

In: Gabriella Mandardini Morelli (ed.)  
2010 Emozioni dal mondo del mare.  
Sassari: Editrice Democratica Sarda,  
pp. 51 – 73.

## Mattanza: The Ritual Killing of Tuna in Sicily

Rob van Ginkel\*

We are history, we're making history,  
with our nine centuries of tradition and  
our nets with six million knots.  
rais Giacobino Cataldo<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In present-day Europe, the public spilling of animal blood would seem to arouse the indignation and disgust of many observers and a wider audience. For example, clubbing seal pups to death for their pelts is generally deemed unacceptable; many condemn the Spanish bullfight as a cruel tourist spectacle and hunting animals such as grouse, fox, deer and pheasant for sport or leisure meets with fierce opposition. One could argue that this is so because there is no nutritional 'need' to do so. But killing animals in public to procure food is also increasingly contested. As French ethnologist Noëlie Vialles (1994) lucidly describes, killing and butchering animals has been removed from the public eye to slaughterhouses hidden in peripheral areas. In rural Europe, the slaughtering of domestic animals for private use continued to be of considerable importance much longer, but the practice has been on the wane for decades now. The vacuum-sealed chunks of meat and fish we buy in supermarkets are hardly recognisable as once life animals. Nonetheless, there are still places where onlookers can observe killing animals and even feel attracted to do so, despite – or perhaps even because of – the spilling of animal blood.

\* Department of Sociology and Anthropology - University of Amsterdam,  
Oudezijds Achterburgwal 185, 1012 DK Amsterdam, The Netherlands -  
r.j.vanginkel@uva.nl

<sup>1</sup> Transcription of interview for Tonnara (Hope 2002).

This article focuses on the time-honoured tuna fishery of Favignana (Sicily) and especially its concluding ritual of the *mattanza*; the killing of the tuna.<sup>2</sup> The fishery is in serious decline mainly due to over-fishing by foreign commercial fleets, but the local tuna fishermen stubbornly hold on to their tradition, despite all odds. They have time and again recreated the fishery in an attempt at economic, social and cultural survival. When I recently read Theresa Maggio's fascinating book *Mattanza* (Maggio 2000), I was captivated by the steadfastness with which the Favignanesi tuna fishermen attempt to continue the ritual. With my curiosity aroused, I decided to conduct more systematic research into the literature on the *mattanza*, the contents of several relevant websites and audiovisual material. The present article is the result of these inquiries and attempts to piece together the bits of information I gleaned from this variety of sources.<sup>3</sup> It seeks to understand why the *mattanza* is so important to the Favignanesi and how the ritual changed following the economic decline of the tuna fishery. It is presently identity matters – being aware of who they are as tuna fishermen – that exceeds the economic importance of the *mattanza* by far. By performing the *mattanza*, the Favignanesi recreate their sense of selves.

However, in search of authenticity, tourists have also discovered the ritual and flock to the island in large numbers to watch the spectacle. Though this tourist gaze reinforces the fishermen's self-awareness, it has also led to protests against the *mattanza* as being little more than a tourist show like the Spanish bullfight. Both fascination and disgust would seem to be inextricably linked with the symbolic

<sup>2</sup> Theresa Maggio's popular book *Mattanza: Love and Death in the Sea of Sicily* (2000) has made the ritual world-famous and will be used here as an important source of information. Though not a scholarly work, it contains extensive descriptions of the *mattanza*. For anthropological accounts, see Collet (1987) and Singer (1999). For a brief overview and compelling photographs, see Stabile and Martorana (1999). For ethnographic films, see Singer (1997) and Hope (2002).

<sup>3</sup> Doing ethnographic research on the digital highway can of course never replace conducting actual anthropological fieldwork. There are many puzzles and questions that remain unsolved, and that would require a prolonged stay on Favignana to observe and interview the fishermen.

power of blood. Tension builds when both fishermen and tourists await the arrival of the tuna and upon the catharsis of gaffing the fish there is an excited, even phrantic atmosphere. Before going into these matters, I shall first briefly deal with the present state of tuna fisheries and the history, technique and social organisation of the *mattanza*.

### *Trapping the 'Pig of the Sea'*

Bluefin tuna (*thunnus thynnus* L.) migrate in schools from the North Atlantic to the Mediterranean in May to spawn and they follow more or less fixed migration routes, making the fish a predictable target for local fishermen. They can live for more than thirty years, reach over three meters in length and large specimens can weigh as much as 650 kilos or even more. They are top predators that feed on fish, squids and crustaceans. Throughout the Mediterranean, bluefin tuna have been caught in abundance for many centuries using large trap nets or *tonnara* (Pitcher 2001). Dubbed 'pig of the sea' for its versatility on the table, tuna was salted, pickled and turned into almost as many sausage products as pork itself. From an early stage onward, salted tuna became an important export product. Often, salt pans and tuna traps were constructed in each other's vicinity. The tuna fishery brought wealth to many Mediterranean communities and '[s]overeigns at times demonstrated their largesse – in return for appropriate services – by granting prominent families exclusive rights to the ownership and operation of certain tuna traps' (Roesti 1966:85).

A considerable expansion of this trap fishing technique occurred in the 1800s as a result of the invention of canning. But increasing catches brought about a depletion of tuna stocks (Pitcher 2001:603). Once a common tuna fishing method, tuna traps have gradually almost completely disappeared from the Mediterranean coasts due to dwindling catches. In Sicily alone, some eighty tuna traps were still used in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But today, this passive method with fixed gear survives in less than a handful of places. Since the demand for bluefin tuna has increased in world markets, they have been hunted relentlessly with modern fishing techniques such as long-lines and purse seines. Helicopters and small airplanes are used to

spot shoals of tuna that are subsequently scooped up by industrial fishing fleets. Bluefin tuna are consequently diminishing in numbers and size and have been considered overexploited since 1982.

Tuna stocks are most threatened in the Mediterranean, where about twenty per cent of the world's dwindling supply is caught. Bluefin tuna are commercially highly valuable. Most tuna caught in the Mediterranean are packed in ice and flown directly to Tokyo's Tsukiji fish market, where individual giants may fetch extremely high prices of over US\$ 100.000. Consumer appetite for sushi and sashimi seems insatiable. The scarcity of bluefin tuna has prompted legal restrictions. The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) regulates the fishery (Block *et al.* 2001). It has developed a management regime for the eastern bluefin tuna stock based on a Total Allowable Catch, with quotas being allocated on a state-by-state basis. This makes bluefin tuna the only fish resource in the Mediterranean managed through quota regulations. However, the efficiency of the bluefin tuna management regime is limited, mainly due to the lack of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the Mediterranean and the related problems of enforcing legislation in international waters.

One of the very few places where the traditional tuna trap fisheries have survived so far is Favignana, a tiny (19 square kilometres) island off Sicily's west coast.<sup>4</sup> It is a close-knit community with approximately 3,200 inhabitants, most of whom live in Favignana città, the island's port town. Favignana is often referred to as La Farfalla on account of its shape that resembles a butterfly (*farfalla*) a-flutter. Its western wing is dominated by the 300 metres high Montagna Grossa with the fort Santa Caterina on top. Its eastern wing is much flatter. Here, tufa stone used to be quarried. Favignana is one of the three Egadi Islands (the other ones being Levanzo and Marettimo) and today it is a popular tourist resort, not least for its specific ways of tuna fishing which have been watched, described,

<sup>4</sup> The tradition also exists in Bonagá, Sicily (cf. Ravazza 1999). Until recently, it was also extant in Portoscuso and Carloforte (Sardinia) and in Camogli (Northern Italy). Outside Italy, there are still traditional tuna traps in Spain (2), Croatia (2), Libya (2), Tunisia (2) and Morocco (1).

photographed and filmed numerous times. Favignana's *tonnara* is a sophisticated trap system consisting of kilometres of netted walls designed and positioned to deflect tuna migrating along the coast. The trap comprises kilometres of steel cable, more than four hundred iron anchors weighing from six-hundred to four-thousand pounds, more than 3,500 stone weights of forty pounds each, and enormous nets of nylon or coconut fibre. The nets are anchored parallel to the coast, are gradually restricted in size, and raised towards the surface. The *tonnara*'s two kilometres-long wings guide the tuna to the entrance or 'mouth' of the trap. A series of six successive chambers with distinct names, each divided by a net gate, lead to the final seventh chamber, *la camera della morte*, 'the chamber of death'.<sup>5</sup> The fishermen herd the tuna from one chamber to the next; lowering the dividing net once the tuna have passed through (Pitcher 2001:603).

For hundreds of years, the local fishermen have been using a *tonnara* to capture bluefin tuna (cf. Collet 1987; Maggio 2000; Ravier and Fromentin 2001). Arabs founded Favignana's *tonnara* in 807 A.D., though they may have found a trap already in place. Sicily's first King claimed the *tonnara* for the crown in the 11<sup>th</sup> century but often leased it to generate income (Maggio 2000:57). Parts of the sea were appropriated as private property and a feudal mode of production came about (Collet 1987:46). Medieval *tonnaroti* worked for a wage specified in a seasonal contract and received a percentage of the tuna and other fish inadvertently trapped (Maggio 2000:58). In Medieval times, the tuna traps of Favignana and elsewhere on Sicily contributed considerably to economic life. In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, Favignana's *tonnara* 'présente les traits d'une protoindustrialisation de type capitaliste, fonctionnant avec un important capital productif, un système de rémunération précocement monétarisé. Le production est tournée vers le marché, vers les marches urbains se trouvant à grande distance' (Collet 1987:46). Catch records go back to as early as 1599. In the seventeenth century, Favignana's *tonnara* had a reputation of being the 'queen' of the Mediterranean tuna traps. Between

<sup>5</sup> The barrier nets or wings also have distinct names: *la coda* and *la costa*. The names of the chambers are *levante*, *camera grande*, *bordonaia*, *bastardo*, *camera*, *bastardella*, and finally *camera della morte* (Maggio 2000:129-130).

1634-1813 and 1878-1960, the median annual catch was 1,958 tuna, showing highs in the 1880 to 1930 period, when median per year catches amounted to 5,200 tuna (Ravier and Fromentin 2001:1304, 1308).

Vincenzo Florio, who had made his wealth with the production and export of Marsala wine and in the world of finance, leased several *tonnare* as of 1827, including Favignana's. 'Florio streamlined maneuvers, redesigned the traps, and sometimes changed their placement at sea' (Maggio 2000:60). His improvements led to growing catches. Nonetheless, Florio did not renew his lease in 1859, but in 1874, his son Ignazio Florio bought the Egadi Islands, including the *tonnara* of Favignana. Under his entrepreneurial guidance, the *tonnara* continued to flourish. Its record catch of 1878 was 10,159 tuna. Ignazio Florio established a large tuna cannery (like the netted walls called *tonnara*) on Favignana, providing work for the entire island community. Florio had a famous Sicilian architect design the building and a new wharf, the Camparia, as well. The *tonnara* used to be an integral part of the fabric of local life, calling on the entire community, not just on the fishermen. The fishermen and many male and female labourers worked for the canning factory. Tuna was bled, cooked and preserved in olive oil, canned and exported. When it was not tuna season, the cannery processed and packed sardines and other fish Sicilian fishermen landed. Florio was an enlightened entrepreneur who established a nursery and a playground in his factory. The Favignana islanders loved their wealthy patron and raised a statue for him. The tuna fishery was the mainstay of the local economy, and the money made with it would feed many fishermen's families for over half the year. But Ignazio's son, Vincenzo (named after his grandfather), had to sell the *tonnara* to their business partners, the Parodi family, in the late 1930s.

For a long time in the twentieth century, many locals – women included (they were involved in making and mending the nets) – continued to depend on work in the tuna factory, where the fish was preserved in olive oil. The fishermen worked for the *tonnara* factory, but due to diminishing catches, it was closed in 1981 and consequently many of the hundreds of workers became unemployed and the tuna killing tradition was endangered. The building still is testimony to the tuna fishery's important legacy. Despite the closure of

the cannery, tuna fishing continued to be of considerable local importance. The owner of the tuna trap, Luigi Parodi, leased it to an entrepreneur from nearby Trapani, Franco Castiglione, who transported the tuna to his slaughterhouse there, where the fish were weighed and cut up by Japanese specialists and then flown to the Tokyo fish market.

### *The Ritual Slaughter of Tuna*

The complex and ritual method of catching tuna follows very precise rules, timings and strictly disciplined practices. It requires a highly specialised division of labour where every crewmember carries out specific tasks. The mode of production has a hierarchical social structure. The concluding act of trapping the tuna is known as *la mattanza*, a term deriving from the Latin *mactare*, meaning to slaughter, immolate or honour.<sup>6</sup> Working towards the catharsis of *la mattanza* requires the team effort of scores of fishermen over a period of three months under the leadership of the *rais*, the head or chief fisherman.<sup>7</sup> He coordinates and oversees the work of the gang or crew (*ciurma*) of *tonnaroti* (the tuna fishermen). The *rais* has two 'lieutenants', *capoguardia*, with whom he may consult as regards certain decisions. They act as his confidants. Under them are the six boat captains who direct their own crews. There is also a special position for the SCUBA diver who inspects the chambers for holes that have to be repaired. He also removes fish that are entangled in the nets lest they rot.

The *rais* is the undisputed leader of the whole operation. He decides when, where and how to set and manage the tuna trap, and co-

<sup>6</sup> *Mattanza* has found its way into the Italian vernacular as a synonym for 'massacre'. The French term for *mattanza* – or, more precisely, the tuna trap – is *madrage*, in Portuguese it is *marações*, in Spanish *almadraba*. Serge Collet suggested to me that this is related to Arabic *al mazraba* and *zrb*, meaning closure.

<sup>7</sup> The term *rais* is Arabic in origin. The *mattanza* technique became popular in the ninth century during the Arab domination of Sicily (although it is possibly much older).

ordinates and oversees all subsequent activities. He is responsible for the outcome, and his position requires skill and expertise. The position of the *rais* is so coveted and prestigious that it used to be passed down from father to son through an extended apprenticeship based on obedience and experience. At one time he was also the head of the village.<sup>8</sup> On the tombstones of deceased *raises*, their honourable title holds pride of place and many islanders still remember the names of *raises* who died decades ago. At local level, they were veritable culture heroes, charismatic characters who acted as the 'brains' of the *ciurma*, something of 'an interface between God and the elements'. He was 'not a tyrant'; 'he was not giving directions, but just looked or gestured slightly to get what he wanted from his men, and all paid passionate attention in order to be successful in reading his mind.'<sup>9</sup> The *rais* was a symbol, a man who refrained from using improper language and from participating in the actual kill. Today only those who have demonstrated expertise, courage and leadership can become *rais*. He keeps his knowledge about the tuna trap setting and operation to himself, lending him a powerful yet responsible position. As *rais* Gioacchino Cataldo claims:

The work of the tuna fishery needs so much passion, so much commitment, that for six months I only get 4-5 hours of sleep a night. During the night I worry about what I'm going to do and the reasons why this or that may happen... The *Rais* has final responsibility for the *tonnara*; he has collaborators, but the final responsibility is his alone. It's more like being a farmer than a fisherman because you have to make so much effort, mental work to plan the numbers, to think of everything, and once everything is ready you must wait for the fruit of your work – the tuna (in Hope 2002).

The *rais* is a reputed and respected man, whose authority is usually unquestioned by his *ciurma*.<sup>10</sup> Although employed by the lessee

<sup>8</sup> The *rais*'s decisions also affected community life, as – up to 1968 – all activities were adjusted to his orders.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.altratrapani.it/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=238>. Last accessed August 24, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> When in the late 1960s unions gained a foothold in the *ciurma*, the acting *rais*, Salvatore Mercurio, quit (Maggio 2000:106).

of the *tonnara*, the *rais* enjoys complete autonomy in his decisions concerning the *tonnara* operations.

In April, the *rais* directs the *ciurma* to deploy the *tonnara* in the waters approximately three kilometres from the western end of the island. Preparations on the fishing nets have been made for months ahead. Before deploying the *tonnara*, a local priest blesses the boats that the fishermen have adorned with bouquets of flowers, and all the other equipment, the sea, the fish in it and the *rais* as well (Maggio 2000:97). After construction of the *tonnara* is complete, the *rais* sets into the waters near the entrance of the trap, the *bocca di nassa*, a ten-foot floating wooden cross bearing pictures of the patron saints of Favignana, a bronze statue of Saint Peter, a plume of fresh palm fronds, blessed on Palm Thursday, and a bouquet of gladioli and white lilies (Maggio 2000:145). The *rais* prays for a good catch and the men respond: 'May God make it so'. At each stage of work, the *tonnaroti* sing a series of *cialome*, propitiatory and superstitious songs of Arab origin, passed down over so many generations that the meaning of many of the words they are singing has escaped them.<sup>11</sup>

The arrival of the tuna is an event that is held in great anticipation not only by the fishermen and their families who depend on fishing as their main source of income and livelihood, but by the entire island community.<sup>12</sup> Once the trap has been set, the *tonnaroti* spend their days maintaining the nets, counting the tuna that have entered the net, and corralling them from one chamber to the next. They start work at seven in the morning when they gather outside the Camparia, the storehouse for the equipment. But after placement of the *tonnara*, most time is spent waiting for the tuna. If the tuna do not appear, the *tonnaroti* plead to various Saints in prayer. Given the

<sup>11</sup> In 1997, former *rais* Gioacchino Ernandes claimed to be the last one to really know all the songs. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 21, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> This also went for the *mattanza* in Sardinia's Portoscuso, where it was 'a true and proper ceremonial ritual made up of precise commands and gestures fixed in time and a popular festival in which the entire community participates' (<http://www.sardynianews.it/mese1/a3e.htm>. Last accessed 23 July, 2004). Stintino and Carloforte also had ritual celebrations for the arrival of tuna.

expenses involved in setting the trap, there is a lot of anxiety as to whether the tuna will show up or not. Other uncertainties include inclement weather that may prevent setting the trap on schedule, unfavourable currents and passing ships that may damage the trap. When the *rais* decides the *tonnara* is full enough with tuna, he calls for a *mattanza*, the apotheosis of the entire operation.

On the morning of the *mattanza*, the men of the *ciurma* surround the final chamber of the *tonnara* with their boats and close its gate. Each boat has a skipper who directs a crew of eight. From his small boat called the *musciara*, the *rais* directs the work of the men in the other long flat-bottomed boats (*vascelli*). From these, the tuna will be gaffed. On the *rais*'s sign, the lifting of the death chamber's tightly knitted floor net, *il coppo*, commences, bringing the tuna to the surface while the men sing in unison (cf. Maggio 2000:29-31). The lead singer or *Prima Voce* of the *ciurma* sings the verses of the traditional work songs, while the other men sing the chorus in unison: '*aja mole! aja mole*'. The chants lend rhythm to the heaving of the nets, which is done manually. The *rais* sees to it that the net is raised evenly. On his command '*Spara a tunina!*' (Spear the tuna!), the tuna are hooked with barbed gaffs (*crocchi*) and hauled into the boats by five teams of eight fishermen, accompanied by their shouting. Their screaming incites the fishermen to overcome the vitality of the tuna and expresses grief for the destiny of their prey.<sup>13</sup> Of the teams of eight that gaff and haul in the tuna, the two fishermen in the centre – the *arringatore* – hold important positions; they have to be the strongest and most experienced at gaffing the tuna.<sup>14</sup> They use the shortest gaffs, the *speta*, and are closest to the struggling tuna (Maggio 2000:104). One of the fishermen takes care of the killing of the fish by cutting two large arteries, whereupon the sea is running red with blood. The tuna die quickly. The whole procedure of lifting all the entrapped tuna aboard takes about an hour. Once caught, the tuna is no longer ad-

<sup>13</sup> The Tuna Hunt in Portoscuso.

<http://www.sardynianews.it/mese1/a3e.htm>. Last accessed May 18, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> *Arringatore* literally means 'haranguer' – referring to the shouting accompanying the operation.

dressed as *tonno* but as *tunnina*, indicating its changed status from a wild, free-roaming beast to a 'tamed' animal.

Upon lifting the last tuna aboard, the *tonnaroti* praise the Lord. If the catch has been plentiful, they sing a song of praise for the *rais* and metaphorically promise him the most beautiful girl in town as his prize (Stabile and Martorana 1999:77). The lyrics sometimes get bawdy, and the singers can even poke fun at the *rais* – the only time his authority can be freely mocked. Because a *mattanza* is the catch of an entire school of fish, dozens of tuna may be captured. It is a spectacular scene with struggling men carrying out their dangerous tasks and fish and erupting seawater turning red from the tuna's blood. A successful *mattanza* requires coordinated effort, experience, skill, strength, luck and – perhaps above all – patience. It is 'a waiting game', says *rais* Gioacchino Cataldo.<sup>15</sup> 'Tuna fishing with the *tonnara* means waiting. It requires patience and tranquillity and hope. The fisherman waits and observes the sea, which often provides surprises, even nasty ones, when you least expect it.'<sup>16</sup> 'The tuna I can catch in three months, the Japanese can catch in an hour. But they search for tuna with airplanes and helicopters, and I wait, I wait... But often, the world is too tired to wait. That's the difference.'<sup>17</sup> He compares the waiting for the tuna with the waiting for a beautiful girl: 'you feel it in your heart, no matter how long you have to wait.'<sup>18</sup>

After all entrapped tuna are taken, the *tonnaroti* jump in the bloody water in a ritual act that, according to anthropologist Serge Collet (personal communication), is symbolic for regeneration and reproduction. Hence, it is a literal blood bath. An experienced *tonnaroto*, Rocco Ponzio, said: 'For me, [the *mattanza* is] the most that life has to offer. We risk our lives killing the giant tuna. *The blood of the tuna makes me feel monstrously strong*' (quoted in Singer 1999:65,

<sup>15</sup> Transcription of interview for *Tonnara* (Hope 2002).

<sup>16</sup> *Rais* Gioacchino Cataldo to Sylvia Poggioli for *National Public Radio*, July 23, 2000 (transcript).

<sup>17</sup> Video fragment on <http://3w-production.de/Offers.asp#>, Last accessed June 27, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Cataldo in the TV documentary *Blutrausch vor Sizilien*.

italics mine, RvG). *Rais* Cataldo maintains: 'This fishing gives you goose bumps – emotions only rarely felt, in our hearts, in our blood, watching them [the *tonnaroti*] catch those huge animals, caught firstly with our intelligence, later with our strength, but not with strength alone.'<sup>19</sup> The appearance of the *mattanza* is violent, but it entails close communication between the tuna and the *tonnaroti*, who show a deep respect for the tuna and sing to them. When taking the tuna, the *tonnaroti* claim to be in harmony with nature. They say the tuna die well but they are not killed but merely taken out of the water. As *rais* Cataldo contends: 'We don't really kill, I don't like this term, I fish the tuna, I don't kill the tuna, I fish it – and the *mattanza* is the final act, after so many sacrifices.'<sup>20</sup> The spilling of blood due to the gaffing does not change this, and this is linked with the fishermen's classification of tuna as a fish not an animal:

le sang des thons est un épiphénomène qui ne peut égarer que les ignorants, la *mattanza* est bien une pêche, et les thons sont bien des poissons. Cela se résume en une phrase, d'une évidence totale pour les îliens: 'Le thon n'est pas un animal! C'est un poisson!' La catégorie "poissons" est donc expressément opposée à la catégorie des 'animaux'; et puisque la viande ne saurait provenir que des 'animaux', la chair du thon reste poisson, malgré la spectaculaire évidence du sang (Vialles 1998:147).

Blood is a powerful symbol, not just for the fishermen, but also for onlookers. Spilling it may arouse people's disgust *and* carnal fascination, as is evidenced by the number of visitors who arrive in the area just to watch this ancient rite. As one eyewitness confesses, he got sick but still shot several rolls of film: 'There's a frenzy of blood. It was bloodier than I imagined. The ritual was almost Pagan-like. Before they did this they were singing Christian songs. The ritual is part of the old Italian culture.'<sup>21</sup> The renowned marine artist, writer and researcher Richard Ellis was appalled when watching a *mattanza* on film:

The sight of sleek and graceful bluefins being gaffed is heartbreaking. One moment they are on what Cousteau called their 'honeymoon', and the next they are thrashing in a panicked mêlée as heavy steel hooks are smashed into their bodies and they are hauled ignominiously from the only element they have ever known into the one where they will die. Bluefins are among the most powerful and beautiful of the oceans' top predators, and seeing them gaffed is like watching a thoroughbred racehorse being hacked to death with an axe.<sup>22</sup>

Though some can hardly hide their disgust, the heroic man-to-animal struggle has also captured the imagination of several film and documentary makers, painters and photographers who attempt to visualise the undeniable – albeit gruesome – aesthetics of the process.

The cultural importance of the *mattanza* is indeed shown in the ancient names, songs, ceremonies, rituals, beliefs and prayers that accompany the work. It is a source of pride, a referent of identity and an activity shrouded in religious attention. As we have already seen, religious worship accompanies all stages of the *tonnara* operation, making it not only a focal point of local economic, social and cultural life, but also of spiritual life. The first tuna caught is offered to the Madonna. An outdoor altar construction of the Virgin Mary holding a tuna in her lap is facing the sea. Women gather daily at this Madonna of the Tonnaroti to pray for the success of the *mattanza* (Singer 1999:64). The *tonnaroti* revere the Madonna del Rosario in the church of Sant' Anna. During the tuna season the *mattanza* is repeated as many times as the *rais* deems necessary, depending on the quantity of tuna entering the trap. The *tonnara* season ends in the course of June, if possible by the feast day of St. Anthony on 13 June. Following the season there is still much work in deconstructing, repairing and storing the nets, floats and anchors, which may last another month or so. Most *tonnaroti* then take up other jobs until the next spring, usually as fishermen. But the reproduction of the *mattanza* ritual is presently in peril.

<sup>19</sup> Transcription of interview for *Tonnara* (Hope 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Transcription of interview for *Tonnara* (Hope 2002).

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.europetheeasyway.com/Article.htm>. Last accessed May 18, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Ellis, R. (2003) 'Mediterranean Massacre', Ecologist Online, [http://www.theecologist.org/archive\\_detail.asp?content\\_id=422](http://www.theecologist.org/archive_detail.asp?content_id=422), Last accessed July 6, 2005.

Over the past few decades, Favignana tuna yields have been declining more and more, first amounting to hundreds instead of thousands and then to dozens rather than hundreds of specimens. The tuna that were still caught were usually smaller in size than they used to be, and required four men for the medium-sized tuna and two men for the smaller ones to gaff and lift aboard. The Favignana tuna fishermen thus faced the consequences of the intensified tuna hunts to which I have alluded above. With catches declining, it has become harder and harder to get returns on investments. Given the slowness of the operation, the traditional equipment and the meagre catches, the costs of labour are prohibitively high. The *ciurma* work force has been reduced from hundred men to eighty, then to sixty-three and now to fifty. In the second half of the 1980s, there were still some good catches and the Japanese paid handsome prices for tuna. A new *rais*, Salvatore Spataro, could convince the lessee of the *tonnara*, Franco Castiglione, to invest in new nylon nets (the old ones were made of sisal and coconut fibre), plastic floats, new cables and chains and steel boats. In part, the new equipment enabled working with fewer men. For example, wooden boats and sisal nets had to be repaired and maintained during the winter – work that was done by ten to twelve men, and nets of natural fibres had to be pulled by more men than nylon ones. The modernisation was not to the liking of all. In wryly contemplating the end of the *mattanza*, former *rais* Gioacchino Ernandes said: 'The fishermen today don't feel love for their work, for the *Mattanza*. Before it was a cultural fact, it was a tradition. But it was also an "amusement", even if the work was done by hand. Now everything is mechanized. I think the *Tonnara* will not continue much longer' (quoted in Singer 1999:65). At that time, the *tonnaroti* earned about US\$ 3,50 a day during the three-month season, plus a bonus of 30 cents per fish landed and extras if they were boat captains. There were already negotiations to obtain subsidies from the regional government to maintain the *tonnara* as cultural heritage. In 1996, Castiglione decided to call it a day and took the modern equipment he owned with him to his Bonagía *tonnara*. The Favignana *tonnaroti* feared for their livelihoods and proposed to *rais* Spataro to lease the rights themselves. He refused and a conflict was

born. Spataro sided with Castiglione to become Bonagía's *rais*. The men went ahead without him. To keep the *mattanza* alive, the *tonnaroti* formed a cooperative (*Cooperativa La Mattanza*) in 1997. They leased the *tonnara* directly from its owner, Luigi Parodi, splitting the profits while they became financially responsible. Many put in their own savings to continue the tradition. With the help of veteran fishermen and an old *rais*, they restored the nets and wooden boats that had been sitting idly in the Camparia for a long time. They elected a new *rais* and head of the cooperative, Gioacchino Cataldo, an experienced *tonnaroto* who was educated by *rais* Gioacchino Hernandes. Cataldo became a tireless promoter of the *tonnara*'s interests. But when all expenses were paid for, little was left to pay for the men's wages. Many experienced men began to leave to find more secure jobs. Inexperienced youngsters took their places. They lacked the knowledge and skills required to make the operation a success. Says Nati, one of the boat captains: 'All these young kids are coming in because they have nothing else to do. They take it like a summer job, it all ends there – there is no desire to learn how to continue – so I don't see a future – we'll see the end of this tradition – unfortunately.'<sup>23</sup> Despite subsidies from the nation, provincial and local governments, the cooperative remained in debt. There was 'great disquiet and anxiety as to the future of Favignana' (Singer 1999:65) and dissension concerning the role and management of the cooperative, as well. The *tonnaroti* were desperately looking for options to get out of their dire straits.

Somewhat surprisingly, the *mattanza* tradition has not met with widespread (international) opposition by animal right activists, environmentalist movements or the public at large. As we have seen, the tuna are under serious threat of depletion. In addition, they are gaffed in public view and the killing involves close contact between man and animal in a bloody frenzy. This could easily attract media attention and in its wake public outcries of disgust. But news reports usually paint a favourable picture of the event, emphasising man's fight with nature and the antiquity of the accompanying rituals. The tuna kill is said to be cruel yet does not arouse much protest. Perhaps

<sup>23</sup> Transcription of interview for *Tonnara* (Hope 2002).



the fact that the *tonnara* equipment involves the use of small-scale boats, nets, anchors and gaffs explains the lack of resistance against the *mattanza*. Its appearance is traditional and artisanal. In addition, this type of fishery has been on the wane for a long time now. The bloody and dramatic spectacle has only sparked a very limited amount of protests, even though it is often described as being rather cruel.<sup>24</sup> Onlookers can easily observe the ritual, but this in itself has not given rise to contestation on their part or from journalists. If anything, they seem to consider bloodshed part of its 'authenticity'. Indeed, the *mattanza* did and does attract onlookers from without and this no doubt has played a role in strengthening the identity of the Favignana islanders and their pride in the tuna kill.

In many cases, traditions may be commodified (converted into currency) when enacted as a tourist performance, but some outsiders are likely to claim that by doing so they have lost their authenticity. To some extent, this has been the case with respect to the *mattanza*. To earn extra income, the *tonnaroti* decided in 2001 that tourists could buy tickets to watch the *mattanza* from boats at a rate of US\$ 20 to 25 per person. They desperately needed the additional revenues. As one tuna fisherman said: 'for the tourists we represent mythical characters' (quoted in Singer 1999:65). They were well aware that staging the performance of the tuna killing ritual would almost certainly attract tourists, although the *tonnaroti* insisted that it still is work (Vialles 1998:147). But the owner of the vessels, Parodi, cancelled the selling of tickets as he feared there would be problems over insurances. Only later, paying tourists were taken on private boats to watch the spectacle.

Ironically, this commoditisation of the ritual not only sparked controversy but also evoked resistance from without.<sup>25</sup> In a news re-

<sup>24</sup> 'La mattanza è una pratica barbara' (the *mattanza* is a barbaric practice), says one commentator in an exchange about the *mattanza* in an e-mail discussion list. <http://forums.about.com/ab-italian/messages?lgnF=y&msg=2679.3>. Last accessed July 22, 2004.

<sup>25</sup> For a brief period, there were two tuna fishery cooperatives that were vying for the quotas allocated by the Italian state. In addition to 'La Mattanza', Parodi established 'Ceripesi' (Centro Ricerche Pesca Sicilia). The two were united after negotiations with the Italian fishermen's association.

port on Favignana's *mattanza*, the Italy Daily website quotes Ennio Bonfanti of the Sicilian branch of the Lega Anti Vivisezione, who maintains: 'This exists only as a bloody performance for tourists. It's no longer something done for survival or even economic motives. They're not real fishermen. They're entertainers. It's like bull-fighting. Nothing more than a barbaric spectacle of cruelty.'<sup>26</sup> In a short article, Anna Mannunci also critiques the practice and the paying onlookers:

In the past, the slaughter was watched by many people and was called a 'ritual' to make it sound a nobler, culture-specific – and therefore more acceptable – phenomenon. But the idea of selling tickets for the massacre upset public opinion, and animal rights groups in particular. So much so that it came to nothing in the end. Killing animals, whether cows, chickens, trout, tuna, or anything else, is considered legitimate if it is driven by necessity. Eating animals is considered necessary for survival and for the financial wellbeing of those who earn money from the death of these animals. Killing them in a visibly, publicly, bloodthirsty way like the fishermen of Favignana is somewhat less generally acceptable but in this case, as in many other similar cases, the ideology of tradition comes to the rescue, excusing even the most repugnant practices. For those who watch the 'ritual' slaughter, there are justifications: tradition, obviously, and then culture, popular and local customs, which are more fashionable than ever in these times of globalization, and so on. Such arguments serve to free those who enjoy the spectacle of this cruel killing from any feelings of guilt. 'I'm not here because I'm a sadist but for cultural, and even democratic, reasons', spectators might tell themselves. But paying for the privilege, with ticket stubs, taxes and all the rest, secularizes the event, calling into question the symbolic and rhetorical constructs that legitimize the pleasure of watching an animal's death. Enjoyment thus excites outrage.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> [http://www.italydaily.it/Italian\\_life/Features/febbraio/mattanza.shtml](http://www.italydaily.it/Italian_life/Features/febbraio/mattanza.shtml). Last accessed August 18, 2004. A German Greenpeace activist describes the Favignana *tonnaroti* as 'primitive people' (letter to the editor, *Stern*, August 3, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Mannunci, A. (2002) 'Ritual slaughter'. [http://www.slowfood.com/img\\_sito/riviste/slow/EN/29/macelli.html](http://www.slowfood.com/img_sito/riviste/slow/EN/29/macelli.html). Last accessed May 18, 2005.

Thus, its transformation into a 'bloodthirsty' tourist spectacle has brought about some resistance against the *mattanza*, in that animal right advocates now liken it to bullfighting and call it 'a bloody performance for tourists'.<sup>28</sup> They argue that the tuna killing ritual has lost its economic functions and should be abandoned. In their view, the tradition has become 'outmoded' and should be discontinued.

The *tonnaroti* contest this view and point out that the *mattanza* is not about putting up a show but about a way of life that has ancient roots and a deep symbolic meaning. *Rais* Cataldo counters: 'We don't do this to put on a show. This is fishing.'<sup>29</sup> He does not regard it as a 'blood spectacle'. 'I don't catch tuna for fun; I catch tuna for food, for my livelihood.'<sup>30</sup> 'There's blood, but it's not a show of blood. It's about a way of fishing, which has gone on for the last 900 years.'<sup>31</sup> Nor does he wish any harm to the tuna, on which his entire existence depends.<sup>32</sup> 'What does fish mean? It means life. Fish is my life.'<sup>33</sup> When he was not a *rais* yet, Cataldo had already confided to Theresa Maggio (2001:18) that not the *mattanza* was barbaric, but the raising, feeding and fattening of calves to slaughter them. Likewise, experienced *tonnarote* Clemente Ventrone states that 'there is a lot of discussion and dissension about *la mattanza*, it looks like a cruel spectacle' but it is indiscriminate commercial tuna fishing that is destructive.<sup>34</sup> Hence, the *tonnarati* attempt to legitimise their actions by emphasising its economic and traditional importance and they

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,3-989891,00.html>. Last accessed March 21, 2005.

<sup>29</sup> [http://www.italydaily.it/Italian\\_life/Features/febbraio/mattanza.shtml](http://www.italydaily.it/Italian_life/Features/febbraio/mattanza.shtml). Last accessed August 18, 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Video fragment on <http://3w-production.de/Offers.asp#>, Last accessed June 27, 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Transcription of interview for *Tonnara* (Hope 2002).

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.taz.de/pt/2002/05/04/a0190.nf/text>. Last accessed March 21, 2005. By the way, Cataldo is involved in the Slow Food movement.

<sup>33</sup> Video fragment on <http://3w-production.de/Offers.asp#>, Last accessed June 27, 2005.

<sup>34</sup> [http://www.mareinitaly.it/intervista\\_v.php?id=85](http://www.mareinitaly.it/intervista_v.php?id=85). Last accessed October 4, 2004.

believe that their customary practices lend the right to continuity. To them, the *mattanza* is not 'staged authenticity' (MacCannel 1973) – it is 'work, ritual, religion and finally identity for Favignana' (Singer 1999:63). Nonetheless, its meaning has certainly changed:

Although almost everything regarding this fishing technique and its instruments has remained unchanged from the Middle Ages up to today, one can't say the same about nowadays tonnare's inner sense and importance and about their protagonists. What once was a means of exploitation of a rich fish patrimony, what was a technique handed down with pride and respect, and the surviving source of entire communities – that seemed endless – has now turned into something different. It now mixes various aspects in contrast: tourist interest, obstinate will of keeping a tradition alive, make-shift jobs for unemployed and first temporary jobs for young people in a social context so poor of prospects.<sup>35</sup>

The turn to performing the tuna ritual for tourists was to no avail. In 2003 and 2004, no bluefin tuna were caught as a consequence of a complete dearth of the fish. The failure to catch tuna with the traditional method of the *tonnara* is generally attributed to the use of modern fishing techniques by industrial fleets, mainly the Japanese and Korean. In addition, the recent boom of offshore tuna ranches, where small tuna – that have been caught long before completing their migration routes in the Mediterranean – are fattened and then killed, frozen and marketed, has wreaked havoc. Consequently, *la mattanza* is presently a dying tradition. The fishermen are acutely aware of this fact. In a recent interview, *rais* Gioacchino Cataldo said: 'Maybe it's not over completely.... And maybe it is. Either way, this beautiful life has turned ugly' (Rosenblum 2004). The *tonnaroti*'s future looks bleak: 'Once celebrated as valiant holdouts of an ancient way of life, these men now survive on odd jobs and hang around the wharf exchanging tales of the good old days' (ibid.). It looks as if the Favignana *tonnara* and its *mattanza* ritual will end up like so many other Mediterranean tuna trap fisheries: relegated to the decontextualised realm of folklore and museums. In the 2005 season,

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.oltremarephoto.com/pages/tonnara.html>. Last accessed March 21, 2005.

the *mattanza* was performed as a 'living museum' to revive its history and emotions for tourists only. The cooperative organised the event twice, on May 19 and June 5. The *rais* and the *tonnaroti* performed the traditional customs in traditional costumes and sang the traditional *cialome* songs. Also, earlier plans to transform the *tonnara* establishment into a museum would seem to have become more concrete than previously. The cooperative simply cannot afford the hundreds of thousands of euros that deploying the *tonnara* for its original economic purpose would require. The folkloristic feat would seem to have turned into a means of survival. Come May, the Favignanesi will henceforth anxiously await tourists not tuna.

### Conclusions

The ancient ritual of the *mattanza* is perceived as an act that lends the Favignana islanders authenticity, a singular way of life on the verge of disappearing. However, since the survival of the tradition has become increasingly dependent on extra income furnished by spectators who pay to observe the spectacle, some resistance has been launched against the *tonnaroti* for putting up a 'show' that has little to do with an 'authentic' tradition. But in the sense that any culture, identity or tradition is to some extent constructed, reconstructed, invented or reinvented, it is impossible to argue that there is such a thing as an 'authentic' culture, identity or tradition (Turney 1999:424) – at least if we take authenticity to mean something genuine, uncorrupted, pristine, untouched (Handler 1986:2). Such a mistaken perception sees authenticity as fixed essence, persistent over time. However, 'an authentic experience ... is one in which individuals feel themselves to be in touch both with a "real" world and with their "real" selves' (Handler and Saxton 1988:243). This is certainly so in the case of the tuna killing ritual. Enacting it makes the *tonnaroti* aware of who they are, regardless of whether it lives up in all respects to the way in which it has been done previously. The *mattanza* tradition is about economic, social and cultural continuity, which is not necessarily repetitive but dynamic: 'any community's ability to persist, to innovate, to change on its own terms, is relative to structural power'. This is a matter 'of politics, not of essence, and thus subject to contestation and change' (Clifford 2004). Though

'roots' may be located in the past, they often continue to produce powerful cultural forms that are important in the arena of identity politics (Briggs 1996:440).

The *mattanza* 'has ancient roots, belongs to our traditions, our history', claims Clemente Ventrone.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, for the Favignanesi performing the *mattanza* is an important referent and a marker of local identity. Without it, they will not be the same. They themselves are acutely aware of this fact and it is for this reason that they tenaciously attempt to hold on to their tradition against the odds of resource depletion and protest. However, before any real clash between the preservers of tradition and the protagonists of animal rights could occur, the *mattanza* appears to have succumbed to the reckless forces of industrial fishing. 'What was once a source of pride (not to mention income) for entire communities has now turned into a tourist attraction, providing a few makeshift jobs. The practice is only kept alive by the obstinate will of the remaining *tonnaroti*', writes Richard Ellis.<sup>37</sup> Whether in 'authentic' form or in transformed guise, the *mattanza* is ill fated, doomed to be relegated a place in the realm of museums and folklore as has already happened elsewhere in the Mediterranean. The *tonnara* would then only function as a key symbol of a local culture's discontinued tradition. The symbolic power of blood is quintessential to the ritual, for the *tonnaroti*, tourists and animal rights campaigners alike, although the meaning they ascribe to it obviously varies. With its very core – the man-to-animal struggle and the spilling of animal blood – taken away, the *mattanza* would merely be a folkloristic performance no longer an enactment of a way of existence with deep emotional and existential content.

<sup>36</sup> [http://www.mareinitaly.it/intervista\\_v.php?id=85](http://www.mareinitaly.it/intervista_v.php?id=85). Last accessed October 4, 2004.

<sup>37</sup> Ellis, R. (2003) 'Mediterranean Massacre', Ecologist Online, [http://www.theecologist.org/archive\\_detail.asp?content\\_id=422](http://www.theecologist.org/archive_detail.asp?content_id=422), Last accessed July 6, 2005. Ecologist Online Ecologist Online, [http://www.theecologist.org/archive\\_detail.asp?content\\_id=422](http://www.theecologist.org/archive_detail.asp?content_id=422) Ecologist Online, [http://www.theecologist.org/archive\\_detail.asp?content\\_id=422](http://www.theecologist.org/archive_detail.asp?content_id=422) Ecologist Online, [http://www.theecologist.org/archive\\_detail.asp?content\\_id=422](http://www.theecologist.org/archive_detail.asp?content_id=422).

## Acknowledgments

I should like to thank anthropologist Serge Collet, who conducted research on Favignana between 1985 and 1987 and generously shared his knowledge of the *mattanza* with me. He also translated several documents in Italian. I am also grateful to David J. Hope, who provided transcriptions of the interviews conducted for his documentary *Tonnara* (2002).

## References

- BLOCK B. A. *et al.* 2001, *Migratory Movements, Depth Preferences, and Thermal Biology of Atlantic Bluefin Tuna*, Science Magazine 293, pp. 1310-1314.
- BRIGGS C. L. 1996, *The Politics of Discursive Authority in Research on the 'Invention of Tradition'*, Cultural Anthropology 11, pp. 435-469.
- CLIFFORD J. 2004, *Traditional Futures*, In: M.S. PHILLIPS and G. SCHOCHET (eds.), *Questions of Traditions*. Toronto (forthcoming).
- COLLET S. 1987, *Le baron et le poisson. Féodalité et droit de la mer en Europe occidentale*, Droit et cultures 13, pp. 25-49.
- HANDLER R. 1986, *Authenticity*, Anthropology Today 2, pp. 2-4.
- HANDLER R. and W. SAXTON 1988, *Dyssimulation: Reflexivity, Narrative, and the Quest for Authenticity in 'Living History'*, Cultural Anthropology 3, pp. 242-260.
- HOPE D. J. (dir.) 2002, *Tonnara*. Documentary. Cirrus films.
- MACCANNEL D. (1973) *Staged Authenticity. Arrangements of Social Space in Tourism Settings*, American Journal of Sociology 79, pp. 589-603.
- MAGGIO T. 2000, *Mattanza. Love and Death in the Sea of Sicily*. Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus Publishers.
- PITCHER T. J. 2001, *Fisheries Managed to Rebuild Ecosystems? Reconstructing the Past to Salvage the Future*, Ecological Applications 11, pp. 601-617.
- RAVAZZA N. 1999, *L'ultima muciara. Storia della tonnara di Bonagia*. Trapani: Maurici.

RAVIER C. and J-M. FROMENTIN (2001) *Long-Term Fluctuations in the Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean Bluefin Tuna Population*, ICES Journal of Marine Science 58, pp. 1299-1317

ROESTI R. M. 1966, *The Declining Economic Role of the Mediterranean Tuna Fishery*, American Journal of Economics and Sociology 25, pp. 77-90.

ROSENBLUM M. 2004, *World Appetite for Tuna Threatens Supply*. Associated Press report, 19 July, 2004.

SINGER P. (dir.) 1997, *L'Ultima Tonnara-Mattanza?* Documentary. Traditional Healing Productions.

SINGER P. 1999, *The Tonnara – Mattanza and Cultural Identity in Favignana*, Insula: International Journal of Island Affairs 8, pp. 63-67.

STABILE A. and G. MARTORANA 1999, *Seeschlacht*, Merian 52, pp. 68-77.

TURNERY L. 1999, *Ceci n'est pas Jimmie Durham*, Critique of Anthropology 19, pp. 423-442.

VIALLES N. 1994, *Animal to Edible*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

VIALLES N. 1998, *Toute chair n'est pas viande*, Etudes rurales 147/148, pp. 139-149.