

Athens of Sardinia. Culture and Nature

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Nuoro is jokingly called Athens of Sardinia by young Sardinian artists. In fact, relatively speaking, it is the most refined and argumentative place in the whole of the island. (Grazia Deledda quoted in Alberti & Pelu 1972, 40, my translation)¹

There it lay, as if at the end of the world, mountains rising sombre behind (D.H. Lawrence when approaching Nuoro on his tour of Sardinia in 1921, 1997, 130)

Abstract

At the beginning of the 21st century Nuoro, capital of the province with the same name situated in the Barbagia district, central Sardinia, has approximately 37 000 inhabitants. At the previous turn of the century it had roughly 7 000 inhabitants. In spite of its then smallness as well as relative isolation due to its inland position, the town gave birth to several authors, poets, painters, sculptors, and other intellectuals who were to become widely known in the years to follow, thus Nuoro's denomination as Athens of Sardinia. In this article I will present the most renowned of these personalities, before taking the reader on a fictive walk through the town in order to give further evidence of its extraordinarily rich and lively culture. I then intend to show that in spite of its richness culture does not in any way drive out the love and respect for nature among the Nuoresi² as has often been demonstrated to be the case in other parts of South Italy. Thus, this article's subtitle Culture and Nature instead of the more commonly used "culture versus nature" when pointing at the dichotomy between the two domains.

Keywords: Sardinia, anthropology, culture, nature, place.

An extraordinarily rich and lively culture

Many anthropologists working in South Italy have found a widespread preference for culture compared to nature, the latter being regarded as an uncivilized world (Carlestål 2005,

¹ Nuoro è chiamata scherzosamente, dai giovani artisti sardi, l'Atene della Sardegna. Infatti, relativamente, è il paese più colto e battagliero dell'isola. (In the original.)

² Plural of *Nuorese* meaning from Nuoro.

159). In the following my aim is to show that this is not the case in Nuoro. On the contrary, in spite of its inhabitants paying tribute to and participating in the extraordinarily rich local cultural life the Nuoresi argue at the same time that *nature is in our skin and in our bones*.

The internationally most renowned of all the *Nuorese* artists and intellectuals is Grazia Deledda (1871-1936) who, as the first and so far only Italian female writer, received the Nobel Prize *for her idealistically inspired writings which with plastic clarity picture the life on her native island and with depth and sympathy deal with human problems in general* (the Nobel Committee for Literature 1926). Deledda published her first short story when she was seventeen years old and very many short stories as well as novels were to follow. To mention just a few of the novels: *Elias Portolu* (1903), *Cenere* (Ashes) (1904), *Canne al vento* (Canes in the Wind) (1913) and *Cosima* (her most autobiographical book, published posthumously in 1936). Her home as a child is today one of Nuoro's several museums: *Museo Deleddiano*.

One of the rooms in *Museo Deleddiano* is named *Atene dei sardi* (the Sards' Athens) and is dedicated to six *Nuoresi* artists contemporaneous with Deledda: Antonio Ballero (painter and photographer), Francesco Ciusa (sculptor), Pasquale Dessanai (poet), Priamo Gallisay (musician), Giacinto Satta (painter) and Sebastiano Satta (poet, journalist and lawyer).

The last mentioned, Sebastiano Satta (1867-1914), was a convinced socialist and his poetry is permeated with his political conviction. He portrays contemporaneous local life and, not least, the Barbagia landscape including the shepherds with utmost sensibility. He is still today much loved by the *Nuoresi* and many know his poems by heart, as for example *Canti Barbaricini* (Songs from Barbagia) (1910). Another modern sign of this love is that Satta has lately become the model for Bustianu (Sardinian for Sebastiano) the main character in Marcello Fois' (b. 1960) sympathetic detective stories about a lawyer and poet at the beginning of the 20th century who always stands up for the weak. Fois, though born in Nuoro, has long lived in Bologna, north Italy, but just as the trilogy about Bustianu takes place in Sardinia so do many other of his books and films.

Another writer having followed the town's first generation of renowned authors is Maria Giacobbe (b.1928). In the early 50s when Giacobbe wrote her first book *Diario d'una maestra* (Diary of a Teacher) she was a young teacher working in some of the small and very poor villages in the Barbagia area. Not only was this book translated into numerous foreign languages but it also gave her the glorious literary award *Viareggio Opera Prima* (Viareggio Prize for writers making their *début*) in 1957. The following year she married a Danish poet, Uffe Harder, and has lived ever since in Denmark, but she often visits Sardinia and her place of birth. This is also where much of her written work takes place or has its origins like for example *Øen* (*Gli arcipelaghi*) first published in Danish.

In a book about Grazia Deledda, Giacobbe argues that Deledda was at least as hated and ridiculed by her co-villagers as Sebastiano Satta was loved. Giacobbe explains this attitude towards Deledda by putting the female writer into a social and cultural context, and showing that Deledda was regarded as transgressing moral borders and thereby being unfaithful to her destiny when as an autodidact Sardinian woman she published books. In those days a woman had no moral right to do this and Deledda was therefore almost regarded as a public sinner, at least until she received the Nobel Prize (1974, 22-23). However, even after that Deledda has rarely been highly praised by Italian critics (Lutzoni 2011). In the comprehensive work *Storia della Letteratura Italiana*, which was compulsory course literature when I took Italian at Lund University in Sweden in the 70s, Deledda is mentioned in less than one page and there is no reference to the Nobel Prize (Sansone 1973, 524-525). However, lately *l'Istituto Superiore Regionale Etnografico* (The Superior Regional Ethnographic Institute) situated in Nuoro held a one day seminar in order to promote the works of Deledda in the Italian schools (La Nuova Sardegna 2011-12-07).

Be that as it may, it goes without saying, however, that in spite of the authors just mentioned there is no other single work that is so often referred to among the *Nuoresi* of today as is the book *Il giorno del giudizio* (The Day of Judgement) (1977) by Salvatore Satta (1902-1975).³ As a newcomer in Nuoro I have again and again been told by the people I have met with, scholars as well as non scholars, that if I really want to know and understand the town and its people I should read *Il giorno del giudizio*. “It is all there”, they say. Satta, originally from Nuoro, was a prominent jurist and professor of civil law at the University of Rome. He published academic work as well as fiction, out of which this book, which he wrote as a pensioner, is without comparison the most well-known. The manuscript was found among his posthumous papers and was published a couple of years after his death. The book centres on the aristocratic Sanna Carboni family and describes with deep psychological insight this family as well as many other *Nuoresi* characters at the beginning of the 20th century. It is regarded as a work of great importance and may very well be compared with Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s internationally more well-known *Il Gattopardo* (The Leopard) (1957) about an aristocratic Sicilian family at the end of the 19th century, both as regards its content, style, and its significance.

As just mentioned, this book is very often referred to by today’s *Nuoresi* and many of them say that they have read it not just once but several times. The extensive reading does not only go for Satta’s book, however. When meeting with the *Nuoresi* for the first time I was struck by the fact that on the whole they seemed to read and talk about literature quite a lot. This is not my experience from living several years in other parts of South and Central Italy. Sardinia is certainly different in many respects of which this seems to be one. Visiting Nuoro’s public library, named after the poet Sebastiano Satta, I was once given statistics for the year 2010 showing that that year 67 614 loans were effectuated – in a town with approximately 37 000 inhabitants!

In a separate building, the so called *Sezione Sarda* (the Sardinian section), the library houses a vast collection of Sardinian works of fiction as well as scientific work on the island. In this section we can also visit Sebastiano Satta’s working studio. Whenever visiting the library I have noticed that both parts of it are always very frequented by men and women of all ages. This goes also for participation at the many cultural events offered by or in collaboration with the library.

These habits of reading are moreover reflected by the number of bookshops in Nuoro. There are five, of which one has specialised in religious literature and one in school books and scientific literature, while the other three offer works of fiction. There are also *Nuoresi* publishing houses, of which Ilisso is the biggest in Sardinia. It has specialised on the Sardinian culture and for example its art history, poetry and archeology.

One frequent theme among the *Nuoresi* writers is the shepherds: their life and their close relation to nature in the bosom of which they spend most of their time. What is more, the shepherds themselves are often said to have been great *poeti pastori* (poet shepherds). A typical and much appreciated form of their art used to be (to a limited extent it still is) poetic verbal competition before an audience. The duelists improvised for hours on fixed themes and some of these texts/songs – always in the Sardinian dialect – have lived on for generations. The first written evidences of such competitions are from the first half of the 19th century (Mathias 1976). Thus, the shepherds’ poetry is older than any work of the artists and writers discussed in this article. To argue that it thus forms the basis for other literature to come – that

³ Satta is a common name in Nuoro. Thus, Salvatore Satta is not related, at least not closely, to Sebastiano Satta.

the shepherds should be the explanation of Nuoro's cultural richness – I believe would, however, be difficult to prove as well as to deny. But it is true that poetry writing is considerably widespread among people in general still today and also encouraged by the Sardinian authorities which finance competitions on regional, provincial as well as local levels. People are invited to send in their work in the hope of getting it published.



1. On many house façades in Nuoro's old districts there are painted quotations from *Nuoresi* writers.

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When visiting Nuoro in 1921 D. H. Lawrence⁴ wrote that “*There is nothing to see in Nuoro: which, to tell the truth, is always a relief. Sights are an irritating bore*” (1997, 141). If that was once the case, the more there is to see coming to the town today. So, for example, the number of museums is impressive for a town of its size. I have already mentioned that nowadays Grazia Deledda's parental home is a museum. Apart from offering its visitors the possibility to see a Sardinian home from the previous turn of the century there is also a garden in which cultural activities of various kinds take place during summer time. I once participated at such an occasion when an elderly man read love letters from a then very young Deledda to his own grandfather!

On the outskirts of Nuoro on the mountain Sant'Onofrio we will now start a fictive walk through the town. Here Sardinia's major ethnographic museum *Il museo della vita e delle tradizioni popolari Sarde* (The Museum of Sardinian Life and Popular Traditions) is situated

⁴ Lawrence mentions briefly Deledda's books in his own book about travelling in Sardinia (1997, 144). In 1928 he also wrote an introduction to Cape's edition of *La Madre* (The Mother) first published by Deledda as a serial story in *Il Tempo* in 1919.

with a beautiful view over Barbagia's mountainous landscape. Its collection consists of traditional male and female clothing, jewelry made of silver, gold and coral belonging to the very rich female dresses or being votive gifts, other textiles and wooden artifacts, weapons, carnival masks, musical instruments, tools and kitchen equipment and more than 600 different kinds of bread representing various seasons, festivals, phases in the life cycle etc. This block of buildings, constructed as a traditional Sardinian village, also contains a big hall where seminars, meetings, theatrical performances and concerts are held.

Walking downtown from the ethnographical museum one passes the art museum, *Museo Ciusa*, housed in the former tribunal adjacent to the cathedral. Francesco Ciusa (1883-1949) was the initiator of modern sculpture in Sardinia and had his first great success in 1907 with the work *La madre dell'ucciso* (The Murdered Man's Mother) at the Venice Biennale. His fame continues into modern times and thus, in connection with the celebration of 150 years of Italian Unity in 2011, another work of his, *Il Pane* (The Bread), was shown in the art gallery situated inside the Vittorio Emanuele Monument complex in central Rome.

Another internationally very renowned sculptor is Constantino Nivola (1911-1988) from the village of Orani within the province of Nuoro. A museum is dedicated to his work in his birthplace, but in the 60s Nivola was also entrusted by the town of Nuoro's local authorities to create a monument dedicated to Sebastiano Satta. The result was *la Piazza Satta* (Satta Square) with its big granite blocks into which the artist placed bronze statuettes showing the poet in different situations during his lifetime.



2. It is always easy to find a library coming to a Sardinian town – signs indicating the way to the hospital and the police also tell how to find the local library.

Before coming to *la Piazza Satta* on our fictive walk we will, however, pass *il Museo Archeologico Nazionale* (The National Archeological Museum) with findings from the whole province of Nuoro. Entering this museum the visitor will find him-/herself at first in a speleological exhibition with mineralogical and paleontological samples. Thereafter follows the archeological exhibition with several halls dedicated to the Upper Paleolithic and the Late

Bronze Age as well as the Nuragic, the Phoenician, the Roman and the medieval eras. To the foreigner the, at least internationally, rather unknown Nuragic civilization may be of particular fascination. This prehistoric people is mainly known for having built more than 8000 *nuraghe* (stone fortresses) all over the island, each consisting of one or more large towers besides smaller buildings of various kinds. Today's tourists will find that the *nuraghe* are in various stages of decline, though some of the towers are still possible to climb.

The next stop on our walk will be MAN – *Museo d'Arte della provincia di Nuoro* (The Art Museum of the Nuoro Province), which hosts a collection of twentieth-century Sardinian art but also gives space to modern Sardinian as well as non-Sardinian artists. One example of the latter was when on my visit to Nuoro in the spring of 2011 I was able to see the exhibition *Dreamtime. Il linguaggio dell'arte aborigena* (Dreamtime. The Language of Aboriginal Art). It was a colourful event showing the works of contemporary Australian artists and the largest collection of aboriginal work that has ever left Australia.



3. Women picking wild fennel and flowers in the countryside.

As usual when I am strolling about the streets of Nuoro I will end also this fictive walk at the bar *Tettamanzi*, where many of Salvatore Satta's characters in *Il giorno del giudizio* (The Day of Judgement) used to meet. There I ask for an *espresso* while reading a Sardinian daily paper and watching one of the temporary art exhibitions that the bar often offers.

By now I hope that the reader has come to the same conclusion as I have, namely that it is amazing that there is so much literature, art and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement in a town of Nuoro's size. Still I have not mentioned all the monuments there are to be seen or the many traditional dance groups and I have not even touched upon *Nuorese* film or the very rich music life including the many local choirs of various kinds. Neither have I discussed the newly-awakened interest among young people of both sexes when it comes to

local culture. A sign of this are young people whose cell phones I have overheard that have the traditional Sardinian songs called *canto a tenore* (tenor singing) as their signal.

Nature is in our skin and in our bones

I think it is fair to say that the town as such is not particularly beautiful, though there are beautiful spots like for example parts of the two old districts San Pietro and Seuna and Mount Sant'Onofrio where Bustianu, the main character in Marcello Fois' detective stories mentioned above, used to take his daily walks enjoying the then unspoiled landscape. But the more so are Nuoro's mountainous surroundings, and the *Nuoresi* seem to have a special love for Mount Ortobene situated on the outskirts of the town. This goes also for the writers mentioned above – much of their literature as well as poetry is dedicated to the Barbagia landscape in general and parts of it to Mount Ortobene in particular. Likewise for Antonio Ballero (1864-1932), the painter and photographer, the Barbagian landscape was a recurring motif. He captured its tone at dawn, in the twilight, in summer as well as in winter. And as so often, the shepherds and their animals were a natural part of his work of art too.

During leisure hours people come to Mount Ortobene for walks, picnics, and to enjoy the rich flora and fauna as well as the fresh air. Youngsters come to bike or to do other sorts of sport. Many *Nuoresi* tell me that just as they were brought here by their parents when they were kids, today they bring their own children. The older generation also remembers war time when they took shelter here from feared bombs. Luckily, however, Nuoro was never bombed.

On the top of Mount Ortobene, 995 metres above sea level, the statue *Il Redentore* (The Redeemer) was inaugurated on August 29, 1901 following Pope Leo XIII's wish to begin the new century with one statue of the Redeemer placed on a mountain top in each of Italy's regions. In Sardinia the church decided to place it on the outskirts of Nuoro. Here the *Nuoresi's* most important religious feast takes place each year on August 29th. To most locals this feast is even more important than the yearly feast of *Santa Maria della Neve* (*Holy Mary of the Snow*), the patron saint of Nuoro, which takes place at the beginning of the same month.

A few days before the feast of *Il Redentore* a procession made up of close to one hundred folkloristic groups from all over Sardinia, dressed in traditional clothes and dancing and singing, paints the town in all imaginable colours. Then on the day of *Il Redentore* people gather early in the morning outside Nuoro's cathedral and, singing, they begin the pilgrimage up to the statue. The cortege is headed by a cart decorated with ears of wheat and oleander flowers. Once at the statue a mass is celebrated, where-after follows a procession along the roads of Mount Ortobene.

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As claimed above many anthropologists working in South Italy have argued that there is a general preference for culture compared to nature. In fact, it has sometimes been argued that this is one of the marked differences between South and North Europeans, that is, in the North people are supposed to give prominence to nature, while the South Europeans' preference for culture is expressed for example in an urban ethos, according to which culture and civilization “*are to be found only in towns and cities, while nature/countryside is regarded as their distinct antithesis – it is an uncivilized world, where disdained physical work is carried out, and where nobody wants to live*” (Carlestål 2005, 159, see also e.g. Redfield 1973, 60ff).

In the same vein Donna Gabaccia writes about the peoples of the Mediterranean by the end of the 19th century arguing that “*Bourgeois and urban notions of civilized behavior*

symbolically reduced male peasants to the level of beasts that lived in the uncivilized countryside. Shepherds who worked long weeks alone with their animals seemed particularly dehumanized” (2000, 85). What a difference compared to the honoured Sardinian so called *poeti pastori* (poet shepherds)!

So, coming to Sardinia a second thing that struck me (the first thing was the much literature and reading) was that here there is no such contradiction between the relation to nature on the one hand and to culture on the other. On the contrary! Deledda and her fellow authors for example have described Barbagia’s nature with great love and sensibility. Personally I have experienced that when meeting with Sardinians and talking about their island they often spontaneously start talking about nature and when taking me on tours they have sometimes asked me whether I would prefer to experience culture or nature. This is a distinct difference from my previous experience in for example Sicily. My first Sardinian acquaintance was a young woman who emphatically stressed when talking to me that nature is so very important for the *Nuoresi*. Her mother in law added that “*Nature is in our skin and in our bones*”.

Thus, as shown in this article Nuoro certainly merits its old denomination Athens of Sardinia, dating back to the 19th century but still today often used. In for example travel booklets about Nuoro the expression is used to attract tourists, a literary café where I have spent several evenings listening to modern Sardinian writers is also called *Atene Sarda* and visiting the home page of the daily Sardinian newspaper *La Nuova Sardegna* (<http://lanuovasardegna.repubblica.it>) one will find a number of articles referring to *Atene Sarda*. Another denomination at least as much used today is *la capitale culturale della Sardegna* (the cultural capital of Sardinia). However, my main argument is that among the *Nuoresi* nature is as highly appreciated as culture and just as people spend time on the many cultural activities that their town offers they spend time enjoying Nuoro’s surroundings. Mount Ortobene elucidates this love of nature more than anything else. No wonder that the feast of *il Redentore* celebrated on top of that mountain has become the most strongly felt religious festival in Nuoro. On that very day nature and culture meet while embracing its people. As Deledda once wrote:

No, it is not true that Mount Ortobene can be compared to other mountains: there is only one Mount Ortobene in the whole world: it is our heart, our soul, our character, everything there is that is big and small, sweet and hard and bitter and painful in us (quoted in Alberti & Pelu 1972, 42, my translation).⁵

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⁵ No, non è vero che l’Ortobene possa paragonarsi ad altre montagne; l’Ortobene è uno solo in tutto il mondo: è il nostro cuore, è l’anima nostra, il nostro carattere, tutto ciò che vi è di grande e di piccolo, di dolce e duro e aspro e doloroso in noi. (In the original.)

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