

## The Tarantism Phenomenon in Italy

Aurelia SĂBIESCU

*Ph.D. Student, University of Craiova, Craiova, Romania, aura79sabee@yahoo.com*

**ABSTRACT:** Widely known as „folk revival,” the tarantism phenomenon (otherwise known as “tarantolism”) has gained a particular interest throughout time, both from a social and cultural point of view, given the fact that this movement holds a ritualistic and cultural background remarkably unique within Italian history. From the time of the medieval period, both nationwide, in Italy, and at European level, many researchers from various fields, such as literature, ethnology and even from medicine have analyzed the origins and the advancement of this cultural “syndrome,” gradually identifying a voluminous amount of historical sources. Thus, it is remarkable that a high volume of these studies have been brought to light thanks to the contribution of Ernesto de Martino, a notorious Italian anthropologist and historian in the '50s. One of the most important work written by the neapolitan analyst is titled “La Terra del rimorso” (“The Land of Remorse,” E. De Martino, 1961). Over the past few years, the tarantism theme was approached by means of several concepts having a stark sociocultural impact. Among these concepts it can also be enumerated the Southern Italian genre, folk-revival, or the popular choreutic dance called “*tarantella*” (“the dance of the spider”).

**KEYWORDS:** Tarantism, Tarantolism, Ritual, Symbology, *Tarantella*, Folk, Arachnids, Psychosis

### History, rits, context and characters

#### A brief presentation of tarantism

Tarantism represents a phenomenon mainly diffused within the Southern region of Italy, having its origins in Puglia. Its main characteristic consists in the increase of an illness caused by the bite of a specific species of spiders, which commonly occurs in Italy. Nevertheless, this phenomenon has had a major impact also on European-level, thus the Italian culture is not the only one to bring to light the existence of such a socio-cultural psychosis, but other European cultures as well.

This type of spider from which the phenomenon emerges is known to be living in the southern region and mostly met during summer time. As the victim was bitten, the symptoms would instantly appear, in a way that any person who came into contact with the arachnid could have suffered severe side-effects. Afterwards, the bite would cause the victim to initiate a dancing ritual which could have not been stopped, not even by the victims themselves.

Most cases included people wearing vibrantly-coloured garments, having a higher risk of being bitten. Moreover, most victims were young girls or women, and even inebriated people. The victims of the bite would then dance themselves sore, even weeks after weeks, with no interruption. The bite resulted in villagers being under an uncontrolled state of excitement, hence most participants felt the need to hear the sound of a song or instrument while dancing.

The disease was cured only when the victims stopped dancing after feeling exhausted. Although, its symptoms were known to appear again in case of high temperature, as the arachnid would be mostly seen during summer (in fact, the symptoms of the venom reappeared each year due to extremely high temperatures during summer). As much as this phenomenon reached significant effects in Italy, this species was completely harmless abroad; its bite was considered to be dangerous only in Puglia.

The tarantism has raised an unusual interest in the medical world of the XVII<sup>th</sup> century, as doctors were not able to identify and diagnose the nature of this condition. Hence, this cultural movement was labeled as a form of “mental disorder”, due to lack of evidence in regard to its origins and nature.

### **Context. The ritual**

We can notice some differences regarding the ritual's main sites where a treatment ceremony was performed; this ritual could have been done right inside the house of the diseased, or in its surroundings, gradually followed by a purification process conducted in different outdoor locations.

The ceremony would then be performed through a traditional dance called “*tarantella*”, in an attempt to permanently cure the symptoms of the bite, but also to drive out the arachnid. This ritual reached its end only by means of a specific type of music or instrument, sometimes even continuing the dance performance for a longer period of time.

During the initial stage of the dance, the victim can be seen imitating the common moves that the arachnid makes. Afterwards, the person is required to follow all the steps of the ritual in order to be cured, although this might include slight symptoms of fatigue.

The final stage of the dance consists in the victim prevailing over the spider and completely defeating it, a crucial scene for the choreutical ritual, in which the participants assisting the person who was bitten wait for an eventual return of the arachnid (information collected from inhabitants of Oria and Novoli). The performance might occur under the same circumstances, but the next affected person can turn back to her normal state only if the same steps of the precedent ceremony are followed.

### **The characters. The musicians and the participants**

In tarantism, the role of the participants – the musicians – is not solely based on forging art, respectively music, but rather, on performing as “physicians” and curing the illness. The instruments used for the *tarantella* dance (typical music of the *taranta* dance) can present various forms: string instruments, woodwind instruments or percussion instruments.

It is well known that the choice of the instrument and the tone of the voice can be alternated, but most cases reveal that it is strongly linked with the type of the arachnid damaging the victim. The lyrics can also be found under different forms; their frequency can be more or less observed and can approach multiple topics.

These can be structured as an interrogatory dialog, accompanied by a game of questions and answers, of which participants include the victim and the spider.

In other cases, the texts do not contain precise questions, but at the same time, they can have a particular trait: for example, they can be addressed directly to the arachnid, the tarantula, by mentioning its name; they can refer to the place in which the victim has been bitten by it (this question is usually followed by a vague answer); the interrogations might be also related to different symbolic objects used during the ritual

(handkerchiefs, swings or even puddles of water); during the interrogatory elements with a religious connotation can be mentioned, such as the image of Saint Paul.

Literary motifs such as those related to romanticism often narrate a story of an unfulfilled love, while others depict multiple religious personalities, such as the patron saint of the victims bitten by the tarantula, Saint Paul. The verses mentioning his name are often used during prayers for healing and kindness.

The group of musicians was mostly made up of men, but sometimes there were also women, interpreting music and playing drums. Erstwhile, the musicians *delle tarante* would perform by means of a “travelling” movement; most of the times, they would travel during reaping and grape harvesting, being aware that the rituals occur in those places (Chiriatti 2001, 47-50). As the transition to the „domiciliary” was completed, the group was required to come over to the small house of the diseased. Most of the times, the low-class families from Salento (Puglia), usually formed of labourers and peasants, had a poor financial situation, so they had to resort to the little they possessed in order to pay the musical performance of the group. The required sum worth 8000£ of each family member, including each day when the performance occurred. If necessary, all the community had to submit to the costs of the “treatment”.

## Conclusions

Throughout eras, the cultural phenomenon called tarantism has developed into such a widespread movement, that it has caught the attention of many researchers and intellectuals, presenting an essential concept in the field of anthropology and ethnology. This form of musical cure has represented a significant case study for many authors and thinkers abroad, de Martino even including and quoting the word in his work entitled “La Terra del rimorso” (“The Land of Remorse,” De Martino 1961, 38; 196).

Among other notorious authors of the XIXth century elaborating the subject are worth mentioning Francesco de Raho (1908), in his paperwork, “Il tarantolismo nella superstizione e nella scienza,” or the ethnomusicologist Marius Schneider, who elaborates a thesis entitled “La danza delle spade e la tarantella” (Schneider 1948), based on the connection between rite and symbology, according to which only the civilizations who are directly connected with the Universe – the nature –, can comprehend the true value of the rhythm, the existence of each element within it.

## References

- Chiriatti, L. 2001. *Morso d'amore: viaggio nel tarantismo salentino [Love bite: Journey to Salento tarantism]*. Lecce: Capone Editore.
- De Martino, E. 1961. *La terra del rimorso: Contributo a una storia religiosa del Sud [The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism]*. Milano: Il Saggiatore.
- De Raho, F. [1908] 1994. *Il tarantolismo nella superstizione e nella scienza (Tarantolism in superstition and science)*. Rome: Sensibili alle foglie.
- Schneider, M. 1999. *La danza delle spade e la tarantella [The Dance of the Swords and the Tarantella]*. Lecce: Argo.