

Sardinian traditional costumes: history, meaning and tradition

The island of Sardinia boasts a great variety of ancient traditions and habits enduring the incessant passing of time. In every area, specific traditions and local history have been preserved, exalted and cultivated both through daily practices and special occasions such as popular festivals.

This work is meant to be the start of a discovering journey to the roots of Sardinian culture through an analytic research on the traditional costumes of the island.

No other Italian region has as many costumes as Sardinia, a rich and varied traditional heritage. Although no more used as a daily dress, the traditional garment is still worn with proud by Sardinian people as a fundamental part of their identity, not at all obsolete. Nowadays, when rituals, ceremonies, religious services and festivals are hold, the old dresses are worn with their rich and colourful accessories along the streets of the villages.

An ancient world, with its rich set of beliefs, rituals and superstitions, coexists with a modern one which, far from concealing or rejecting the past, is instead willing to depict and preserve it, laying in this way the basis for its blooming and incessant development.

The greatness and value of the island's costume is due both to the precious materials and fine embroidery on the one hand, and to its flourishing vitality and self-innovating capacity on the other; but its primary resource is its ability to coexist with the contemporary habits and trends.

The number of components of the old garment was a means of expression and self-definition for the person who used to wear it: gender, age, social class and status, role in the community, place of origin and marital status were the personal information that could be inferred by an aware observation.

Multiple versions of the same costume could be created, depending on peculiar decorations, shades of colours, fabrics and jewellery and according to the different stages of life: from birth to youth, from marriage to death, for weekdays and for holidays.

The Sardinian traditional costume could express absolute meanings, out of ambiguity or misunderstandings. It used to be a distinctive feature, an immediate and clear non-verbal code conveying a complex message about itself, its own surrounding ecosystem and its own progeny and ancestry.

Young people's dresses were usually made up of a combination of different pieces not always perfectly matching because most families could not afford a good quality handmade dress: the result was thus incoherent and disjointed. That was a well-established way of recycling second-hand, and sometimes worn-out, clothes: a girl's costume, for instance, was mainly handed down by her mother, while the apron usually came from her grandmother and all secondary pieces from her aunts.

That was a *servant's dress*, worn by a poor girl once she became a woman through the crucial and drastic turning point that is a girl's menarche. The changes in a girl's dress made the whole community and the nearby villages acquainted with her transition from childhood to adulthood and that she was ready to be taken to wife.

A woman's costume consisted of a blouse, a waistcoat, a jacket, an apron, an orbace long skirt (made with a hand-woven coarse woollen fabric typical of Sardinia) and a veil or shawl to cover her head.

The blouse could be short to the hips or longer (also used as an underskirt) and its daily standard models were made of resistant fabric such as cotton or linen; essential and simple embroidery finely adorned the cuffs, the upper part of the sleeves and the collar. It was usually white in colour, but light blue shades could be obtained through a treatment with indigo dye.

A wrapping corset was a typical feature of the costumes of Mamoiada and few other villages such as Fonni, Gavoi, Ollolai, Olzai, Ovodda and Dorgali. It was a long fabric band wrapping the chest and pinned in the front, stiffened by topstitching or by inserting some cardboard between the plies. Two extensions of the band were given a triangle shape, thickened and stiffened, the edges covered with red fabric and pinned at the chest. Many researchers and folk culture lovers have tried to guess if this special conformation could have had any magical and symbolic significance connected with breastfeeding or only a mere practical purpose.

According to an old and still persistent superstition, the band was decorated at the

back with a sewed reverse triangle as a good omen.

The skirt, usually pleated, could be made of different fabrics in different colours and shades. Pleats were all the same width because accurately made by hand one by one with a special technique called "*assaittonzu*", nowadays almost forgotten.

On weekdays women used to wear two skirts: one for staying at home or having a walk, and one other, beneath the former, for working in the fields or in the garden. When at work, they took the decent skirt off and laid it down to keep it clean and neat, and worked with the other.

Buttons of different sizes embellished the blouse or the shirt of Sardinian costumes: of gold for the rich or silver for the poor, they were pinned at the collar or at the back of the sleeve, or inserted into the buttonholes. Their mamillary shape was enriched with small blue cameo glass pearls, turquoises or rubies whose colour was connected to blood and therefore to the continuity of life; their typical pointed shape protected the bearer from bad luck.

The wedding dress and the holiday dress not only wrapped the body protecting it from severe weather conditions, but also lead and restrained its movements and instinctive manners, adapting them to the solemnity of the day.

Marriage, holidays, religious ceremonies and gala nights required an appropriate apparel in accordance to the circumstances: more elegant, embroidered with bright colours, trimmed with lace and enriched with jewels.

These dresses were to be left to the following generations as a precious and valuable part of the family's inheritance, or to dress the departed on his last journey.

A woman's wedding garment was made up of specific items sanctioning the passing from the unmarried status to the new bridal life: a set of pieces nubile girls were strictly forbidden to wear. It was richly variegated and geographically marked, while a man's dress was similar throughout the island with no remarkable differences, and was not characterized by special features symbolizing the transitional status.

It consisted of a headdress, a white cotton shirt, a red waistcoat, a pair of long (to the ankles) trousers and a pair of short (to the knees) trousers worn above the former, and gaiters to wrap the shoes.

Not everybody could afford a brand-new wedding garb; most people adapted for the

solemn day their holiday dresses, imitating the style of those worn by rich people on Sunday Masses: a habit emblematic of the social gap existing between the lower classes and the elite minority. Those who could not afford neither to buy nor arrange a dress, borrowed it from relatives or friends corresponding to their social status, or one level higher at the most.

The white shirt or blouse for weddings, ceremonies or gala nights was more elegant and sophisticated than the one for daily use, especially because of the fine embroidery and minute lace trimmings of the collar, the armhole seam and the cuffs; these decorations became particularly magnificent at the beginning of the 20th century.

Men get prepared for their wedding by themselves, while women needed some help for practical reasons, the same as today: a bridal gown is constituted of a number of items wrapped so tightly around the body that it cannot be done by oneself.

An eccentric peculiarity of the island's inhabitants was their trust in magic practices and ancestral propitiatory rituals to protect themselves from real or supernatural negative elements or to win the favour of nature. Beliefs, superstitions and ancient rituals are still handed down from generation to generation, in addition to or sometimes interacting with medical instructions.

Many Sardinian people still believe in evil eye: it is considered a suffering deriving from the forces of evil that is transmitted, sometimes unawares, by means of a glance.

Many amulets exist, both for baby boys and girls, and they may be pinned to their clothes or placed in the pram.

The female amulet has on top of it the operculum of a gastropod called *Turbo Rugosus*, also known as Saint Lucy's eye, because associated to the cult of the Christian saint who had her eyes gouged out. In Sardinian it is called “*sa pèrda dè occru*”, the stone of the eye, for its helicoidal shape reminding an eye; its spiral conformation, moreover, symbolizes fertility and the prolific essence of water, source of life.

In the lower part, a cowrie shell (*Cypraea*) dangles: its profile reminds of female sex organs and for this reason it is dedicated to the pagan goddess Venus and is a wish of fertility. It is not typical of Sardinia but imported.

The strong symbolic value connected to female gender derives from the marine origins of the amulet's components: water is, as mentioned before, the basic element

that has allowed life on Earth. The shell is linked to “*sa pèrda dè occru*” and other components such as pendants and small rattles, by means of filigree silver chains.

In Sardinian, the male talisman is named “*su kokko*”, “*su sebetze*”, “*sa sabegia*” or “*su pinnadellu*”. It is a silver jewel including different parts: some may have a small black ball of jet (a stone typical of Spain that became popular in Sardinia and that has now been replaced by cameo glass), two silver little hens symbolizing industry in accordance with the classical iconography of Sardinian arts, two pearl “*sìas*”, that are pendants representing a typical gesture of disdain or bad omen made crossing one's fingers and that was believed to have apotropaic power against evil eye, and finally a piece of coral, in the shape of a small branch or tubular, hanging between the two “*sìas*”.

Coral was a material of great worth especially for its colour, more than for its chemical composition: being the colour of blood, red was a metaphor of life, and symbolized vital energy because a loss of blood may result in the end of one's life. It was commonly thought that red shared the same powers of blood, supplying physical strength, resistance and vitality.

“*Su kokko*” had different meanings depending on its colour: black was for children against jinx, pain and poisonous animals such as spiders, while the white one, rarer and not easily found, was given to women in childbirth to protect breastfeeding.

Amulets did not actually have a real price or market value as they were made of quite simple and common materials: their effectiveness was given by the magic and symbolic value they were granted, not by their cost.

Plenty of exhaustive studies on the Sardinian traditional costume have been conducted with a double purpose: on the one hand they try to discover and give new life to ancient regional habits almost lost or forgotten in order to recover former moral values, experiences, virtues, honours and talents: the essence of a people's cultural heritage.

On the other hand, they have depicted the transformations undergone by the traditional dress along the centuries, victim of a pervasive modernity that has moulded and transformed not only the dress in itself, but the underlying views, hopes, beliefs, ideals and life aspirations, too.

Research on this subject was only made possible by the recovery of written documents, photographs, paintings and very old clothes, carefully guarded by those who inherited them or by those great lovers of antiquities who bought them from their indifferent owners, but mainly thanks to the memories of the elderly of the island.