

Mediterranean Islands: A Concept

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ABSTRACT

This article represents some of the results of my fieldwork and research on the islands of Sardinia, Corsica, Malta, Sicily, Crete and Susak between the years 1962–1986. My main field-work in Sardinia was supported by the Social Science Research Council, London and the University of Reading / Berks, and the ones in Corsica, Malta and Sardinia by the Department of Ethnology, University of Cologne (Institut für Völkerkunde, Universität Köln) forming a part of a project on the Mediterranean of which I was in charge. The above research was also related to my M.A. Course on »Mediterranean Peasant Societies and Social Structures« taught at the Graduate School of European and International Studies, University of Reading between 1978–1994. The main purpose of the article is to demonstrate the role of the islands in the Mediterranean, especially their ability in preserving their identity in spite of many incursions from outside. Islands became symbolized by their systems of values, and the ability to survive any attempt of conquest or change. In this the islands received a great help in the environment which helped these islands to remain unique and isolated until the present day.

Before discussing Mediterranean islands, what they are and what they represent in relation to the Mediterranean as a whole, a few general comments should be made. The Mediterranean shows a unique relationship between different cultures and their physical, political and economic environment. All this is linked by the sea, which is conveniently situated between two mainlands and three continents. However, this maritime relationship is uneven, making the study of the Mediterranean World, already existing

for 5000 years, a rather involved and difficult undertaking. This is even more so as the Mediterranean has been not only a connecting link between its different parts, including the islands, but also a barrier. This barrier disappeared, at least in part, during the Roman period which for the first time gained complete control of the Mediterranean, and then reappeared later when parts of the Mediterranean came under regional control of powers like Byzantium, Venice, Spain or the Ottomans. This naturally applies to the

islands, which shared their destiny under different conquerors who have never succeeded in destroying the cultural heritage and identity of the islanders¹⁻⁵. (For the Mediterranean in general see: King et al. (1997), Braudel (1997), Le Lannou (1973) and Lopašić (1994); for the islands see: Lopašić (1994/95) and Polyglott (1986/87).

Another important, perhaps even striking, element of the Mediterranean in general, and the Mediterranean islands in particular, is the organization of *space*. It is this organization of space which French anthropogeographer Maurice Le Lannou describes as a »Cruel portrait of the Mediterranean«. He refers to a number of confrontations which are observable and visible in different parts of the Mediterranean orbit. There is a considerable contrast between ease of approach and difficulty of penetration, writes Le Lannou⁶ (1967, p. 161), and the presence of these two oppositions had far-reaching consequences which are particularly visible on accessible coastal areas but not so noticeable among inaccessible archaic and conservative societies in the interior. Observable major opposition and separation exists between land inhabitants and seafarers, the sedentary population and the shepherds. The dichotomous styles of pastoral and nomadic life have made the Mediterranean a place of permanent confrontation.

This is precisely the confrontation, which is easily observed on the island of Sardinia – where Le Lannou worked in the 30's. The peasants inhabit the few plains, particularly the one of Campidano, and the shepherds the mountains⁷.

Here is a classic example of confrontation between two ways of life existing since the Middle Ages. During the Roman period, the Romans controlled the coast and created a few sedentary centers which were mostly abandoned after the Romans left. This confrontation between peasants and shepherds meant also a dif-

ferent organization of space as large parts of the island became pastoral serving needs of the most important part of the population. Even today it is Sardinia, which has the largest number of sheep in Italy, about 4 million. At the same time we have the development of two types of society: one static and sedentary, the peasants, closely tied to their piece of land which has been inherited through generations of ancestors, and the other, mobile and nomadic, represented by shepherds roaming the island in search of better pastures. In Sardinia it was the shepherds who gained control, but in most of the Mediterranean it was the agriculturists and the peasantry who gained the upper hand. It was, after all, the Roman Empire which became, in due course, a peasant civilization⁸.

Another part of the Mediterranean where a pastoral way of life prevailed was *Spain*, where the confrontation between sedentary peasantry with their sophisticated irrigation system, and the mobile shepherds was related to the division between Muslim Spain in the South and the Christian area in the North. As Christian Spain became victorious through »Reconquista«, shepherds enjoyed a number of privileges and the unique organization of the shepherds, the »Mesta«, provided the most Catholic Majesties of Spain with an impressive income⁹.

As a good contrast to Sardinia and indeed to Spain, we have another island, South of Sardinia, namely Sicily, which became the granary of the Roman Empire through the elaborate system of *Latifundias*. It remained so until cheaper imports from America made the position difficult and forced a large number of Sicilian peasants to emigrate.

Sicily, too, is an island of contrasts and confrontations. It is a paradise for a few months in the year; the island becomes green, with blossoming almond groves, ripening oranges, maturing grain

and melons, but this is followed by droughts, burning heat and gaping dried soil, a real hell. A true balance on this island does not exist neither for nature nor Man. Sicilians, like their northern neighbors, the Sards, emphasize their insularity, their Sicilianità or Sardità, opposition and separation from the Italian Continent, and their definitive way of life. Through a strange quirk of history they became part of the Italian state, but they never lost their own identity.

As a consequence of that two types of economy *developed*, one producing olives, fruits and wine, for which the Mediterranean became famous, and the other cheese, milk and meat, traditionally the main products of the shepherds. These two original confrontations based on the way of life and the economy can be observed further in the conflict between the *sea* and the *islands*. The sea, generally speaking, is supposed to bring trade and the exchange of ideas. In the Mediterranean, the islands, very often mountainous, became the *refuge* of island populations which avoided contact with outside powers seeking to conquer the islands and enforce them to accept a new way of life and even more emphatically a new value system. Thus the mountains became a real *refugium gentium*, to paraphrase the original term *colluvium gentium* used by the German Anthropologist Mühlmann, with reference to the Balkans, as a safe hiding place for different ethnic or religious minorities there. In this way the islanders tried to preserve their identity by avoiding the sea, sea voyages, and the coast. These became symbols of negative forces, not only bringing commerce, material advantages and new ideas but also causing the effects of conquest, notably servitude to outside powers. In this way the sea became a symbol of rejection. One aspect which demonstrates this clearly was the role of *fishing* which on both islands was very limited.

Traditionally the fishermen on Sardinia were not Sards but immigrants from other areas. For instance, the inhabitants of the island of San Pietro, off the Southern coast of Sardinia, were from Liguria and were settled there in the 18th century by the ruler of Piedmont-Sardinia Carlo Emanuel III who moved them there from their original island of Tabarca off the Tunisian coast. There they were originally coral fishermen, but got into trouble with the Bey of Tunisia who wanted to control them. The coral fishermen from Golfo di Arancio on the Eastern coast came from the island of Ponza in the Bay of Naples, and those from Alghero on the NW, coast were Catalans, the most reputable seafarers of Spain; they had used their sailing skills across the Mediterranean for many centuries. Fishing fleets in the rich Sard waters are often Neapolitan or Sicilian and not composed of local Sard fishermen. Even the fish names are Italian.

In Corsica before 1914 only 1,112 Corsicans were involved in fishing and in 1925 there were only 1,098. Fishermen in the capital Ajaccio were of either Neapolitan or Genoese origin. In the Corsican fishing village, of Cargese, only 10 fishermen remained. The village was originally inhabited by Greek fishermen who fled before the Ottomans in the 18th century.

As in Sard, all fish names are of Italian origin and there are only two associated Corsican words, namely 'fish' and 'trout', which is a river fish¹⁰.

The social values of these two communities were based on the local area with its closed *societies*, real in-groups, often not collaborating, just co-existing. It was the individualism of the mobile shepherd community which prevailed, as the strong communal feeling of large villages did not exist. Communities were organized on the basis of trying to bring together the interests of a number of highly individualistic shepherds with the interests of the

village community. The totality of such communities represented the society of Sardinia or Corsica versus the rest of the world. The villages were not only separated from each other, they were also separated from the *coast*, which in the old days was inhospitable and full of swamps until efforts to eradicate the malaria prevailed in the region. This was attempted between the two World Wars, especially after World War II, when, with American help through the DDT Campaign and UNRRA, malaria disappeared, changing the image of the coast. In the old days, the coastal areas were also attacked by pirates, often coming from the Barbary coast (North Africa). In that period the coasts were deserted and the local population lived safely in isolated villages in the interior of the island.

In this way the islands succeeded in preserving their traditional way of life, the autonomy of their villages, their local customs, local dialect and poetry as well as their history collected by local historian and ethnographers who kept it for posterity and, in this way, guaranteed its continuity for many centuries to come. Some of these local communities preserved their local identity for hundreds of years in spite of nominally belonging to one of the regional powers like Genoa, Venice, Spain, the Ottoman and Roman empires.

Such isolated villages and islands made inbreeding in such areas possible, bringing the consequence of *genetic diseases*. In connection with this I would like to mention the case of the small island on the Croatian Littoral, called Susak. In the Italian period it was known as San Siego and on that Island a study of genetic diseases was undertaken in the 50's by the Department of Psychiatry and Neurology of the University of Zagreb. I participated in one of these undertakings in 1955, when I accompanied my father, Prof. R. Lopašić, head of the Department,

and two of his collaborators. Susak is a small and very isolated island of 6,3 km², having 1440 inhabitants in that year. The island is also known for its archaic dialect, its costume resembling the Greek Fustanella and ancient marriage customs. The reasons for the study were related to isolation and possible mental retardation.

This study in 1955 produced 129 cases considered to be related to oligophrenia (mental retardation). Out of this there were 57 cases of imbecility, debility and idiocy, 33 cases of dementia senilis and schizophrenia, 13 cases of other psychopathic illnesses, and, interestingly enough, only one case of chronic alcoholism, even though the island has large vineyards and is known for its red wine. This compares with, for example, Sardinia, where my own research demonstrated a low level of alcoholism, so-called »picolo alcoolismo«. This is related to individual cases; the majority of people drink wine either mixed with water or as part of a meal. The only drunkards were sailors in large ports, mostly non-Italians. The Susak study with 9,2% cases of oligophrenia in the total population was considered a higher percentage than that of the mainland population. Inbreeding was high, and islanders recognized only first cousins as real blood relatives¹¹.

The idea of preservation of self-identity is also related to the *political sphere*; islanders try to develop their own political movement or party in order to protect and support the political interests of their community.

In Sardinia we have a rather late political development which is related to the 1st World War when Sardis fought on mainland Italy as part of the specially created Brigatta Sassari and former soldiers, after returning from the war with many high decorations, created the Sardinist party (Partito Sardo d'Azione). It was a party with some socialist ideas which propagated extensive autonomy for the

island. It proved of short duration because of the growth of Fascism in 1923 and the eventual ban on all political parties. The Partito d'Azione reappeared after 1943 with the fall of Fascism, but lost its momentum because of a series of political changes in post-war Italy when Sardinia received considerable political autonomy and a degree of local government. However, the Sardist movement was able to preserve some influence in the central part of the island which was always considered to be the most traditional and conservative^{10,12}.

The political development of *Corsica* is unique as it is connected with the personality of Napoleon who originated from one of the leading political families of the island which preserved until the end the Corsican identity and language and introduced some laws which are still benefiting the island. Napoleon created a permanent link between the island and France and Corsicans entered the politics of the mainland. The only comparable example from the Mediterranean is Eleutherios Venizelos, possibly the most important figure in modern Greek history, who came from Crete.

Certainly in Corsica Napoleon remained a cult and a legend. A very important development took place between 1780 and 1880 when the Corsican population doubled forcing a major move to the few existing towns like Ajaccio, Calvi or Bastia, or migration to the French mainland. Corsicans settled mostly in the South of France, particularly in Marseilles, and became minor officials or soldiers either in France or French North Africa. A number of Corsicans became in due course Colons or Pieds-Noires who, after the end of the French rule in North Africa, would move in large numbers to Corsica. The new political history of Corsica had already started in 1943 when Corsica became the first Department of Metropolitan France liberated by the Free French.

This brought Corsicans political advantages and some Corsicans became members of the French cabinet from that time on. Particularly important developments took place after 1962 when 17,000 Pieds-Noire from Algeria settled down in Corsica and started to improve the wine-production which they knew from North Africa as well as tourism which, until then, had had only limited importance. This development of tourism and the building of a number of hotels was generously helped by the French government, which felt a certain obligation toward people who were obliged to abandon their long-standing properties in North Africa. Ten years later, Corsica could pride herself, on having more than 300 hotels and accommodation for 14,000 visitors, as well as number of camping sites. Standards of living on the island increased considerably but, at the same time, contributed toward anti-French feelings and the revival of the Corsican autonomous movement which led to tensions, bomb-attacks, even assassinations. This resulted in the introduction of a special status for Corsica in 1981 and the first elections of an autonomous Corsica a year later. The presence of Pieds-Noires created tensions and difficulties after 1962 but this led eventually to new social and political changes which are still in process of development^{12,13}.

The political development of *Sicily* is much more complicated because of a turbulent history due to which Sicily had many changes of rulers, all of whom left some important signs. Major changes and reorganization of space took place in the period of Arab rule between 8th–11th century. These included the introduction of a number of Near Eastern plants like lemons, rice and cotton. Fishing became modeled on fishing in Tunisia, which resulted in the inclusion of a specialized fishermen's vocabulary of a few hundred words of Arabic origin. Still today, agriculture

remains the most important branch of the economy, supported by the fertile soil, wet and mild winters and dry summers. It was the Common Market which encouraged the efficient cultivation of artichokes, aubergines and other vegetables and helped their distribution in the countries of the European Union. In this way Sicily, unlike Sardinia and Corsica, remained the center of agriculture and horticulture. This large scale agriculture based on the system of »Latifundia« had far-reaching consequences for the political system of the island. Sicily was administered from far away, from Madrid, Naples or Rome, but the real masters of the island were large landlords situated particularly in the center and Western part of the island. Here they ruled with absolute power surrounded by armed bodyguards who controlled the local peasantry and organized the manpower which was often in surplus. This surplus of manpower was forced to emigrate, creating a serious weakness in the island's social and economic structure. At the end of the 18th century, many of these large landowners moved to Palermo, Naples and other large cities, leasing their lands to »Gabelotti« (large tenants) who rented it further to small tenants. When feudalism was abolished in 1812, »Gabelotti« bought most of the land and became the »new agrarian-bourgeoisie« with total control of their property. Their power increased further in 1860, when a united Italy confiscated the large properties of the church and offered them for sale. Until then, the traditional peasantry had collective rights and ownership of communal property. All this was taken from them making their position very weak, forcing them to emigrate or rebel, as for instance, in the well-known »Fasci dei Lavoratori« in 1893 and 1894. On this occasion the rebellion was suppressed with the help of the new landlords who also participated in the new political system

and elections. This is the background of the Mafia which gained social and political control of the island. The Mafia, according to Henner Hess, one of the experts on the subject, is much more a method or behavior pattern to control the struggle for land and its crops, the application of violence in social conflicts, as well as economic privileges and influence on political and bureaucratic institutions¹⁴.

The Mafia is also an expression of Sicilianita, supporting the insularity and political autonomy of the island against outside powers, irrespective of their origin (Spain, the kingdom of two Sicilies or the united Italy after 1860). It was Sicily which had received her autonomous status in 1946, being the first Italian region to do so. The attempt to gain political independence, which started in 1943, after the Allied landing, received the full support of Mafia leaders and some American politicians who were afraid of Communist domination of the Italian state. This struggle only ended with the assassination of Salvatore Giuliani, a Sicilian outlaw and nominal leader of the Independence movement, in the summer of 1950. To-day Sicily has its own parliament and government and a large bureaucracy bringing together the extreme right and extreme left while fighting for Sicilian autonomy within the Italian state¹⁵.

Perhaps nobody has expressed this Sicilianita better than one of the great Sicilian writers, Giuseppe di Lampedusa, in his masterpiece, »Il Gattopardo«, when his main protagonist, the Prince of Salina, defines Sicily and the Sicilians as follows: »Sicily is characterized by violence of landscape, cruelty of climate and continual tension in everything. All those rulers from outside who landed on Sicilian shores were, at the beginning obeyed, than detested and always misunderstood. All this has formed the Sicilian character which was influenced by both, the events from outside

out of their control as well as terrifying insularity of their way of thinking.«

The last of the Mediterranean islands whose political history should be mentioned is Crete, most easterly of the islands discussed. It is the largest of the Greek islands, playing a most prominent and important role. Already in 3,000 BC Crete was the center of a flourishing civilization, called after the mythical king Minos, son of the Greek god Zeus and Europe, the ancestress of the European continent. Like her Western co-islands, Sardinia and Corsica, Crete has a very mountainous terrain, and is dominated by it. Between the mountain ranges there are a number of upland plains enclosed by a ring of these mountains. The climate is mild and favorable enabling olives, grapes and numerous fruits including bananas and melons to grow. The climate is also responsible for the astonishing variety of wild plants and flowers.

The most important plain of the island is Messara in the South, about 140 sq. km in size, an important center of agriculture and the place of the earliest settlements and it is from here that the Minoan civilization spread. From the end of the Minoan period, Crete, because of her central and strategic position, became an easy prey for many conquerors whose rule the Cretans had to tolerate. This experience has shaped both the island and the islanders. Not surprisingly, the island was always a stronghold of liberty and the center of revolt against many enemies, particularly the Ottomans who controlled the island between 1645 and 1898, when Crete received autonomous status, later, in 1913, joining the Greek state. The center and the symbol of the revolt against the Ottomans was the monastery Arkadi

where, in November 1866, about 900 Greek men, women and children found refuge. Realizing their hopeless situation against 22,000 besieging Ottomans, they blew themselves up by exploding the powder magazine, killing most of the besieged and 1,800 Ottoman soldiers.

This happening is vividly portrayed by the best known Cretan novelist Nikos Kazantzakis in his novel »Kapitan Mikhailis«. But the best epitaph for the Cretan feeling of independence is inscribed on his own tomb: »I hope for nothing. I am afraid of nothing and I am free«. In spite of jealously guarded local customs, their own dialect and love of freedom, Cretans also produced the most prominent Greek political figure Eleftherios Venizelos, who already in 1905 organized the movement for integration with Greece and after the disastrous war with Turkey in 1922 settled the most difficult and painful dispute about the Greeks in Asia Minor with Kemal Ataturk, the victorious and charismatic leader of the Turkish republic⁵.

In conclusion, we can perhaps conceptualize *Mediterranean islands* as areas where *Mediterranean identity* has survived best because of the islanders ability to preserve their own traditional social structure through isolation and separation from the mainland as well as mental and physical resistance to foreign and alien rule. In this way the islands became symbols of and refuges for the traditional way of life strongly supported by the environment to which the islanders adapted themselves, using it as a permanent barrier to outside powers too strong to resist but strong enough to survive. In short, the Mediterranean islands show a successful blending of landscape and human existence.

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MEDITERANSKI OTOCI: JEDNA KONCEPCIJA

SAŽETAK

U ovom radu prikazani su neki rezultati mojih terenskih kao i teorijskih istraživanja koje sam proveo na otocima: Sardiniji, Korzici, Malti, Siciliji, Kreti i Susku, u razdoblju od 1962. do 1986. godine. Moj temeljni terenski rad na Sardiniji financiralo je Vijeće za društvena istraživanja iz Londona te Sveučilište u Readingu, dok su istraživanja na Korzici, Malti i Sardiniji financirana sa strane Odsjeka za etnologiju Sveučilišta u Kölnu kao sastavni dio projekta o Mediteranu kojeg sam kasnije preuzeo. Ova istraživanja također su povezana s mojim nastavnim radom u okviru kolegija: »Mediteranske ruralne zajednice i socijalne strukture« koji sam držao na Poslijediplomskom centru za europske i međunarodne studije Sveučilišta u Readingu u razdoblju od 1978. do 1994. godine. Osnovni cilj ovog rada je ukazati na ulogu otoka u Mediteranu naročito njihove sposobnosti da očuvaju svoj identitet unatoč brojnih naježda izvana. Otoki su postali simbolima svojim sustavom vrijednosti i sposobnošću preživljavanja svakog pokušaja osvajanja ili promjene. U tome su otoci dobili veliku pomoć u svom okolišu koji je pomogao tim otocima da ostanu jedinstveni i izolirani sve do današnjih dana.