

ALESSANDRO TESTA:

Ritualising Cultural Heritage and Re-enchanting Rituals in Europe
Carolina Academic Press, 2023, 270 p.



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2025.4.44> © 2025, Iona Baskerville

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Alessandro Testa is an Associate Professor at Charles University, Prague, and a European anthropologist and historian of religions whose research focuses on ritual, religion, cultural heritage, and popular culture in Europe, based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork and comparative, interdisciplinary scholarship. His publications mainly address European ritual practices and festivities, popular and vernacular religiosity, mythologies and pagan traditions (ancient and modern), re-enchantment and religious change, cultural heritage-making and collective memory, identity and nationalism, and the interplay between religion, politics, and social transformation in contemporary and historical Europe.

The thematic scope of Testa's book can be situated within the extensive scholarship that has developed since UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, as well as within the critical perspectives of ritual and festive studies. Over the past two decades, scholars have examined the complex entanglements of heritage-making regimes at global, national, and local levels, particularly in Europe (Bendix, Eggert, & Peselmann 2012; Adell et al., 2015). Testa's work fits squarely within this tradition. Unlike many others, he has not been directly involved in the institutional machinery of heritage regimes, a position that affords him analytical distance from policy-driven heritage production. Scholars whose work parallels his engagement with rituals and festivals include Sebastian Fournier, focusing on European festive practices, and Michael Dylan Foster, in relation to non-European case studies of ritual, folklore, and heritage-making (Fournier, 2005, 2019; Foster, 2011).

Laurajane Smith's critique of UNESCO's intangible heritage framework provides a crucial reference point for situating Testa's approach. Smith's concept of the Authorized Heritage Discourse frames heritage as a political and institutional process rather than a neutral safeguarding activity (Smith, 2006). Regina Bendix adopts a more ambivalent stance, emphasizing epistemological dilemmas around authenticity, value, and cultural knowledge rather than privileging a single dominant discourse (Bendix, 2009). In alignment with these perspectives, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett conceptualizes intangible heritage as metacultural production, showing how UNESCO reshapes cultural practices through documentation, display, and management (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). Similarly, Valdimar Hafstein highlights the bureaucratic and translational effects of ICH, demonstrating how safeguarding standardizes cultural expressions and introduces new forms of governance under the rhetoric of community participation (Hafstein, 2018). These critiques resonate with the analyses of Bendix, Eggert, and Peselmann (2012) and Adell et al. (2015), who conceptualize heritage policy as mediating between expert authority, legal frameworks, and local claims, while also emphasizing participation, territoriality, and the everyday enactment of heritage. Together, these works portray ICH as a contested field of negotiation among states, experts, and communities.

Empirically, Testa's research resonates closely with Gerald Creed's (2011) analysis of Bulgarian masquerade traditions and with Alin Rus's research (2018, 2023) on rural winter plays as intangible cultural heritage in post-socialist rural Romania. Testa's volume can be read as a key contribution to the growing body of scholarship that conceptualises festive events – and carnivals in particular – as performative platforms for negotiating identity, power, and political belonging (Quinn, 2019), as well as for articulating emic perspectives that are often marginalised within dominant cultural narratives. For example, in a specific Greek context, despite running

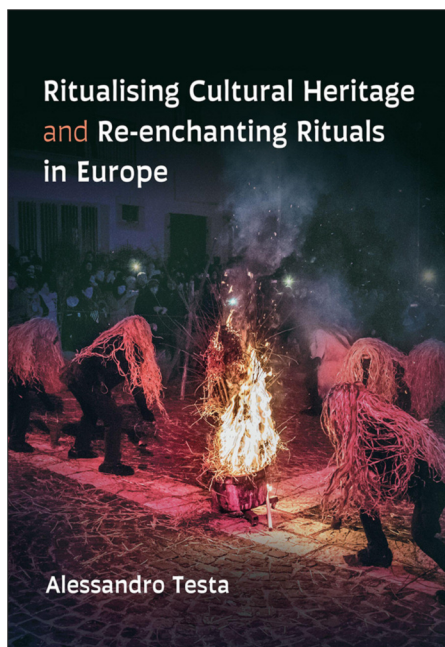
counter to international heritage-policy recommendations, the marketisation of heritage is not perceived as a threat to authenticity by local actors (Karampampas, 2021, pp. 663–664).

Testa presents himself as a “privileged ethnographer,” claiming the rare opportunity to observe and analyse the late-stage formation of a mythological system emerging from the interaction between local, micro-social practices and a much broader cultural imaginary upon which those practices partially depend. He conceptualises this process as the emergence of a form of what he calls “vernacular mythology”. The density and complexity of Testa’s prose, his stylistic hallmark and maybe bothering for some readers, are not merely rhetorical choices but reflect the conceptual intricacy of his subject matter. At the core of his critical project lies an examination of heritagisation – or heritage-making – as a cultural and political process of institutionalisation that transforms historically contingent and often fragmentary performative practices into reified objects of heritage. Closely intertwined with this inquiry is his sustained engagement with ritual, particularly public ritual, since such practices constitute a primary object of desire within heritage regimes.

Testa is explicit and reflexive about his theoretical positioning, distinguishing himself within a field often marked by conceptual ambiguity. He defines his approach as a “neo-structuralist culturalist posture,” affirming culture as an indispensable analytical concept without essentialising it. As he acknowledges in the opening chapter, the book did not originate as a unified project: the empirical materials and analyses were developed over approximately twelve years, initially as independent studies. Only gradually did these pieces coalesce into a coherent monograph, a process that mirrors the book’s broader concern with assemblage, continuity, and transformation.

The volume is structured in two main sections. The first is devoted to conceptual and theoretical debates, addressing issues such as the rethinking of festivals and public rituality, the shift from essentialised notions of tradition to analytical categories, and the relationship between ritual, politics, power, and symbolic hierarchy. Chapters 3 and 4 are particularly interconnected, offering a sustained theoretical discussion of ritual and ritualisation. Chapter 4 revisits the heavily researched in the last decades, but still crucial terrain of the transition from folklore to intangible cultural heritage, providing a critical account of heritagisation processes connected to UNESCO agency in the field. The second section of the book comprises the empirical core: a set of ethnographic case studies followed by a concluding chapter that synthesises the analytical insights developed throughout the volume.

After a long “golden age” of evolutionary anthropology and folkloristics – during which festive culture and celebrations were largely interpreted as ritualistic and magical survivals – there remains a pressing need for critical reassessment in the field. Situated within a strong critical tradition, Testa offers not only a nuanced analysis of the deep structures of these cultural forms but also a reflexive critique of the heritage frameworks that have transformed them into objects of public culture, reifying ritual meanings and mobilising them as political tools of cultural management. He brings to this task a robust critical apparatus and solid academic



background. His training in classical languages and cultures, combined with extensive ethnographic fieldwork on heritage practices in Southern and Eastern Europe, underpins a methodological approach that integrates archival historical research with qualitative anthropology and insists on studying these phenomena both synchronically and diachronically. At the same time, Testa does not dismiss ritual and religious forms outright; rather, he emphasises their significance as meaningful modes of social action and as analytical laboratories for uncovering the ideological layers of contemporary societies.

In line with his sustained critique of the ritualistic paradigm in anthropology and ethnology, Testa revisits the crucial contribution of later scholarship on public rituals in dismantling meta-historical and archetypal interpretations. He highlights the pivotal shift inaugurated in the English-speaking world from the 1950s onward by scholars of the Manchester School, notably Max Gluckman and Victor Turner, whose work foregrounded the role of rituals and festivals in shaping social dynamics and in maintaining or contesting social order. Testa also acknowledges the foundational contributions of Van Gennep and Bakhtin to this paradigmatic reorientation, while singling out Clifford Geertz as exemplary for refining interpretive tools grounded in ethnographic practice rather than in assumptions about irrational or timeless ritual essences.

As a critical scholar of festivals, Testa is committed to the idea that public ritual events are privileged moments in which collective values, power relations, memories, and conflicts become visible and performative. Such events function as windows onto society, revealing how communities negotiate belonging, continuity, and transformation, particularly in post-secular Europe. At the same time, he engages critically and reflexively with key theorists such as Bourdieu, Foucault, and Gramsci, explicitly acknowledging earlier misreadings of some of their concepts. This intellectual honesty is underscored in the foreword, where Testa reflects on his own theoretical evolution across studies conducted at different moments of his research career and within diverse research projects. His trajectory exemplifies both the rapidly shifting dynamics of performative cultural forms in social reality and the way scholarly interpretation itself sharpens through experience and sustained engagement – an implicit acknowledgment of the complexity of the subject matter.

Testa's approach is strongly influenced by Marshall Sahlins's understanding of ritual as a site where enduring patterns of social organisation and symbolic systems are brought to bear on concrete historical events. Particularly valuable for non-Italian readers is his engagement with Italian scholarship on festivals – often overlooked internationally – which has played a crucial role in revitalising the study of this central form of public ritual within Italy's social and cultural history. This methodological and theoretical reorientation, advanced notably between 2003 and 2006 by scholars such as Berardino Palumbo and Francesco Faeta, represents a decisive break with earlier antiquarian and essentialist approaches to festivals in the academic community in the peninsula.

Chapter 4, "From Folklore to Heritage," derives from research conducted during Testa's postdoctoral project in the Czech Republic (2013–2015). Its temporal distance from the book's final composition is evident, particularly in the absence of engagement with some more recent developments in the rapidly expanding field of heritage studies, which are only partially integrated into the discussion. This gap reflects the inevitable cost of a monograph assembled from studies produced over a long period. Nevertheless, despite the lack of substantial updating or added theoretical refinement, the chapter remains fully justified within the overall structure of the book. It plays a crucial role in providing the critical tools and conceptual background necessary for understanding the subsequent ethnographic case studies, all of which are deeply embedded in the historical and institutional trajectory linking folklore to UNESCO's regime of intangible cultural heritage.

Although Testa had already introduced the notion of "popular Frazerianism" in earlier, stand-alone articles, the concept clearly merits sustained treatment in a monograph, and this volume successfully preserves and consolidates that important contribution. Testa demonstrates

a rare ability to combine a critical scholarly perspective with emic sensitivity to what he defines as popular Frazerianism, closely linked to processes of “self-heritagisation.” He frames this phenomenon as a growing and parallel dynamic that scholars must take seriously, rather than dismiss, even as they continue to critically deconstruct ritualism and essentialist notions of tradition in public festivals. As Testa observes, while anthropologists and historians have spent the last four decades exposing traditions as reified, invented, or politically misused, practitioners themselves have remained eager to invoke, appropriate, and mobilise the very idea of tradition – often in open disregard of academic critique.

From a constructive standpoint, Testa understands “popular Frazerianism” as one of the key modalities through which tradition is being reconfigured in contemporary Europe. It enables individuals and communities to symbolically imagine and reconstruct the past, actively produce cultural heritage, shape senses of belonging, and distinguish between what they perceive as authentic and inauthentic practices and representations. In doing so, these processes foster new modes of social experience and emergent forms of religiosity, underscoring the continued vitality of ritual thinking in late-modern contexts.

As an empirical terrain for explaining and exemplifying the dynamics of “popular Frazerianism,” the chapter focuses on two of these cases: Gl’ Cierv, the deer-man carnival in Castelnuovo al Volturno (Molise, Italy), and the Masopust in Hlinsko v Čechách (Bohemia, Czech Republic), and the Carnival of Solsona (Catalonia, Spain) is introduced and analysed in subsequent chapters. Through a comparative framework, Testa explores the degrees of continuity and transformation linking these events to ritual and tradition. In Castelnuovo, his grassroots analysis reveals a dynamic process of the re-ritualisation of tradition and the re-traditionalisation of ritual, marked by innovation alongside claims of antiquity. In contrast, the Masopust in Hlinsko displays a high level of formal and structural stability: the ritual has persisted with minimal change, acquiring new meanings without undergoing re-ritualisation in a strict sense. When considered together with the Solsona carnival – an example of rapid institutionalisation and “heritage without tradition” – the three cases illustrate distinct yet comparable pathways through which festivals become framed as heritage. Collectively, they demonstrate that carnivalesque practices are shaped by divergent historical trajectories, political contexts, and institutional regimes, while also being sustained by local and vernacular understandings of cultural value and social modes of representation. He highlights how heritagised rituals can serve competing and sometimes contradictory purposes: fostering social cohesion and resilience, but also reinforcing exclusion, nationalism, or simplified narratives of identity. Heritage is thus a contested field where authority, creativity, and power intersect.

Although presented in a theoretical chapter, the cited example of the “politicisation” of public events is not particularly persuasive. On 1 December 2011, during Romania’s 93rd National Day celebrations, thousands of people gathered around the Arcul de Triumf in Bucharest loudly booed political leaders during their speeches, expressing discontent with the country’s economic conditions. This episode is problematic as an illustrative case for two main reasons. First, it is only weakly representative as an instance of public ritual, given the limited ritual density and symbolic elaboration of such state ceremonies. Second, expressions of popular dissent toward political authorities during events associated with “civil religion” are not exceptional anomalies but rather recurring and well-documented features of contemporary public commemorations. As such, the example adds little analytical leverage to an argument about the politicisation of ritualised public events.

Alessandro Testa makes a significant contribution to contemporary historical anthropology, particularly in relation to the social and cultural dynamics of public rituals in Europe. His ethnographic work offers a timely re-evaluation of the diverse and often subtle functions of festivals and carnivals. As for his critique of heritage-making and grassroots self-heritagization

processes, he pays tribute to the early writing of some of his research integrated in this book, since current research on intangible cultural heritage is increasingly shaped by a newer paradigm linking UNESCO's intangible heritage framework to the Sustainable Development Goals. As shown by Bortolotto and Skounti (2023), critical attention has shifted from questions of authorization to what heritage is now expected to do – economically, socially, and environmentally – within global governance agendas. A complementary perspective is provided by Wulf's edited anniversary volume on the 2003 Convention, which situates intangible heritage within broader anthropological discussions of ritual, performativity, education, and transmission (Wulf, 2025). Read together, these works highlight a productive tension between normative policy frameworks and anthropological understandings of culture as relational, embodied, and processual.

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