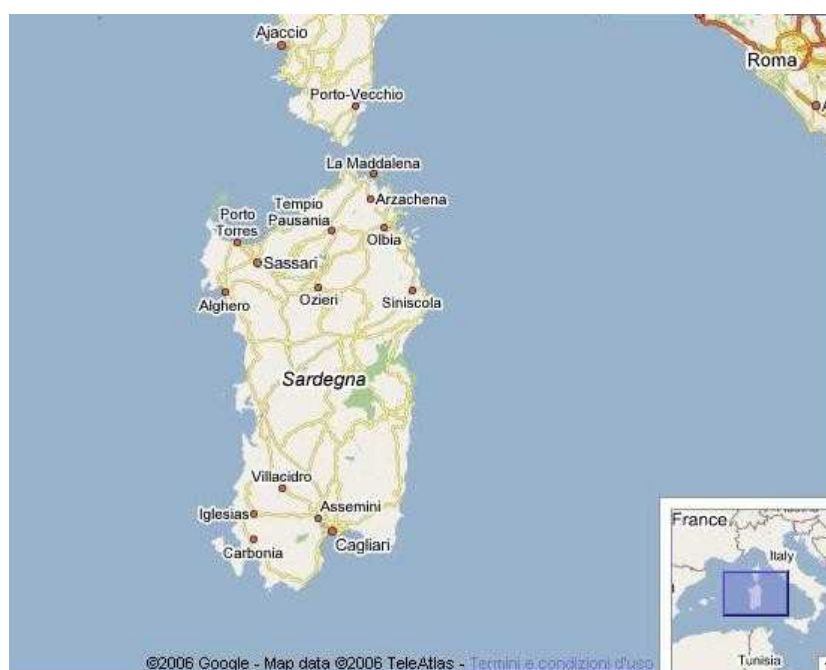


ISCHE 28 August 16th-19th, 2006

ILLITERATES AND CRIMINALS: JUDGEMENTS AND PREJUDICES ABOUT ILLITERACY  
IN SARDINIA (ITALY) FROM THE XIX TO THE XX CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

“Lucrezia e Errica partirono convinte di aver graffiato il ventre molle dell’universo barbaricino, che invece non si lascia né sfiorare né graffiare, perché con gli estranei diventa di granito e mette braccia e gambe d’atleta per nascondersi ed andare lontano...”<sup>2</sup>

fig. 1

*Some preliminary considerations*

Literacy, in the history of education, has been often connected both to religion and to civil education, so the assumption has been common that high levels of education should correspond to high levels of morality. This equation, that appears almost reasonable within strict frameworks of positivism and the religious theoretical thought, has produced erroneous effects such as stereotypes and prejudices. The main mistake is to believe that there is a close connection between illiteracy and criminal behaviour. However this belief is expressed in a very wide variety of tones. For example, an article in a very popular Italian catholic review for primary teachers, showed the rapid development of delinquency in France in the years when religious education was banned in the state schools<sup>3</sup>. The number of crimes, as shown in the graph (fig. 2), decreases only in two periods: in 1856 with the enforcement of the law Falloux, when religious education in state schools was reintroduced by the

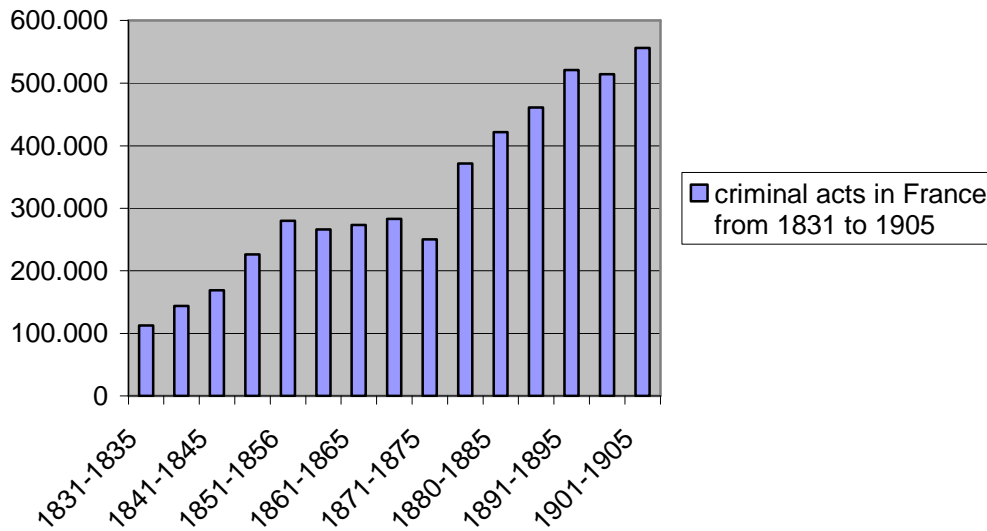
<sup>1</sup> Paper presented for the International Standing Conference for the History of Education, Umeå, Sweden, 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> August 2006

<sup>2</sup> S. Niffoi, *Il viaggio degli inganni*, (Nuoro: il Maestrato, 2005), 169.

<sup>3</sup> 'Istruzione laica e criminalità', *Scuola Italiana Moderna*, 20/5, (1911), 39.

ecclesiastical authority, and in 1871 when the Church re-introduced religion in state schools just for a short time. From 1876 schools in France were secularized and the Italian journalist wanted to underline that the delinquency began to increase.

fig. 2



This problematic perception of an association between illiteracy and criminality was still alive in the XX century but in reverse. For example, in 1944 and 1945, in some English school journals there are interesting discussions of reports on juvenile delinquency that showed fewer delinquents in Council Schools than in the religious schools<sup>4</sup>. A letter from J. Reece Walker in *The Schoolmaster*, about ‘Catholic Schools and Juvenile Crime’ claimed that “by an able psychologist Edna M. Henshaw the relative delinquency rates per 1.000 of total school population were found to be: Provided Schools 6,6; Roman Catholic Schools 15,3, Church of England Schools 7,5”, but John A. MacCarron denied that: “82 per cent of boy criminals in Liverpool in 1936 were from Catholic schools”<sup>5</sup>. “Assertion is not proof”, said, and he “should attempt to verify the figures”, as a matter of fact this issue caused discussions. As you can see religious literacy in this case was not enough to prevent young people from straying down the wrong path.

Sardinia is a very interesting place to consider the relationship between illiteracy and delinquency and to demolish the prejudices of false claims for literacy produced by school reformers.

In the island, both delinquency and illiteracy had, between the XIX and the XX centuries, a much higher percentage compared to the rest of Italy; so the idea delinquency of due to illiteracy seems to be confirmed. As you can see in a map of 1861 (fig. 3), the date of Italian unification, in the South of Italy we have 90% of “ignorant people” and in the North just 40%.

<sup>4</sup> “The following figures appeared in a report on juvenile delinquency in Liverpool published by the local education authority: a) delinquents in Council Schools 21,6 per thousand; b) delinquents in Church of England Schools, 35,6 per thousand; delinquents in Roman Catholic Schools 45,5 per thousand. It would be unsafe to base upon these figures any generalization as to the comparative morals of children in the three classes of schools”, in *The Journal of Education*, 76/894, (1944), 20.

<sup>5</sup> J. Reece Walker and John A. MacCarron, *The Schoolmaster & Woman teacher's chronicle, organ of the National Union of Teachers*, Jan 18 1945, 46., A.J. McManus, ‘Catholic Schools and Juvenile Crime’, in *The Schoolmaster & Woman teacher's chronicle, organ of the National Union of Teachers*, Jan 4 1945, 12 and Factfacer, ibid. 26.

fig. 3



The aim of my paper is to show how illiteracy and criminal behaviour were subject to particular conditions in the island that their perceived relationship could lead to over-simplifications. Moreover, I would like to stimulate some research in other European countries, so as to confirm or not the model supported by the most popular pedagogic thought in the XIX.

#### *The problem of delinquency in Sardinia and the schools of the past and of today*

In a memoir by a civil servant who was police chief in the 1960s and 70s in Orgosolo - a village of 5.000 inhabitants - called, at the end of the nineteenth century, "the criminal peak in a criminal area"<sup>6</sup>, we can read: "When I was in Orgosolo, during my first tour of the village by police car, a primary class booed at me. That's why I started to improve the culture of legality"<sup>7</sup>. This episode of Sixties or Seventies is not really proved, but we can help asking ourselves how compulsory schools that taught not only how to read and write, but also how to respect the rights and duties of citizenship, failed to teach respect for authority. In my opinion, that was the failure of the school as a social institution.

The relation between illiteracy and rural delinquency in Sardinia is not easy to understand: actually we need to study the island's economy and, of course, its anthropology. Because of lack of time, I'm going to give you a general summary of the problem.

After Spanish domination lasting 400 years, Sardinia passed in 1720 under the rule of Vittorio Amedeo II of Savoia, prince of Piemonte, Member of the Sabaudi dynasty. The economy of the island was very poor. There were no roads and, of course, popular schools were less developed than in the rest of Europe. The State had little power, taxes were light, crimes were quite rare. Lawsuits against inhabitants were settled among themselves. The wild nature, presence of malaria, lack of roads because of the geography of the region, made links with other villages difficult. So all the authority's efforts to impose civilization failed, mainly in a zone in the middle of the isle that has been called Barbagia (fig. 4). Only after a century of Savoia domination, the kings Carlo Felice and Carlo Alberto could begin a

<sup>6</sup> A. Niceforo, *La delinquenza in Sardegna*, (Cagliari: Edizioni della Torre, 1897), 21.

<sup>7</sup> 'Il bandito non è un mito', *Il Sardegna* (25 aprile 2006), 38.

program of reforms that was continued after the unification of Italy in 1861.

Around the middle of the XIX century, criminal behaviour increased. Acts against the law were committed in some areas in the mountains of Barbagia and Ogliastra in the isolated west part of the island. There was a spread of cattle theft, street robbery, fights, ambushes, arrogance of the new local governing class that hadn't abandoned its former thinking for the old ways of the shepherds' society techniques.

fig. 4



Government reforms and means of repressing violence in the island produced injustice and tyranny. The State was either weak or too strict, presenting further proof of the weakness and frequent corruption of the institutions, so that honest people didn't trust it. Many civil servants employed in the protection of the peace had been sent to Sardinia as punishment or because they were considered incompetent. Sometimes judges or police officers got tough with the population just to recover their reputation. With the arrest of innocent people, the authority lost credibility with the families of villages and these behaviours encouraged absconding<sup>8</sup>.

Analysis of the number of murders demonstrates the gravity of the banditry in the last few years of the XIX century. Specifically, murders rose from 148 to 211 between 1887 and 1894, and robberies increased from 92 to 222<sup>9</sup>. These events were frequent in a small part of the island among Ozieri, Barbagia and Ogliastra - where the people were mainly shepherds - while it was almost irrelevant in the cities like Sassari and Cagliari.

In the rich literature on banditry made up of board commissions, law studies, sociological and anthropological analysis, travel literature, novels and memoirs, the correlation between banditry and literacy is not well considered.

A study on the criminal physiology of the inhabitants of the island carried out in 1897 by Alfredo Niceforo, a Sicilian anthropologist, identified two elements responsible for the lack of the sense of right in Nuoro and Oliena area, called the *zona delinquente* (criminal zone): firstly historical and geographical isolation, secondly race<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> G. Bechi, *Caccia grossa: scene e figure del banditismo sardo*, (Milano: Treves, 1914), republished edition M. Brigaglia ed., (Nuoro: Glisso, 1997), 71-80.

<sup>9</sup> G. Sorgia, *Banditismo e criminalità in Sardegna nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento*, (Cagliari: Editrice Sarda Fossataro, 1973) 27.

<sup>10</sup> A. Niceforo, *La delinquenza in Sardegna*, (Cagliari: Edizioni della Torre, 1897), 30-59. "Due quindi sono le cause dell'arresto di sviluppo morale e sociale nella zona in questione; la prima risiede nell'isolamento storico di essa zona, la

In the criminal area (Dorgali, Orosei, Lula, Mamoiada, Orotelli, etc. ) there was perceived to be an "atrophy in the progress of civilisation", an overturning compared to the habits of the new society. Specifically the shepherds consider robbery an honorable thing just as it had been considered in the very old times<sup>11</sup>. In this situation Niceforo pointed out that to have a criminal as relative was considered a respectable title, not something to hide. About education Niceforo affirms:

"We have seen in Nuoro children pretending to be bandits. They faked a robbery with long clubs instead of guns. And a young man said to a friend: 'look at Giovannico: what a boy! He is Sebastiano's son. His father killed two police officers, so he hid in the mountains for twelve years' ..." <sup>12</sup>

According to the positivistic and optimistic Niceforo's thought citizenship in the criminal area was at the level of primordial life<sup>13</sup>. There are some elements that testify to Niceforo's belief: Sardinia was at the top for the murders committed in Italy between 1890 and 1893. It had the record for homicides, usurpation and robbery and the gap between the North and the South was quite big.

For this reason Sardinia appeared - as can be seen in criminality statistics for Italy (fig. 5) - as an area inclined to delinquency

fig. 5<sup>14</sup>

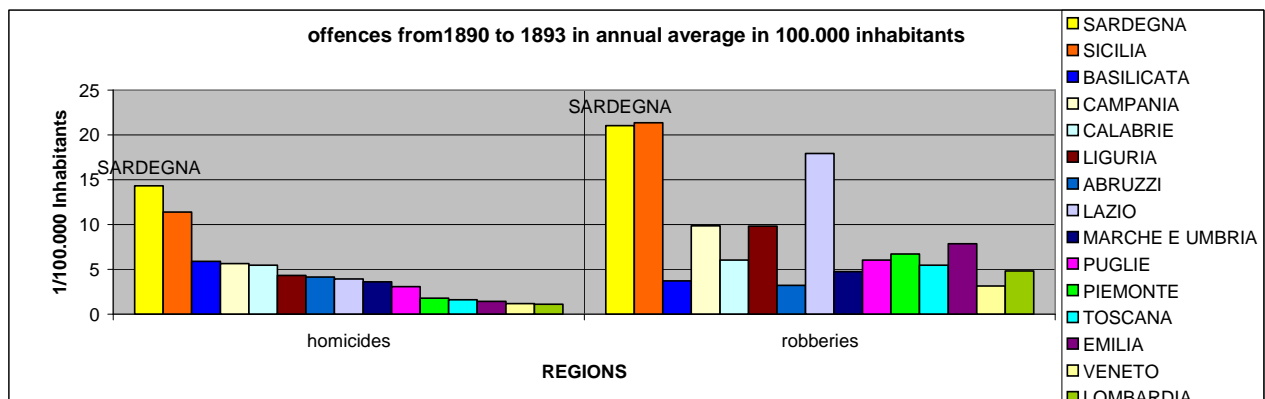


fig. 6<sup>15</sup>

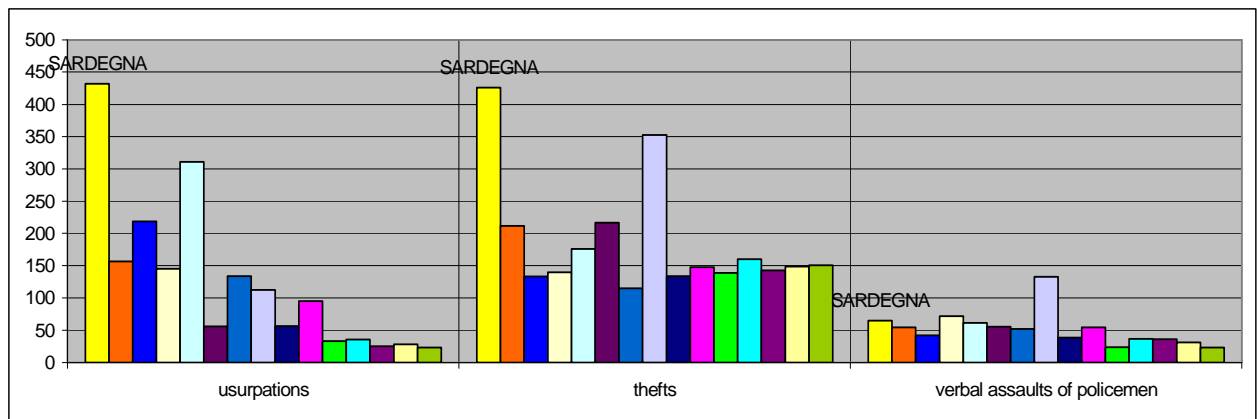


fig. 7<sup>16</sup>

seconda nella qualità per così dire -cristallizzabile della razza che popolò quei paesi, razza assolutamente priva di quella plasticità che fa mutare ed evolvere la coscienza sociale". Quoted *ibid.*, 59

<sup>11</sup> So "la psiche atavica fa sembrare glorioso e forte ciò che nella tribù primitiva si considerava onore grandissimo ed oggi, per contrario, è punito dal codice". Quoted *ibid.*, 44.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> "Distribuzione per compartimenti. Reati commessi e denunciati dal 1890 al 1893. Media annuale e cifre proporzionali a 100.000 abitanti". Niceforo, *La delinquenza in Sardegna*, op. cit., 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

	omicidi aggravati qualificati	e e usurpazione e danneggiamenti	Ince ndi	furti	rapine, estorsioni, ricatti	violenza, oltraggio alle autorità resistenza
SARDEGNA	14,35	432,28	93,1	426,13	21,05	64,8
SICILIA	11,4	156,65	21,77	211,66	21,35	54,1
BASILICATA	5,92	218,4	45,9	133,08	3,71	42,01
CAMPANIA	5,67	145,4	24,68	140,02	9,86	71,81
CALABRIE	5,47	310,96	32,84	175,78	6,06	61,2
LIGURIA	4,33	56	15,75	216,56	9,82	55,11
ABRUZZI	4,15	133,94	22,27	114,7	3,24	52,04
LAZIO	3,93	112,56	50,2	352,59	17,95	132,64
MARCHE UMBRIA	3,59	56,24	20,9	133,76	4,75	38,25
PUGLIE	3,09	95,15	23,89	147,75	6,02	54,38
PIEMONTE	1,8	33,16	14,34	138,97	6,72	23,71
TOSCANA	1,62	35,56	19,4	160,39	5,47	36,65
EMILIA	1,42	25,26	41,58	142,69	7,87	36,18
VENETO	1,2	28,39	21,84	148,46	3,13	30,86
LOMBARDIA	1,09	22,94	13,4	150,56	4,82	23,11
<i>Media</i>	<i>4,60</i>	<i>124,19</i>	<i>30,79</i>	<i>186,21</i>	<i>8,79</i>	<i>51,79</i>

Nobel Prize winning Sardinian writer Grazia Deledda describes the dirty, abandoned children playing among stones such as little savages. The kids because of the poverty couldn't have good education.

Niceforo believed that there existed a moral and physic heredity, so the shepherds' children of the delinquency area could inherit and transmit the genes of their subversive vigour<sup>17</sup>. The anthropologist follows an absolute determinist route where there wasn't any possibility of change through education; the people that continuously used violence and robberies belonged to a primordial, naïve stadium, from which it wasn't easy to escape.

Niceforo thinks that race can explain the behaviour of Barbaricini. Two races coexist in Europe: the Celtic and the Mediterranean. The first one is law abiding, the second is "clearly warlike and bloody"<sup>18</sup>. It is easy to find the Celtic line in the North of Italy as, according to Niceforo, we can see from the statistics of offences. There is also a regional temperament, so in some parts of territory it is possible to find a "common psychological character". The atlas of criminality shows that in Nuoro area the percentage of offences is from two to six time greater than in the north of the island or in Cagliari<sup>19</sup>.

Literacy, according to Niceforo, is not very significant because the reasons for criminal behaviour were hereditary. In the "zona delinquente" child labour is very common and school attendance is poor. You must consider that till 1911 in Italy expenses of school had to be met by the municipalities, but the local communities, in particular in Sardinia, were deprived.

On one hand, according to Niceforo, to win the fight against banditry the government had to build new roads and railways to break the isolation<sup>20</sup>; on the other hand, in the same period prime minister Francesco Crispi's policy was to send as many military corps as possible to restore public order. But the solution wasn't efficient for many reasons: criminal courts didn't pass fair judgements, a lot of arrested people were acquitted for lack of proof, sometimes the judges couldn't find perpetrators or even witnesses to offences. In Barbagia because of the code of silence, many criminals remained undetected

<sup>17</sup> NICEFORO, *La delinquenza in Sardegna*, op. cit., 66.

<sup>18</sup> *Ivi*, p. 93.

<sup>19</sup> About Orgosolo Bechi says: "Così il nostro disgraziato battaglione si disperde attorno a Nuoro in dodici distaccamenti: Orani, Orune, Oliena, Pattada, Olzai, Orgosolo, Bitti, Lula, Dorgali, Orosei, Ottana Oniferi. Li avete mai sentiti nominare, lettori miei? Dio vi tenga le sue sante mani sul capo, e non ve li faccia conoscere mai!", G. Bechi, *Caccia grossa: scene e figure del banditismo sardo*, op. cit., 92.

<sup>20</sup> Niceforo, *La delinquenza in Sardegna*, op. cit., 150.

or unidentified.<sup>21</sup>

Also, in the century following unification of Italy (1861) Sardinia with a different growth rate compared to the rest of the peninsula, nevertheless experienced a series of economic changes that however seemed not to touch bad behaviours; criminal brutalities, abuse of power carried on just as in the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> After the second world war, the new Italian constitution allowed Sardinia to have greater autonomy than other Italian regions. Intellectuals felt that illiteracy could be an obstacle to revival of the island.

The lawyer Gonario Pinna in the book *Due problemi della Sardegna. Analfabetismo e delinquenza* (1955) and the professor of philosophy law Antonio Pigliaru in the essay *Scuola e banditismo in Sardegna* (1955), analyzed in a new way the link between education and legality.<sup>23</sup>

The percentage of illiterate in the fifties was under 42% of inhabitants (Sassari, 32,5% and Nuoro 41,5%), but the population census failed to recognise that many students escaped from school to work.

Why were schools not attractive although they were compulsory? The school for poor Sardinian village children was till the middle of XX century a sentence and a prison. Classrooms were insalubrious and uncomfortable and couldn't compete with the freedom that pupils could experience at first hand in the countryside. National curriculum wasn't very useful and didn't meet the population's needs. Paradoxically, sheepfolds were better than classrooms! In the Nuoro area for more than 20 thousand students there were less than 13 thousand desks! So pupils had to carry stools from home. Compulsory schools in this context were not a universal panacea but a sentence and a pressure.

In the fifties, intellectuals understood that the only hope for Sardinia's revival was to fight against illiteracy in the same way that in the XX century politicians did against malaria, and the criminal issue was considered as a part of a large social problem that has been touching of the whole of southern Italy.

In the same period delinquency decreased, but crimes in Barbagia were still homogeneous: most of them were robbery and kidnapping. Offences were linked with economic and social background. If Sardinia had wanted to become a modern region the State would have needed to guarantee law and order, and to gain the population's trust. There was no biological or racial determination to do criminal acts, but rather the State had to change its relation with the population. Not just an institution that requires people to join the army, pay taxes, and control social behaviours, it had to become a friendly organisation that helps citizens and gives welfare services backing return. On the contrary, the Italian government, especially for the Barbagia population, was an institution that forgot people in prison waiting for the trial, that sentenced fathers to life imprisonment neglecting one's duties with honest persons. In this way absconding and flight were not only a survival, but became a way of life that was socially disruptive.<sup>24</sup>

In the public opinion the banditry has become not a question to repress with violence, but an issue to understand and to change with the help of education.

Antonio Pigliaru for the first time, in 1959, wrote a book about the Barbaricin codex<sup>25</sup>. The shepherd's behaviour appeared like a real criminal justice system. He demonstrated that there was no connection between illiteracy and banditry. If we lay two demographic maps, the one about ignorance and the other about offences, one upon the other, we will find great gaps. The illiterate area is not more criminal than the others.

In the fifties, a research about delinquency carried out on 1.281 soldiers showed that only the 28% of 102 that had criminal records were illiterate; of others 47% had attended the first classes of

<sup>21</sup> F. Pais Serra, *Relazione dell'inchiesta sulle condizioni economiche e della sicurezza pubblica in Sardegna promossa con D.M. 12/12/1894*, republished edition Sorgia ed. *Banditismo e criminalità in Sardegna nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento*, op. cit., 181.

<sup>22</sup> L. Camboni, *Della correlazione fra alcuni fenomeni economici e sociali e la criminalità. Un decennio di vita sarda*, (Cagliari: società tipografica Sarda 1913), 60.

<sup>23</sup> G. Pinna, *Due problemi della Sardegna. Analfabetismo e delinquenza*, (Sassari: Gallizzi, 1955).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 94. "Che cosa volete che sappia o pensi o senta dello Stato il pastore della Barbaglia o dell'Ogliastra - scriveva efficacemente - che lo vede rappresentato quasi esclusivamente dalla Commissione di leva, dall'Esattore e dai Carabinieri?" Quoted ibid., 102.

<sup>25</sup> A. Pigliaru, *La vendetta barbaricina come ordinamento giuridico*, (Milano: Giuffrè, 1959).

elementary school and 27% had even finished it<sup>26</sup>. If illiteracy had no a direct link with banditry, the increased numbers of people staying on at school couldn't solve the problem. Compulsory education was inefficient and wasn't fit to moralize, ineffective to counter popular habits that were very powerful and reproductive. The school by itself would be insufficient without the help of local heritage.

But not everything in the banditry codex had to be deleted; according to Pigliaru the rural society knew exactly what was good and what was bad.

The official school, the one with five classes, the one with the alphabet, seemed powerless against the informal curriculum. So if the government had wanted to reform the social system it would have needed to consider about the link between school and environment.

### *Conclusion*

---

It is interesting to check what is happening now... Recent research, made by a student of University of Sassari for her thesis, shows that in a sample of 584 secondary students in Nuoro, there are still now a lot of problems with the law<sup>27</sup>. 60,8% of boys and 46,7% of girls - attending secondary level education - have doubts about the authority of the State. This percentage remains constant for students attending vocational schools or those who are attending high schools such as "liceo scientifico". So, once again, the standard of school education doesn't seem to modify behaviour.

According to department for juvenile delinquents in Nuoro (Ufficio di Servizio Sociale per Minorenni) teenagers still now appreciate "balentia" - a word that summarizes actions above moral standards, skill, energy and courage. The "balente" is the rebel, the bandit that has been greatly respected by community, because he's against the official law that the village believes unfair.

So delinquent acts become like an initiation rite in a community where, as a teenager student reported, "who is 'clean' is considered like a child". Violence is a palpable experience: for example, 42,1% of the sample affirm that in meeting places such as coffee houses, dance halls, amusement arcades, etc. there are episodes of fighting.

31% of males says they committed an offence. It is interesting that illegal behaviours reproduce "old" types of crimes such as weapon possession, violence against the person, revenge, theft. Just 1% is for drug

Globalization, mobility, and new media, have reached all the villages: sometimes the answer is defensive at other time it looks like a loss of identity. Up to now, we can't say what the best answer is, we should start, as in the fifties, with studies and researches to solve the island problem, for example increasing moral values still set in the inhabitants' ways such as hospitality, kindness, humanity, solidarity.

Literacy is a good "medicine", but it isn't enough to protect the society from the contemporary diseases: since there are a lot of alphabets it's useful to speak and read many more languages than the ones the teachers are used to teaching in their classrooms.

Fabio Pruneri  
Università degli Studi di Sassari  
Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia

Piazza Conte di Moriana, 12  
07100 Sassari  
pruneri@uniss.it

---

<sup>26</sup> A. Pigliaru, 'Scuola e Banditismo in Sardegna', *I Problemi della Pedagogia*, 4, (1955), 80-111, republished edition: *Il banditismo in Sardegna. La vendetta barbaricina*, (Nuoro: Il Maestrale, 2000), 293-324.

<sup>27</sup> L. Columbu, *Indagine sull'incidenza della devianza minorile in Barbagia: dati e interpretazione*, Università degli studi di Sassari, facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, a.a. 2005-2006.