

The 'Attitos' of Sardinia: An Interview with Dolores Turchi

*Martha King
Pisa, Italy*

The "wild" Barbagia region in central Sardinia where the ethnologist Dolores Turchi was born and has lived and taught for many years is also the area of her research of orally transmitted legends, stories, and improvisatorial funeral poetry. In Oliena, Orune, Orgosolo, Nuoro, Bitti and other small, remote, isolated villages, she listens to and records what has been passed down from generation to generation. The results of her research have appeared in three books and numerous articles in Italy, France, and Germany.¹ Most of the older people she deals with speak the local Sardinian dialect (or more properly, the Sardinian language that has distinct regional variations), a mix of Latin, Italian, and Spanish, which she translates into Italian for publication.

Turchi has been able to record one aspect of Sardinian folklore that has all but vanished—except in the most isolated areas of Orgosolo and Orune where bandits and acts of vengeance still flourish and strong passions have not been diluted by technological change. In those villages the funeral lament or *attitos*, as improvised for the occasion by natural poets, still serves the important function of inciting revenge as well as providing an emotional release for the mourners. At one time the *attitos* were jealously guarded from the curious, and so were lost to all but their immediate audience.² Turchi was able to collect examples of *attitos* in the recent past from people who remembered them as beautiful verses from past times and not as quasi-magic incantations.

Turchi has not only recorded a number of these spontaneous poetic utterances of bereavement but has traced the custom to ancient sources. She believes nearly all the legends and customs in the

Barbagia are rooted in pagan rites. Although most pagan rituals were either abolished by the church or absorbed into its ritual, they nevertheless continued to contribute meaning and energy to the lives of the people. The Catholic church, incidentally, was not strongly ensconced into the lives of the people of this east-central area until the sixteenth century. This particular funeral practice was prohibited by the Catholic hierarchy not only because of its pagan origins, but also because it sometimes blasphemed by crying out against God's injustice, and incited revengeful acts of violence.

"S'Attitu" (singular) goes back to Greek custom, Turchi states in her book, *Oliena . . . Barbagia . . . Sardegna . . .* In the *Iliad* Homer tells of the women gathered around the corpse of Hector and how first Hector's wife Andromache, and then his mother Hecuba, and finally Helen intoned the funeral chant, mixed with cries and tears. The funeral lament began with Andromache: "You've been torn from life/ my husband, in young manhood, and you leave me/ empty in our hall".³ The funeral chant was also part of the funeral rites in Gargano and Lucania, both part of Magna Graecia.

In an interview in Oliena,⁴ Turchi said she is convinced that the origin of this custom precedes Homer's time. "The source of the Sardinian custom of *attitos* comes from the Orient. The practice originated with the religious festivals honoring Phrygian Attis, companion of the "Great Mother" Cybele, who was mourned with religious rites for three days before the celebration of his joyous resurrection. This festivity corresponded to the spring renewal of vegetation, and it also symbolized its winter death. The same ritual is observed in the cult honoring Adonis in Phoenicia and Osiris in Egypt: the vegetation spirit dies and is continually reborn. The mourning rites for both Adonis and Attis were frantic and prolonged with chanting and loud laments."

Turchi believes that what has become legend or custom of forgotten origin was once history. Greek and Roman historians such as Herodotus, Sallust and Pausanius, living closer to the events that had passed into the common fund of transmitted knowledge, commented on the arrival in Sardinia of a group of men from Asia Minor after the burning of Troy. For many centuries such data were considered legend, until Schliemann and Kaldewey discovered the mythical Troy and Babylonia by following indications found in classical histories and literature.

"The cult of Attis was especially strong during the Roman occupation of Sardinia," continues Turchi, "either spread by the military or perhaps already in Sardinia by that time and reconfirmed

by the Romans. "Attitare" must refer to periods of weeping prescribed for commemorating Attis' death, which by extension becomes a funeral lament for everyone. The lament becomes more intense and symbolic when it is for the death of a young spouse, and especially when a young man is killed, as the lament then incites a vendetta.

"Of course, the adaptation of the celebration for Attis to a funeral lament for others occurred over centuries. This sorrow was expressed as violently in Sardinia as it was with the Greeks, with tearing of hair and face-scratching.

"Naturally the church was opposed to this pagan practice. Not only did it perpetuate a pagan ritual, but it contrived to continue the *disamisadas*, that is, the continual chain of murderous vendettas between families. 'Sangue chiama sangue.' Blood claims blood. The religion of forgiveness never existed in the Barbagia. It entered only as a varnish applied by the church. The heart of Barbagia has always been pagan. A practice that began as honor of the dead became an incitement to revenge. As a result the tradition of the funeral lament still exists in revenge-prone Orune, especially if a young man is killed.

"If the surviving sons are too young at the time of their father's death to avenge it, his bloody shirt is saved to show to them when they grow up."

Turchi was able to record a number of funeral chants recalled from *attitos* improvised more than fifty years ago. Particularly sorrowful is this cry of a young bride from Orgosolo whose husband was murdered.

A su vintuin'annu
m'app'intintu su pannu!
a s'annu vintiunu
intintu su belludu!
Pezzi hosa de arrohu!

On my twenty-first year
I have dyed my dress!
At my year twenty-one
I have dyed my clothes black!
It seems like a curse!

Mortu mi ses, Caràlu,
vazzi tundu e galanu.
Adiosu a su mundu!
Mortu mi ses, Caràlu,
galanu e fazzi tundu.

You are dead to me, Carlo
ruddy and handsome.
Addio to the world!
you are dead to me, Carlo
handsome and ruddy.

Pesa ha mi carinnas
ha so galu pizzinna!
Pesa ha mi carezzas
so pizzinna e non bezza!

Get up and caress me;
because I am still young!
Get up and caress me;
I'm young and not old!⁵

The funeral chant was created and performed only by women, who often expressed their sorrow by letting down their hair and tearing it in the Greek manner. This was common in all countries where it was the custom to "attitare." In Sardinia it is still customary to say of a person who has lost a dear one: "Est pranghende a pilu isortu!" (She is weeping with her hair loose.) And one can issue no more serious offense to another than to say: 'Ancu vajas a pilu tirau." (May you go tearing you hair).⁶

In the 1930s, around the last time the *attitos* was heard in Oliena, one woman's twenty-year-old daughter died just before she was to be married. The grieving mother improvised a long series of premeditated verses rich with similes worthy of the name of poetry. She compares her daughter to a swallow, to the moon, to a rose about to bud.

Pesa, sa izza mia,
bella in sas prima rias!
Rundine posta in chima,
pesa, sa izza mia,
bella in sas rias primas!

Rise, o my daughter,
most beautiful of all!
Swallow on high,
rise, o my daughter,
most beautiful of all!

Luna isparta in su mare,
pesa pro isposare,
ha ch'est atta s'ispesa!
Pro isposare pesa!
Pesa, e non fahas 'arta,
luna in su mare isparta!

The moon lies on the sea,
rise up to get married,
Now everything is ready!
Rise up to get married!
Rise up and don't be absent
The moon lies on the sea. (7)

Several neighbors of the grief-stricken mother were able to remember enough of the poetic lament for Turchi to piece the poem together. It has forty-one stanzas, most of four or five lines, but some with six or seven with varying rhyme schemes. Turchi said it was customary for the improviser to stop sometimes when interrupted by visitors. When taking up the *attitu* again she would include the names of friends and relatives who had arrived in the meantime.

As a lighter postscript to this otherwise lugubrious subject, in good time the promised bridegroom married his dead fiancée's sister and they live today in Oliena, now old but still hearty.

Notes

- 1 Dolores Turchi's books published in Italian are *Oliena . . . Barbagia . . . Sardegna* . . . (Nuoro: La Tipografica, 1977); *Dalla Culla alla Bara: Raccolta di antiche ninnenanne, canti, attitos e proverbi* (Nuoro: AR.P.E.F, 1981); *Leggende e racconti popolari della Sardegna* (Rome: Newton Compton, 1984). The first two books had two printings and *Leggende* is in its third printing. The latter was also issued in a school edition by Lucarini of Rome in 1989.
- 2 When Grazie Deledda, the novelist born in Nuoro, Sardinia (Nobel Prize 1926) tried to persuade some women to "attitare" so she could transcribe verses for her *Tradizioni popolari de Nuoro* (1894) "no one wanted to comply, at any cost." No one would cooperate because they thought it might bring bad luck—a death in the house, explained Dolores Turchi. In Deledda's novel *Via del Male* (1896) she describes the custom of women improvising funeral poetry, but she gives no examples of it.
- 3 Robert Fitzgerald's translation (Oxford University Press, 1984).
- 4 Easter week, 1989.
- 5 From *Oliena . . . Barbagia . . . Sardegna . . .*, p. 45.
- 6 *Oliena . . .*, p. 51.
- 7 *Oliena . . .*, p. 45.