martino 1996: 31). He places it in the field of a 'minor religion', in a world such as that of the South of the 1950s, both underdeveloped and superstitious. Remorse expresses the 'sense of guilt' in the face of the cultural and psychological misery of the poor in the South, a society that had been forgotten and isolated for centuries by institutions. "Cultural misery", he states (De Martino 1996: 49), is the mirror of psychological misery and therefore also of the continual repression endured. It was no coincidence that the majority of people affected by the bite were women, psychologically frustrated, excluded from society and prevented from taking independent decisions, the most marginalised among the marginalised (see De Martino 1966: 270). The sting of a tarantula, the symbol of the bite that induces this agitation and frenzy, allows the women to provoke "the precluded Eros", to free themselves from an interior bite which today we would call depression and which De Martino defines as

“an anxiety which is a coded symptom of unfulfilled choices and conflicts operating in the unconscious” (De Martino 1996: 272).

## THE PREVALENT FEMALE PARTICIPATION

The historical data analysed by De Martino shows that more women were afflicted by tarantism from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, as indicated by Dalmatian Doctor Giorgio Baglivi. The ethnologist also reports that in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the prevalent female participation of tarantism led the scholars of that period to suspect that women had invented the excuse of the spider so that they would then be free to do whatever they wished with men: “With this excuse of the tarantula, what others would have considered filthy and immodest acts, became for them a remedy” (De Martino 1996: 177). “The tarantate, the women bitten by the tarantula, simulated the symptoms of the bite to give vent to their passions, staging the so-called *Carnevaletto delle donne* [Women’s little Carnival]” (De Martino 1996: 155, 157).

Ancient masculine prejudice aside, the ritual of the tarantate could be considered a form of self-cure, a primordial defence of women in the face of malaise, psychic discomfort, grief and a periodic explosion which allowed them to carry on the enduring and never ending fatigue to which they were subjected every day, pregnancy and numerous children included. Once a year, the women in Puglia were able to “act out their desperation in front of a crowd of spectators” (taken from the soundtrack of the film *La Taranta*, Mingozzi 1962) and escape from the anonymity and invisibility that relegated them to what was almost a cloistered life between home and church, hidden under black dresses and scarves, the symbols of mourning and death.

Ethnomusicologist Tullia Magrini carefully observed that:

Finding themselves in a position socially ‘without voice’, the women [of southern Europe] resorted to a means of symbolic expression, discovering in religious and ritual behaviour one of the few expressive and emotional channels available to them in public contexts. Within this field of action, women could become the creators of events which were of significance for both themselves and their community, thus displaying their own particular skills. (Magrini 1998)

## THE FRAME DRUM: *TAMBURELLO*

The women from Puglia preserved particular skills as tambourine players, the tambourine being the main instrument in the choreutic-musical rituals of the tarantate. The Italian tambourine or tamburello is an ancient musical instrument connected to rituals associated with women, dating back to ancient Egyptian and Sumerian culture. Just as the Sumerian people felt the need in time to document the presence of the first percussionist in history, priestess Lipushiao, the scholars of tarantism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century also documented the presence of a highly skilled tambourine player: “In 1876 famous musicians for the tarantate were still living in Salento, and the scholar De Simone from Salento met and questioned the tambourine player Donata dell’Anna di Arnesano and the violinist Francesco Mazzotta di Nòvoli” (De Martino 1996: 148).

It was on Donata’s ability that the success of the cure and recovery from the illness depended, in a ritual in which it was essential to find the ‘appropriate’ music, the sounds and rhythm that would crush the depressive tarantula illness, so-called musical motifs that were exclusive to “a divinity, a spirit, a genie, i.e. figures that [...] are being evoked” by a specific melody or a particular rhythm, making them similar to the rituals of possession (Agamennone 2005: 41).

According to De Martino, the musicians thus take on “the character of exorcists, doctors and artists” (De Martino 1996: 75) and the female musicians that of shamans, witches and composers carrying out a magical ritual. Musicologist Meri Franco Lao writes:

Analogous to shamans, the witches had to avail themselves of assistants who played and danced while they smeared the narcotic ointments and applied the cure, extracting the evil (symbolised by a piece of glass, a worm or an insect) and showing it to the community that had gathered. On the other hand, as was the case with tarantism from Puglian and Sardinian *argismo*, these musical, choreutic and periodic chromatic ceremonies had the function of controlling and resolving the hysterical crises. (Franco-Lao 1977: 13)

These religious-ritual practices, the result of cultural syncretism with pre-Christian religions, are often the “privileged field of action for women”, generally represented along the Mediterranean in particular, “as silent, passive and marginal people, closed up in their homes, covered from head to foot because they are ashamed of their bodies, and apparently employed in the sole activity of tacitly showing their modesty” (Magrini 1998). Gender studies in music are very young, but it is necessary to emphasise that the

presence of women in musical activities, documented by recordings collected by ethnomusicologists, have not always received the attention they deserve. However, other observers have emphasised not only the great number of females present in the therapy of tarantism but also the important role played by female musicians, the great “Ladies of the tambourine”, who “have the honour of leading the dance of recovery and celebrating the death ritual” (Agamennone 2005: 39).

The woman-tambourine association can still be seen at the end of the 1950s in tarantella rituals in ceremonies which celebrate the passage from life to death, fertility rituals that recall the myth of Demeter and her daughter Persephone who, kidnapped by Hades to the bowels of the earth, are celebrated each spring. Agamennone’s text *Le musiche tradizionali del Salento* [The Traditional Music of Salento] includes two CDs that present extensive audio documentation of music recorded by De Martino and Carpitella in 1959 and 1960 and in which the female presence is central. The music that starts the dance and the entire curative process is often played by a single musician who often accompanies her song with the continuously increasing insistent rhythm of the drum. When listening to the recordings, one can observe what a decisive and characteristic role in the tambourine players’ part the convinced, confident role of percussion on the tambourine has, so much so that it seems to draw in the other instruments. The Puglia women demonstrate a special energy and strength, above all in the explosion of the *botta*, a strong blow to the centre of the membrane, to the face or near the ears of the tarantate, to shake up and revive the suffering women. The photographs in the volume show rather large instruments, apparently so heavy, as they would be played for hours on end, that the musicians had to bandage their forearms. This is in complete contradiction with the presence of many male performers who now dominate the scene during the revived Festival *The Nights of the Tarantella*. These musicians regard the tambourine as an exclusively masculine instrument since women would have neither the strength to support them, nor the resistance, to support them for such long lengths of time.

## THE LADIES OF THE TAMBURELLO

Agamennone gives us a list of musicians: Salvatora Marzo, the ‘Za Tora’ of Nardò, specialised in a loud, strong *botta* and in the use of nonsensical verbal formulas, Cristina Stefanizzi, specialised in binary rhythms, Addolorata Assalve, Leonide Pediò, Grazia Zoccu, with a typical style that produces low-pitched frequencies and Laura Pediò, who was 73 years old at the time of recording. These women, used to hard labour in the fields and at home

at a time when electrical appliances had not yet arrived to help female emancipation, were evidently endowed with great strength. Physically very unlike today's aesthetic 'television' models, they preserved the practice, custom and familiarity with the same instrument we see portrayed in the hands of the Maenads,<sup>1</sup> who held large tambourines similar to those in use today. The women from Puglia undoubtedly learned the technique from their mothers and grandmothers, who instinctively entrusted their daughters with this knowledge as if it were part of the female domain just as the preservation of the secrets of good traditional cooking. Later on, we shall see how this almost exclusively female tradition was interrupted and how today, only a very few musicians, like Alessandra Belloni, have rediscovered this musical heritage and are trying to spread these ancient therapeutic, choreutic musical traditions amongst women.

Like the Maenads, the Bacchantes described by Euripides, the tambourine players of Salento were the depositories of a musical tradition that was then already over 4 000 years old, in which the song, dance and sounds of tambourines were the means of harmony with the divine. This particular ritual is a continuation of the rites in honour of Cybele<sup>2</sup>, the black goddess of the Earth. The tambourine players of Salento were gifted with a particular, typically 'feminine' sensitivity that allowed them to offer support and a cure to the tarantate, helping them endure grief, melancholy and fear of death or of an empty, miserable life. According to the ethnomusicologist Gianfranco Salvatore, the symbols of tarantism, which go back to cults and rituals of the goddesses of the Mediterranean, are numerous:

- The use of the tambourine as the main instrument of the ritual.
- The presence of a 'totemic animal' the *tarantata* can identify with, imitating its movements. In the ritual in the past, the animal was not a spider but rather a serpent, the symbol of Dionysius, skilfully controlled by the Maenads (Salvatore 1997: 140). Moreover, the image of the spiral linked to the cult of the Great Mother and the Serpent Goddess of Çatal

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1 Maenads: the female devotees of the wine god Dionysus, thus also called Bacchantes.

2 Originally a Phrygian goddess, Cybele was first worshipped in Anatolia in neolithic times. She embodies the fertile earth, a goddess of caverns and mountains, walls and fortresses, nature, and wild animals (lions and bees in particular). Cybele's most ecstatic followers were castrated males called *Galli* by the Romans, who led the people in orgiastic ceremonies with wild music, drumming, dancing, dancing and drink. She was associated with the mystery religion concerning her son, Attis, who was castrated and resurrected.

Hüyük<sup>3</sup> and to symbols of divination of life and cyclical time of birth and death, would in time take on the negative significance of the animal of the devil or sin. (Redmond 1997: 145)

- The presence of the thyrsus and vine leaf of life documented by Baglivi in 1695 as the accessories of the tarantatas' dances and clearly visible on both the Puglia ceramics and the ornaments of the Bacchantes.
- According to Athanasius Kircher, the tractate's habit of swinging evokes the myth of Phaedra who hangs herself for love, while the myth of Isis, who puts back together her husband Osiris, who had been cut to pieces by his brother, and symbol of the changing seasons, can be traced back to De Martino's words regarding the tarantate who felt they were "in pieces", "torn apart", "broken". (De Martino 1996: 132).

As can be seen from the above, all these elements help to trace the more or less direct influence of dionysionism and orphism on phenomena of trances and musical catharsis in the territories of Magna Graecia. Ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget interprets tarantism as a phenomenon of possession in which the therapy is a phenomenon of the reconciliation of the tarantata with the 'possessor entity', the tarantula, the spider. According to Georges Lapassade, one of the greatest experts on the study of altered states of consciousness, the most significant aspect of tarantism is the trance generated by the obsessive rhythm of the tambourines. It is the rhythm of the tarantella itself that draws people to the dance owing to the simultaneous presence of two complex rhythms – the beat, the pulsation, the regular beat and the offbeat, a 'rhythmic superstructure' that creates the effect of retard, syncopation and of slight rhythmical displacement. It is the percussion that stimulates the dance and begins the therapy that puts an end to the crisis. The tambourines and rattles possess such force that they can hypnotise and almost anaesthetise the tarantata, who, inside the holy space (called *perimetro cerimoniale*) – in the past a prehistoric cave, symbol of the maternal womb or sacred mountain of the Sybil – is now reduced to a white sheet stretched on the floor of the dark and poor houses of peasants.

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- 3 Çatal Hüyük, ancient Turkey, is now considered to be one of the earliest known 'cities' in the world. A series of shrines has shown clear evidence of bull veneration, a vulture cult, and signs of worship of the prehistoric mother goddess. The earliest visual depiction of a drummer playing a frame drum comes from a cave in Çatal Hüyük, around 5600 BC. Archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, author of *The Language of the Goddess*, published in 1989, speculates that the small clay drums and bowls found in the Çatal Hüyük site represent the instruments used in the worship of the bird goddess, the goddess of music.

All these elements confirm the continuity of a choreutic musical tradition that connects magic rites, recovery, rhythms of the tambourine and therapeutic musical actions of women. Female religiosity, wisdom and sexuality are confirmed through musical expression, perpetuating an ancient knowledge that has been preserved in various forms in the Mediterranean area, and in Salento in southern Puglia in particular. This strong, constant presence over the centuries of events that associate the tambourine and female musical actions with the celebration of the ritual of death and birth/rebirth through a curative process (but also of regenerative self-cure) might perhaps be the symptom of a greater capacity in women to let themselves go, surrender to emotions, relieve grief and tension, recharge themselves with energy, above all through the body, movement, breathing and search for rhythms connected to nature and its cycles. The same melody follows a cyclical form that is repeated obsessively until therapy is completed. The cure, which is a search for wellbeing and health but also the expression of one's own discomfort, takes place because of a particular need for relationships with others, apparently a characteristic of women. Today, the stereotype of 'female qualities' that characterise women as altruistic within the social sphere, looking after the sick and elderly, is still strong, as if women were destined to sacrifice themselves.

## A WOMAN'S AFFAIR

The renewed interest in tarantism, which has produced a vast number of studies from different perspectives over the last few years, would seem to confirm and underline that this is almost exclusively a female phenomenon. Research carried out by Franco Signore in Nòvoli (Lecce) has provided further evidence that therapy involving the sound of a tambourine was a "woman's affair" and the "Lady of the Tambourine" was always the same: "La Cenza te lu Gervasi" [Gervasi's wife] (Signore in Agamennone 2003: 125–129). According to the information given, in the case of the town of Nòvoli, it is all about 'menstruation', a centuries-old taboo that should not be mentioned in public. The women allegedly simulated possession by the tarantula so they could dance until it induced a miscarriage. Signore believes that the use of this induction of miscarriage was an epiphenomenon of tarantism and suggests that in Nòvoli it was the specific and exclusive domain of the female world since women always played the tambourine and played a primary role in dealing with the crisis. There is, therefore, abundant evidence that tarantism is a specifically female manifestation, as an expression of psycho-physiological discomfort and as a remedy generally administered through the hands of the tambourine players. In his conclusion,

Signore emphasises how difficult it might be for male observers to evaluate this ‘female experience’. Furthermore, the very transmission of information might be partly unexpressed or censured by women out of fear and a feeling of discomfort owing to the lack of communication with men about taboos and subjects such as menstruation, pregnancy and sexuality. The gender of the interviewer and therapist seem to be important in initiating more intimate and profound forms of communication, capable of entering into the sphere of private experience. This was the case of the friendship between the scholar Annabella Rossi, a member of De Martino’s team in June 1959, and the tarantata Anna. After their first meeting in Galatina, a strong friendship was established between them, unprecedented in ethnographic studies in Italy, giving rise to a long correspondence that continued until 1965. According to Annabella Rossi, Anna’s story is common amongst the women of that area – one of poverty, fatigue, hunger, a strict father who forbade many things and a society that favoured male offspring, thus leading her to view the male universe with hostility, to the extent that she wrote, “Dear Miss, I hope you aren’t offended but the way I see it, I really can’t stand the male sex” (Rossi 1970: 154). This is a strong statement underlying this woman’s desire to describe her own marginalisation and the wish to escape. Women have a special kind of sensitivity that allows them to begin interpersonal communication with greater ease, be it a therapy or an ethnographic study.

According to Ida Magli, the arrival of women anthropologists has been very important: “Indeed, only women anthropologists have ‘really’ been able to talk to women from those countries where, until now, researchers have almost been blind: Travellers, missionaries, ethnologists, anthropologists” (Magli 2007: 102).

Women, or rather ‘scholars of the female sex’ as ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl (Nettl 1993: 44), describes his American colleagues, have a particular way of dealing with field research, using an anthropological approach that pays more attention to human experience. Today, a gender study in Puglia is nearly impossible since tarantism has disappeared and musical therapy is no longer practised. The ritual of the *taranta* has become a collective joyful summer festival accompanied by the *pizzica-pizzica*, the last remains of the ancient curative dance.

Towards the end of the 1970s, the phenomenon of tarantism was viewed in Puglia as something shameful to hide, a past best forgotten, along with its music and instruments. At that time, ethnomusicologist Diego Carpitella took part in the *Tambourine Festival* in Cutrofiano (Lecce), organised with the aim of preserving old musical traditions. According to Carpitella it was highly possible that the tambourine would become the most popular instrument in Salento. During an interview for a local newspaper, he also

rackled the problem of the conservation of techniques used in tambourine construction and made an appeal to his readers that an important and living symbol of civilisation should not be forgotten. Carpitella believed that a census should be carried out on both tambourine makers and performers. Once again, the ethnologist documented the presence of a tambourine player, Donna Rosa: “An elderly female player who had a highly original way of beating the tambourine. The rhythm, typical of Muro Leccese while preserving the therapy of tarantism is one of the fastest and liveliest” (Carpitella Interview in Agamennone 2005: 25–26).

Donna Rosa was another of the countless musicians with a strong personality and the ability to communicate tambourine rhythms in a new, personal and innovative fashion. But was she perhaps the last of the ‘Ladies of the tambourine’? Where are the percussionists of Puglia today?

## NEOTARANTISM

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new cult appeared: *neotarantism*. This neologism was coined in 2001 by journalist Anna Nacci and defines the phenomenon of the revival of music and dance of the past in all its elements, rhythm in particular. The *neo-tarantella* induces an unrestrained unleashing of the body which, once liberated, moves in a collective manifestation of joy, in a ‘modern’ trance freeing itself from the problems of everyday life. In the past 20 years the music has survived, although deprived of its ritual framework, but the context has changed completely – dancing in festivals in public squares or discos (the new ritual cavern) with a vast number of people of all ages, united by the will to socialise and have fun. This renaissance of tarantism is not only supported by countless articles on the subject and the proliferation of musical groups, but also by a careful promotion of the local culture, which has managed to draw attention to a forgotten tradition that had been perhaps, for a certain period, unpopular and despised. In fact, over the last ten years there has been a radical change towards a phenomenon that had always been perceived as something to be ashamed of and to hide because it was the reflection of a poor, backward southern Italy. Today, the *pizzica* and the tambourine are vindicated as the symbols of Salento and of an autochthonous past in which the culture of the taranta existed before the influence of the Greeks, as proved by the painted murals of the *Grotta dei Cervi* [Cave of the Deers]. Discovered in 1970 in Porto Badisco (Lecce), the paintings witness the transition from the late Palaeolithic to Mesolithic eras, confirming the existence of rituals focused on a divinity believed to be the origin of this popular culture. According to Daniele Durante, the founder of *Canzoniere Greco Salentino* in 1975, the first group to include

the pizzica-pizzica, the new *taranti* (now masculine) are not possessed by anything but are searching for their own god and a relationship with spirituality; demonstrating their pride in belonging to such a profound popular culture (Durante 2005: 78).

These new generations vindicate, as one of their own specific characteristics, the feelings their parents and grandparents used to consider shameful, a symptom of superstition, illness, hysteria, lack of equilibrium, madness, or weakness, but also a therapy from an almost exclusively female universe linked to the problems of women's condition in society and within the family. This cultural change, 'the repossession of identity' and globalisation make it possible for young people to revive this ancient therapeutic ritual that has become an expression of innovation, energy, celebration, joy, positive energy and strength, all expressions that are symbolically linked to a male world. At present, tarantism is claimed to be "a positive, noble, profound sign of the history of Puglia" (Imbriani in Agamennone 2005: 398), women as therapists and percussionists disappear. Many skilled singers perform, at times playing the tambourine as a simple accompaniment since the solo and virtuoso parts are left to the great *Signori del tamburello* [Masters of the tambourine]. The women in Puglia and southern Italy (and not only) have not stopped playing the tambourine, but are no longer at the centre of the stage, maintaining the frenetic rhythms of the pizzica-pizzica at times for hours on end, something which is now the prerogative of men only. The main figure, outstanding in both originality and personality, is Alfio Antico, a Sicilian percussionist who became the symbol of the tambourine thanks to his skill at creating a 'magical, primordial atmosphere'. This is what he says in an interview: "I was the inventor of the tambourine solo. At times I wonder if, without me, the tambourine would have been as important as it is now" (Antico 2007)<sup>4</sup>.

Today, there are countless opportunities to attend courses by *Signori del tamburello*; however, if we wanted to find a female teacher out of respect for the original female nature of the instrument or just out of pure curiosity, it would be much more arduous. Indeed, women play at festivals and some singers and dancers in traditional music groups know how to play the tambourine but they never reach the virtuosity of their male colleagues. On the contrary, it seems as if they use the instrument as a decorative object to give their performance a traditional flavour. My research on female tambourine players began around ten years ago and is linked to a single Italian name – Alessandra Belloni, a singer, tambourine virtuoso, dancer and actress. Born in Italy, she works to preserve and disseminate the

4 <http://www.operaincerta.it>

wealth and traditions of her culture. She is the only woman in the United States and Italy specialised in percussion linked to the ritual dances and songs she learned while studying and working together with the legendary percussionist Alfio Antico.

## ALESSANDRA BELLONI: THE QUEEN OF THE TAMBOURINE

We first met on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2005 in Tuscany in Chiara di Prumiano in Val d'Elsa, for the seminar *Rhythm is the cure* that Belloni has taught for over seven years. The musician offers seminars on Italian dance and the tambourine in relation to the therapy of tarantism. The following information comes from my participation in the two seminars Belloni held in August 2005 and 2006 and from an interview with Belloni herself and the participants in the seminar in 2005. I also took notes when I participated for the second time and these notes document the impressions, reactions and emotions each woman experienced. Indeed, a key moment of the workshop is the conclusive group reunion that allows participants to share their experiences. Belloni suggests that the numerous women and few men who attend her seminars recreate the ritual of the tarantate with the aim of freeing themselves of their own worries while searching within themselves for memories and dreams. Belloni plays the tambourine for hours and the whole group dances for hours. This experience is highly emotional and also physically tiring.

During the interview she told me that she herself had experienced the effectiveness of the rhythm of the tarantella, dancing for hours in a trance-like state to cure herself of a serious illness. She believed that other women she had helped had also benefited from the combination of the strength of the tambourine and movement. For many of those who participate in Alessandra Belloni's seminars, dancing and simulating the movements of the spider takes on a completely new meaning. The ritual space is seen "as a safe place where everyone can trust each other", "you feel protected", where you can "let go". While dancing, "you enter a relationship with the Madonna", you re-experience "your past and that of your forefathers", you experience "a sort of prayer", you feel "the energy increasing in the group when they are joined in a circle", and you feel "you have the courage to experience this". Some thank Alessandra for having protected and helped them and for having "experienced trust in themselves" and they feel "the desire to reciprocate the energy they have received". For some of them "time just flew" while for others it was "the longest experience of my life" (Personal communications, Chiara di Prumiano, Val d'Elsa, Tuscany, 27<sup>th</sup> August 2006). The recurrence of the word 'to experience' proves highlights

that this was only the beginning of the journey and it should be pointed out that the women who came from countries where emancipation has been underway for years, for example the United States and England, found it easier and were more open-minded in their approach to these activities. The few Italian women present – just three – were more rational and said they found it difficult to let themselves go completely. As mentioned earlier, in Italy women do not play the tambourine professionally; normally they are singers or dancers who play it occasionally just for one song. According to Belloni this is because by going to school and leaving behind the exhausting work in the fields, they have lost contact with nature and the earth and, as a consequence, with strength (Mattingly 1999: 32). Since 1984, Alessandra Belloni participated in the Festival of San Rocco in Torrepaduli in Salento, a traditional celebration that takes place in the summer with the playing of tambourines and *pizziche*. Belloni says that at the beginning she was the only woman who played the tambourine and was not particularly well received (Consolmagno 1999: 59). Since then she has developed great strength and technical skill so she is now able to play for hours in competitions with drum players and percussionists. Once she had proven her bravura and her physical stamina she felt more welcome at these festivals and collective events in public squares, even if she was the only woman playing. Belloni's original objective to revive dance with therapeutic functions, which I believe has not yet been studied, annoys her colleagues and generates a sense of uneasiness that is similar to the one experienced by the elderly who regarded tarantism as a 'woman's affair to be ashamed of and left unspoken. Through seminars, Alessandra Belloni hopes to convince an increasing number of women to return to playing the instrument, to restore a balance between male and female energy. She wishes to transmit this female knowledge to women so may find "the courage to break the cobweb woven by society and women themselves" (Belloni 2004: 16).

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