

## DANCES WITH SPIDERS: CRISIS, CELEBRITY AND CELEBRATION IN SOUTHERN ITALY

by Karen Lüdtke. 2009. New York: Berghahn Books. xxviii + 224 pp., notes, bibliography, filmography, illustrations, index. \$70.00 cloth.

Each year at the end of August, *thousands* of local people and tourists meet in Melpignano, a small town near Lecce in southern Italy, to attend “La notte della taranta” (the Night of the Tarantula). It is the final event in a music festival that takes place in many towns in this area of Apulia. Participants spend the whole night dancing the *pizzica* and listening to the combination of its rhythms with those of world and symphonic music, rock, and jazz. The event, held for the last fifteen years, is probably the best-known case of a phenomenon called “neo-tarantism,” which Karen Lüdtke explores in her recent book. The *pizzica*, defined here as the Apulian *tarantella*, though a more precise definition could be “the version of the Apulian *tarantella* danced in Salento (the area around Lecce),” is a music and dance genre practiced by small family groups or entire communities. In the past it was also used as a cure in the rite of tarantism.

As is known from historical traces left over many centuries, the victims, mostly women (the *tarantate*), who claimed to have been bitten by a spider (*tarantula*), had to dance the *pizzica* for days in order to expel the poison and recover. Despite the visible symptoms (cramps, convulsions, nausea, stomach pains) most cases of tarantism never involved an actual spider bite. This phenomenon has been investigated from a number of different perspectives and with different tools, from anthropology to sociology, from medical studies to psychology, at least since the eighteenth century. For several decades the most authoritative study among many has been *La terra del rimorso* (The Land of Remorse), written in 1961 by the Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino.<sup>1</sup> The book became a major point of reference in folklore studies and cultural anthropology in Italy, where tarantism was a key theme.

*Dances with Spiders* is the result of a dozen years of fieldwork and research in Apulia (1996–2008), and more specifically in a little town, Galatina, the core of the spider cult during the annual St. Peter and Paul’s feast. Lüdtke doesn’t claim to explain the *tarantate*’s rituals or the contemporary scene; rather, she aims to give an impressionistic picture of the many faces of everyday life within which the *pizzica* existed in the past and continues to exist today. Lüdtke attended many events of neo-tarantism and learned to dance the *pizzica*, but she never witnessed a rite of tarantism. She collected fresh data regarding the personal experiences of past and present participants, basing her work solely on their memories. This aspect of her research, while engaging, could have been more fully theorized.

Lüdtke’s geographical focus is the Salento area, although she refers to similar cases documented in other places in Italy (including Sardinia, Calabria, and Campania) and also in Spain. Her project started in the wake of a strong revival of historical research and academic debates on tarantism, marked by the re-issue of De Martino’s book in 1994. In Salento, this period was also characterized by the emergence of neo-tarantism, nourished by the nostalgic memory of the local population.

Most traditional approaches to tarantism and neo-tarantism are informed by the myth of a vanished peasant society, a critique of modernity, and an identification of the cultural heritage of Salento with the memory framed by the work of De Martino. Lüdtke contextualizes and deconstructs most of these approaches, then focuses on the shift from the use of the *pizzica* as a way to confront life crises to its more recent uses for the promotion and celebration of a local sense of identity. This new dimension is strictly related to a larger investment in cultural production that considers the *pizzica* an “intangible heritage” integrated into the local economies of tourism. In this regard Lüdtke doesn’t fully acknowledge the role of the Italian anthropologist Giovanni Pizza, whose works and participation in the debates surrounding the *pizzica* have been crucial for the development of this field of research thanks to his critical deconstruction of many traditional issues advanced by other scholars. Lüdtke also neglects to consider how much heritage, memory, and transmission in dance have been largely theorized in recent years.

The first of three sections, “Past and Present Spider Webs,” explores the relationship between past and present dances and the constant attention that these performances have been given over many centuries. Lüdtke introduces the question of the roots of the phenomenon, recalling different historical interpretations and framing them theoretically. The issue of the authenticity of a “traditional” product merges into a much broader inquiry into how traditions are revitalized and commercialized today.

The second part, “The Spider’s Cult Today,” provides ethnographic detail to explain why the spider remains the common denominator of these events while changing its meaning over the centuries. “La Notte della Taranta” is the perfect example of how tarantism is lived now. It is a “tradition” and a myth serving many different purposes, from the search for magical experiences to the individual performance of virtuosity, from the desire for a source of identity to a means of reacting to social and political changes.

The third part, “From Ritual to Limelight,” presents the performance spaces for neo-tarantism today. Lüdtke demonstrates how music has taken over the rhythmic component of neo-tarantism and, together with dance, has become the central attraction for the large audiences who attend these events. She captures the contemporary dimension of the *pizzica* as both a performance that still addresses life crises and one that serves as a trendy entertainment. Lüdtke makes this point clear by zooming from individual experiences to social relations and group identities, revealing how these dimensions are interconnected. The “magic circles” (*ronde magiche*) of musicians, singers, and dancers are invisible to the eye but experienced as highly real by participants, who, abandoning themselves to rhythms synchronized with others, can feel unknown aspects of their personal identity and well-being. In neo-tarantism, as it was for tarantism, what has been pathologized by society is reappropriated and valorized for its transformative and therapeutic values, as long as it is framed by a social network. Lüdtke also points out that, as in the past, the *pizzica* is used today for multiple purposes. So, for example, while the old ritual form of the *pizzica* was employed to express psychological discomfort or physical suffering, to transgress social and cultural boundaries, and to reject gender limitations, today it is a means of advertising and promoting Salento; a potential source of celebration, at the same time, of local identities; and a key to the development of this area of Italy.

Lüdtke also raises issues of performance, gender, identity, and well-being. Specifically, she reports on the medical and religious (Catholic) discourses that transformed resistant (female) bodies into docile ones. The *tarantate* were branded as mad, hysterical, psychologically unstable, or even exhibitionistic because of the performative aspect of their crises. Because of their performative component these crises were also considered part of the cure because they provided a way to convert an inappropriate display of personal experience into a more codified (and thus socially acceptable) form. Many *tarantolate* experienced traumatic events during their lives, while for others the pilgrimages to Galatina and the performative aspects of the tarantism provided a way to escape a difficult and often isolated everyday life and to express forbidden emotions, eroticism, and sensuality. These crucial gender issues are discussed by Lüdtke in the broader geographical and political context of what Apulia represented in the past, a cultural crossroads of the Mediterranean for crusaders, invaders, travelers, and pilgrims, and what it is today a region shared by local people, tourists, and migrants from Albania and North Africa. For decades during the last century, many people migrated from Apulia to find a job and better living conditions in northern Italy or abroad. It is no coincidence, Lüdtke notes, that more than one *tarantolata* was “bitten” on the first day of work in the fields after years spent away from home in industrial environments. This aspect of the phenomenon is a telling example of the complexity of identity issues involved in tarantism and its transformations.

During the *taranta* rites of the past, the *pizzica* was mostly performed as a solo, but as a traditional form of dancing today it also includes duos and circles (*ronde*). Lüdtke’s careful descriptions and close look into the dance component of tarantism help in grasping the choreographic and kinesthetic patterns of famous descriptions of past and present cases. Less revealing are the photographs and illustrations in the book, whose selection and print quality are not helpful in better understanding what is described. Looking at these pictures from the perspective of visual studies might expand the interpretation of how tarantism and its protagonists have been shaped in the imaginary of several generations.

*Dances with Spiders* reflects the trend that treats anthropology as theoretical ethnography, or, in other words, a way to practice cultural criticism that seeks to explain contemporary social experience while carefully observing the historical forces that animate its major concepts and theories. Using this approach, Lüdtke offers a reflection on the processes of production and preservation of tarantism today, both on a theoretical and performative level. Although the book may not do a great deal to extend the horizon of scholarship, it is a stimulating study suggesting many lines of enquiry for other research. From the point of view of the cultural historian, for example, it is interesting to note that De Martino’s *The Land*

*of Remorse* appeared in the same year as Michel Foucault's *History of Madness*,<sup>2</sup> and it would be productive to compare their respective analyses of insane (female) bodies. For dance historians, *Dances with Spiders* provides many sources to rethink the links between dance, ritual, and social boundaries that could be retraced in Western tradition from the Middle Ages to the Romantic era, and to cast new light into dancing witches, willis, and Giselles.

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#### Notes

1. Ernesto De Martino, *La terra del rimorso* (Milano, Il Saggiatore, 1961); 2nd ed. 1994. Translated as *The Land of Remorse* (London: Free Association Books, 2005).

2. M. Foucault, *Folie et déraison. Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961), was published in English in an abridged edition as *Madness and Civilization* and is now available as *History of Madness* (New York: Routledge, 2006).