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The Upside-Down World of the Saturnalia: A Carnival or a Pilgrimage?

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Abstract

Pilgrimage has been defined variously for multiple decades by several scholars, critics and researchers alike. The primary problem that arises in course of theorizing pilgrimage is that the distinction between a pilgrim and a tourist tends to blur out owing to the diverse nature of the discourses surrounding what constitutes a proper pilgrimage. This paper explores the construction of civic identity within the context of the Roman Saturnalia, one of the most ancient pagan agricultural festivals. Through an analysis of certain seminal discourses on sacred travel, rites of passage and pilgrimage, it tries to determine to what extent the Roman Saturnalia, which has often been perceived as a carnival of decadence and debauchery, qualifies as a pilgrimage.

Keywords: saturnalia, pilgrimage, sacred travels, travel writing, rites of passage, roman festivals, pilgrimage and tourism.

According to Simon Michael Coleman (1995), pilgrimage is “a journey undertaken for a religious motive.” Over the years, pilgrimage has been defined as a journey often into an unknown or foreign place where one goes in search of new or expanded meaning about one’s own self, others, nature, or a higher good. Pilgrimages can often lead to spiritual awakenings or personal transformations after which the pilgrims return to their daily lives. Just like a pilgrimage can frequently involve a journey to a shrine or a location important to the pilgrim’s belief or faith and a search for moral or spiritual significance through that journey, it can also be a metaphorical journey into someone’s own beliefs, a way to dive deeper into one’s own psyche, explore one’s motivations via the dual process of learning and unlearning and recalibrating the foundations of one’s being through an evaluation of the core values that shape and reshape one’s existence. Naturally, the line that separates a tourist from a pilgrim often gets blurred.

As Valene Smith (1992) points out, though the most widespread use of the term “pilgrim” might refer to someone on a “religious journey,” the Latin term “peregrinus” from which “pilgrim” is derived “suggests broader interpretations, including foreigner, wanderer, exile, and traveler, as well as newcomer and stranger” (Smith). Referring to ecotourism, Smith suggests that throughout different periods of history people have fulfilled their spiritual needs by travelling to various locations with no apparent public or religious shrine. As both Graburn (1977, 1989) and Turner and Turner (1978) have highlighted: “Even when people bury themselves in anonymous crowds on beaches, they are seeking an almost sacred, often symbolic, mode of communitas, generally unavailable to them in the structured life of the office, the shop floor or the mine” (20). Elsner and Rutherford's introduction in book *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods* (2005) “serves as a useful primer to the knotty problems of theorizing pilgrimage. The editors seek a path that exploits the usefulness of the category without importing fuzzy criteria to distinguish the pilgrim from the tourist, such as the quality of a pilgrim's belief.” (Laura, 2)

Ms. Samragngi Roy

According to Jas Elsner and Ian Rutherford (2005), the criteria for a typology of pilgrimage in the ancient world would have to include certain questions. The very first question is the “spatial relation between sanctuary and clientele” that is the “catchment area” which would involve the question “are we talking about a region or the whole of the Greek world, or an even larger area?” (Elsner and Rutherford, 11) Further related to this is the of “whether the pilgrim returns at once to his own community, or is in transit somewhere else” (11). Elsner and Rutherford (2005) then clarify that in some cases “a pilgrim moves from sanctuary to sanctuary in an unlimited itinerary.” (11) The next thing to consider is the identity of the pilgrims, “are they ordinary people, or official representatives of a community, or members of a specific cult? do they include young people? do they include performers or artists? are they members of some profession, such as members of the *koinon* of the Asklepiadae of Kos and Knidos who are attested as visiting Delphi in the fourth century.” (11-12) The third question involves the question of timetable, “does the pilgrim visit the sanctuary once, or is it a regular practice? How long does the pilgrim stay at the sanctuary?” (12) Another important factor would be the pilgrim’s activity at the sanctuary-“is the purpose to attend a festival, to consult an oracle, to make a dedication, to seek physical healing, to undergo an initiation, to visit a place of religious or cultural significance, or perhaps something else?”(12) The last question would be about the pilgrim’s motivation- “is the pilgrimage voluntary or mandatory, and, if mandatory, is it required by tradition, or by a religious code to which the pilgrim subscribed, or was it motivated by an oracle, or is it made in fulfilment of a vow?”(12)

Elsner and Rutherford divide the typology into three sections. First, forms of pilgrimage attested in classical and Hellenistic Greece. Second, forms attested mostly in the Roman empire (both West and East), and lastly, Jewish and early Christian pilgrimage. Coming to the kind of pilgrimages in the Roman Empire, Elsner and Rutherford mention that in Roman Italy “pilgrimage seems to play a smaller part in Roman religion than in Greek, a fact perhaps partly to be explained by the fact that Rome tended to appropriate foreign deities by the process known as *evocatio*” (24). They list certain kinds of pilgrimages under classifications like symbolic pilgrimages undertaken by the Roman emperors, intellectual pilgrimages, pilgrimages undertaken on the basis of shared religious and cultural traditions of participating states and ethnic pilgrimages to a mother deity or core deity particularly in the Near East. However, the mention of the Roman Saturnalia cannot be found anywhere within these categories perhaps because of the carnival nature of the festival which makes it too far-fetched to include the festival under the category of pilgrimage.

The Roman Saturnalia

Saturnalia is an ancient, in fact one of the oldest Roman festivals, held in the honour of God Saturn, “the god of sowing and of husbandry, who lived on earth long ago as a righteous and beneficent king of Italy, drew the rude and scattered dwellers on the mountains together, taught them to till the ground, gave them laws, and ruled in peace.” (Frazer, 304) A major aspect of Saturn’s renown lay in the fact that he was the mythical God of agriculture, fertility and rebirth, heralding a new Golden Age. The reign of the mythical Saturnus was called the Golden Age, because during his reign, there were no slaves, no private property, no rank or order and no lack of any resources whatsoever. It was an era of plenitude and liberty. The ancient Roman historian Justinus credits Saturn with being the historical king of the pre-roman inhabitants of Italy. “The first inhabitants of Italy were the Aborigines, whose king, Saturnus, is said to have been a man of such extraordinary justice, that no one was a slave in his reign, or had any private property, but all things were common to all, and undivided, as one estate for the use of every one; in memory of which way of life, it has been ordered that at the Saturnalia slaves should everywhere sit down with their masters at the entertainments, the rank of all being made equal.” (Smith)

Saturn, thus symbolized, abundance, prosperity, equality and freedom. Saturnalia likewise was a weeklong street festival, fuelled by feasting, gambling, gift giving and endless drinking in order to look back and relive the prosperous Golden Age. To ensure God Saturn was kept happy was the primary

objective of the Romans on Saturnalia. The Saturnalia started out as an agricultural festival and was initially centred around the winter solstice when the farmers of Rome would be collecting their last harvest. The celebrations surrounding this ancient pagan festival would begin around the seventeenth of December every year and continue till the twenty third of December. At times the festivities would even extend till the twenty fifth of December. That is precisely how the festival of Saturnalia later metamorphosed into Christmas under the reign of the Christians in Rome. The primary themes of this festival were overturning of social norms and complete liberty for all human beings alike. It was time for uninhibited feasting, generosity towards the poor, extravagant exchange of gifts and lavish decoration of every nook and corner of the city of Rome with human sized candles known as the sigillaria lighting up the streets. 'Io Saturnalia!' was a chant that would rent the lips of every inhabitant of Rome irrespective of their socio-economic differences. Frazer (1976) further describes the festival as a time of the year when "the customary restraints of law and morality are thrown aside, when the whole population give themselves up to extravagant mirth and jollity, and when the darker passions find a vent which would never be allowed them in the more staid and sober course of ordinary life. Such outbursts of the pent-up forces of human nature, too often degenerating into wild orgies of lust and crime, occur most commonly at the end of the year." (Frazer, 304)

On the day of Saturnalia, people and farmers all over Rome, from the neighbouring regions and the Roman countryside used to travel to the Temple of Saturn situated at the foot of the Capitoline Hill. This is where Saturnalia comes close to pilgrimage as it includes a physical travel to a sacred location. The gathering would cause a major swell in the city's population. Right after waking up, the citizens of Rome would prepare to stream into the forum in order to get the best spots and celebrate the time-honoured tribute to God Saturn. Here in the Temple of Saturn, Roman priests would gather and sacrifice bulls who travelled to the temple along with the people in a grand parade headed by the senators. This would all happen under the watchful eyes of Saturn, a reclined statue filled with olive oil with his feet bound with wool. The priests would mark the beginning of Saturnalia by liberating the feet of the statue from the woollen fetter and then placing the unfettered statue at the head of the grand banquet. For the next few days Saturn would symbolically once again claim the throne abandoned by his son Jupiter/J Zeus and rule over Rome. The streets would be lighted with torches and sigillaria and the Romans greeted each other on the streets with joyous cries 'Io Saturnalia!'

Saturnalia and Pilgrimage

British cultural anthropologist, Victor W. Turner, came up with the concepts of liminality and communitas in his ground breaking work *The Ritual Process* (1969) with an attempt to explain the concept of pilgrimage theoretically and develop on what French ethnographer, Arnold Van Gennep defined as 'rites de passage' in his work *Les rites de passage* (1909). Van Gennep defined *rites de passage* as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age." (Gennep) The rites of passage, according to Arnold Van Gennep, comprises these three stages- separation, margin, aggregation. Turner explains these three stages meticulously in the third chapter of *The Ritual Process* (1969), a chapter entitled 'Liminality and Communitas'. Turner writes,

The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or the group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a 'state') or from both. During the intervening 'liminal' period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and 'structural' type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions." (94)

When it comes to an in-depth analysis of the Roman Saturnalia, these three stages of the rites of passage distinctly stand out and assume prominence, especially in the customs and traditions associated with this festival.

The Separation Stage:

The first phase of separation “comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or the group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a ‘state’) or from both.” (Turner, 94) Likewise, on the first day of Saturnalia every office, institution, organisation and machinery in Rome shut down, starting from schools, law courts, public offices to even the war machinery. People were expected to forgo their normally flashy and decorative attires and instead wear extremely plain and simple but colourful clothes and tunics. This included senators, magistrates, candidates for office, men who wore specialized togas exquisitely embroidered and of fine fabric which would proud demonstrating the wearer’s wealth and status. In addition to that, every single person in Rome from citizens, slaves, servants, to even the emperors were supposed to wear a special leather cap known as the ‘Pileus cap’ that was normally worn as a symbol of liberation by freed slaves. The strict formality of the class system was completely suspended during the festival. Every Roman citizen was homogenized into the single status of the ‘free man’ in accordance with the primary theme of Saturnalia which was to upend the social order and to celebrate liberty. Thus, the phase of “detachment... from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions... or from both” (94) which forms a major part of the separation stage gets symbolically fulfilled through these suspensions.

The Liminal Stage and Attributes of Liminal Entities:

Victor Tuner, while talking about the study of Ndembu chieftainship in the third chapter of *The Ritual Process* (1969) writes, “Our present focus is upon liminality and the ritual powers of the weak. These are shown under two aspects. First, Kafwana and the other Ndembu commoners are revealed as privileged to exert authority over the supreme authority figure of the tribe. In liminality, the underling comes uppermost.” (Turner, 102) This becomes an important point of discussion when it comes to the analysis of the Roman Saturnalia through the lenses of Victor Turner. “The underling comes uppermost” (102) most prominently features in the context of the Roman Saturnalia because it is primarily a festival of the underlings. As James Frazer writes in *The Golden Bough* (1976), “no feature of the festival is more remarkable, than the license granted to slaves at this time. The distinction between the free and the servile classes was temporarily abolished.” (307) In Saturnalia, the slaves form the centre of attention. With the crumbling of the social hierarchy and a temporary suspension of the rule of the mighty, it is customary that the slaves either dine with their masters or are served at the head of the table by their masters. Frazer mentions

...masters actually changed places with their slaves and waited on them at table; and not till the serf had done eating and drinking was the board cleared and dinner set for his master. So far was this inversion of ranks carried, that each household became for a time a mimic republic in which the high offices of state were discharged by the slaves, who gave their orders and laid down the law as if they were indeed invested with all the dignity of the consulship, the praetorship, and the bench.” (308)

The slaves also partook in gambling with their masters which was otherwise forbidden.

While describing the Kumukindiyila rites, Turner (1969) mentions, “the chief and his wife are dressed are dressed identically in a ragged waist cloth and share the same name- mwadyi”. (102) During Saturnalia too, people of high rank and status have to forego their rich attire, the expensive togas and wear simple, plain clothes akin to those of the slaves. Turner adds, “attributes of sexlessness and anonymity are highly characteristic of liminality.” (102) Both men and women were given equal liberties during Saturnalia. They also dressed identically. The masters and slaves dressed, behaved and

feasted in a similar way and with each other. So, it would become extremely difficult to differentiate people of rank from others. They were all one and the same, just like Turner explains “all attributes that distinguish categories and groups in the structured social order are here in abeyance; the neophytes are merely entities in transition, as yet without place or position.” (103) “Other characteristics are submissiveness and silence” (103) writes Turner. Under the attributes of liminalities, he also mentions that “the supreme political authority is portrayed ‘as a slave,’” (102) and that the chief “has to exert self-control in the rites that he may be able to have self-mastery thereafter in face of the temptations of power.” (102) Similarly, during saturnalia, the slaves were allowed to rail at and insult their masters just like the masters did to them for the rest of the year. This would result in a complete role reversal. However, the masters would have to accept it all silently and submissively ‘as a slave’ and they could not punish their slaves for it. Frazer (1976) reiterating Horace writes, “The slave might rail at his master, intoxicate himself like his betters, sit down at table with them and not even a word of reproof would be administered to him for conduct which at any other season might have been punished with stripes, imprisonment, or death.” (308)

The liminal stage according to Turner (1969) is marked by the “stripping off of pre-liminal and post-liminal attributes” (102). This applies to both the masters and the slaves. The normal duties of the slave are suspended during the Saturnalia. The masters no longer have the right to order them around. This reversal of roles between the slaves and the masters embodies the complete stripping off of the pre-liminal as well as post-liminal attributes because post-Saturnalia, both masters and slaves go back to performing their original functions. This phase of liminality is marked by the establishment of a new social order. Each family would select a ‘princeps’. This might be a child or a servant or a slave. They were now treated as equals or would be elevated to the point where their masters or the elders of the house would serve them. A King of Saturnalia who is typically of a lower status belonging to the lower echelons of the society would also be selected and that person would have to be obeyed at all cost. James Frazer writes,

Like the pale reflection of power thus accorded to bondsmen at the Saturnalia was the mock kingship for which freemen cast lots at the same season. The person on whom the lot fell enjoyed the title of king, and issued commands of a playful and ludicrous nature to his temporary subjects. One of them he might order to mix the wine, another to drink, another to sing, another to dance, another to speak in his own dispraise, another to carry a flute-girl on his back round the house.” (Frazer, 308)

Certain food items and dishes that the upper classes normally enjoyed but the poor people and the slaves couldn’t afford were now made available to the latter and the drinks would flow in an unlimited and uninhibited way. “In his guide to profitable management of an estate the elder Caro advises the donation of about a gallon of wine to each slave at the Saturnalia and at the Compitalia.” (Standhartinger, 180) After the grand feast there were gladiatorial games where all the different classes mingled with each other. Women and dwarf gladiators also participated in these games along with the men owing to the sexless and anonymous nature of the festival. Rome’s streets were normally dark and dangerous to navigate at night but during the Saturnalia they would be lined with torches and candles. People stayed up all night, loudly greeting friends and acquaintances on the streets.

Communitas

According to Victor Turner, what is particularly interesting about liminal phenomena is “the blend they offer of lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship. We are presented, in such rites, with ‘a moment in and out of time’, and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties.” (Turner,

96) These ties are organized in terms of caste, class, or rank hierarchies or of “segmentary oppositions in the stateless societies beloved of political anthropologists.”(96) Turner believes that it is as though there are two primary models for human interrelatedness, both juxtaposed and alternating. The first is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical. “The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.”(96)

In case of the Roman Saturnalia, the Roman priests who sacrifice the bulls and unfetter the statue of Saturn might be initially considered as the ritual elders after which the Princeps and the elected King of Saturnalia take over the reins. Every citizen of Rome, whether a peasant or a senator, whether a slave or the emperor, without any exception, has to submit to the whims of the King of Saturnalia. *Communitas* refers to this unstructured community in which all the people are equal allowing them to share a common experience, usually through a rite of passage. *Communitas* thus becomes the very spirit of community. Victor Turner was interested in the interplay between what he referred to as social ‘structure’ and ‘antistructure’. Liminality and *Communitas* are both components of and constitute the ‘ritual antistructure’. Both liminality and *communitas* draw our attention to the arbitrariness and artificiality of the structure and norms of society. *Communitas* is an attribute of people experiencing liminality together. “I prefer the Latin term ‘*communitas*’ to ‘community’, to distinguish this modality of social relationship from ‘an area of common living’. The distinction between structure and *communitas* is not simply the familiar one between ‘secular’ and ‘sacred,’ or that, for example, between politics and religion.” (Turner, 96)

The Reaggregation Stage:

Gennep observes that rites of passage and other rituals are liminal in the sense that they temporarily extricate participants from their social statuses. Turner on the other hand argues that rites of passages are antithetical to existing social structure and ‘subjunctive’ because they invite new possibilities. The rites enable people to experiment with alternative social relations and facilitate the invention of new ones. It is “a matter of giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be no society. Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low.” (Turner, 97) According to Turner, rituals inevitably affect social change. After the ritual, participants undergo liminality and *communitas*, and when they are reincorporated back into their community, they are never the same as before. They have gone through the process and have transformed in a certain way. “Certain fixed offices in tribal societies have many sacred attributes; indeed, every social position has some sacred characteristics. But this ‘sacred’ component is acquired by the incumbents of positions during the rites de passage, through which they changed positions. Something of the sacredness of that transient humility and modelessness goes over, and tempers the pride of the incumbent of a higher position or office” (96-97) writes Turner. However, this is not something that happens in the Roman Saturnalia. The Roman Saturnalia is more like a temporary break from the reality, just like the Maypole and Midsummer festivals. After the people have spent a week in revelry, they go back to their original way of life. Slaves become slaves once again and masters are reinstated as masters. The same structure is once again re-established. No social change seems to be really affected, at least not in a conspicuous way. Therefore, though Saturnalia might qualify as a pilgrimage based on the Gennepian line of thought, it definitely falls behind when we analyse it from the Turnerian viewpoint. This is what brings us to Mikhail Bakhtin’s four categories of the carnival sense of the world.

Bakhtin’s Carnival

Carnavalesque is a popular literary mode that seeks to subvert and liberate the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through the generous use of humour and chaos (“Carnavalesque”). The concept of the carnivalesque originated as “carnival” in Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s*

Poetics (1929) and was further improved upon in *Rabelais and His World* (1965). According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the carnival sense is deeply rooted in the human psyche on a collective level as well as on an individual level. He further enumerates four main categories of the carnival sense of the world. Firstly, it involves “free and familiar contact between people” (Bakhtin, 65). A carnival is often known for its ability to bring the unlikeliest of people close together and encourage free expression of and interaction among themselves in unity. “People who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free familiar contact on the carnival square. The category of familiar contact is also responsible for the special way mass actions are organized, and for free carnival gesticulation, and for the outspoken carnivalistic word.” (65) The Saturnalia obviously lives up to this category since every single citizen of Rome is homogenized during the festival due to the temporary collapse of the hierarchical social structure. Every individual is one and the same and they freely interact, rub elbows, feast and exchange gifts with one another.

The next category in line is eccentricity. Unacceptable behaviour is welcomed and accepted in a carnival space where one's natural behaviour can be revealed without any consequence. “Carnival is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life. The behavior, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in noncarnival life, and thus from the vantage point of noncarnival life become eccentric and inappropriate. Eccentricity is a special category of the carnival sense of the world, organically connected with the category of familiar contact; it permits—in concretely sensuous form—the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves.”(66) The Romans are free to take to the streets, dance, sing, feast and drink in an unlimited and uninhibited way during the Saturnalia. Therefore, one comes across several instances of eccentricity during the festival. Instances of unbridled lust and crime too are not uncommon in Saturnalia. Initially Saturnalia also involved human sacrifices and sacrifice of the dead gladiators at the Temple of Saturn. However, such practices were terminated for good and ceased to exist in the later years.

The third category as elucidated by Bakhtin is “carnivalistic *mésalliances*”. The familiar and free interaction of carnival allows everything to unite, even the things that may normally be separated, for instance Heaven and Hell, young and old and so on. “A free and familiar attitude spreads over everything: over all values, thoughts, phenomena, and things. All things that were once self-enclosed, disunified, distanced from one another by a noncarnivalistic hierarchical worldview are drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations. Carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid.” (66) Masters and slaves eat and drink at the same table and roll the dice together during Saturnalia. Everyone, irrespective of their class or rank, is out on the streets dressed in plain but vibrant clothes wearing the *Pileus* cap on their heads, the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the weak and the mighty, men and women, masters and slaves as well as the emperor and the citizens. The final category is profanation in carnival wherein the stringent rules of piety and respect for official notions of the 'sacred' are stripped of their power and blasphemy, obscenity, “debasings”, “bringings down to earth” (66) are celebrated rather than condemned. Everything earthly and body-based is glorified. Profanation, according to Bakhtin includes “carnivalistic blasphemies, a whole system of carnivalistic debasings and bringings down to earth, carnivalistic obscenities linked with the reproductive power of the earth and the body, carnivalistic parodies on sacred texts and sayings, etc.” (66) During the Saturnalia, slaves are allowed to rail at their masters without any fear of condemnation or punishment. It's also a time of sexual license and liberty.

The primary act of carnival is the mock crowning and subsequent de-crowning of the king of the carnival. According to Bakhtin(1984) it is a “dualistic ambivalent ritual, expressing the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift-and-renewal”(66) that embodies the upside-down world of carnival and the “joyful relativity of all structure and order of all authority and all (hierarchical)

position” (66). The act personifies the ambivalence towards all things that are normally considered absolute, single, monolithic. Carnivalistic symbols are always fraught with contradictions and include their opposite within themselves, “a perspective of negation (death) and vice versa” (66). Bakhtin mentions, “Birth is fraught with death, and death with new birth.”(66) The act of crowning implies a subsequent act of immanent de-crowning, and the act of de-crowning implies a new crowning soon to follow. Therefore, it is the process of change itself that is celebrated, not that which is changed. The carnival sense of the world “is opposed to that one-sided and gloomy official seriousness which is dogmatic and hostile to evolution and change, which seeks to absolutize a given condition of existence or a given social order.” (78) The spirit of carnival grows out of a culture of laughter as Bakhtin mentions in *Rabelais and His World* (1965). This happens because it is based on the physiological realities of the lower bodily stratum concerned with birth, death, renewal, sexuality, ingestion, evacuation and so on. Therefore, it is innately and inherently anti-elitist for its objectives and functions are necessary and common to all humans alike—“identical, involuntary and non-negotiable” (Bakhtin). Carnival was a powerful creative event, not merely a spectacle.

Can Saturnalia be considered as a pilgrimage?

Frank Fahey, a priest of the archdiocese of Tuam, in his famous essay “Pilgrims or Tourists?” (2002) writes, “Pilgrimage is more about stillness than movement; it is more about the journey than the destination.”(213) Then he goes on to make a few distinctions between pilgrimage and tourism based on certain elements. He begins with faith and writes that “pilgrimage is essentially a journey in faith or at least with an element of faith expectancy in it. In this most people are indeed pilgrims. To be a pilgrim is to believe (however faint it may be) that there may be a mystery in life greater than ourselves, that there may be a purpose and a meaning to life in which we are somehow involved” (213). Then he further adds, “Prayer is linked up with this faith dimension. For prayer gives new life and urgency to these faith stirrings in our souls; it helps us become aware of the God experience in our lives, it can give meaning to these experiences. So 'prayer' or a prayerful attitude is the first prerequisite that distinguishes a pilgrim from a tourist.” (213) Saturnalia begins with an actual journey to the Temple of Saturn. It was an agricultural festival celebrated in order to ensure that Saturn was kept happy, such was the faith of the pagan Romans. As far as prayer and prayerful attitude is concerned, the atmosphere of Saturnalia was not conducive to that. It was a time of feasting and revelry. However, everything was done with the intention of paying tribute to Saturn.

Fahey then writes about penance,

Pilgrimage is about growth- in search of wholeness. Growth entails ‘change’ and in the context of pilgrimage, change means ‘change of heart’. The Book of Lismore states: ‘Going on pilgrimage without change of heart brings little reward from God for it is by practising virtue and not by mere motion of the feet that we will be brought to heaven.’ Change of course entails ‘letting go’ and ‘letting go’ is painful. In the context of pilgrimage and growth, that pain is called ‘penance’. Penance is not a negative thing. It is the willing removal or ‘letting go’ of that which is preventing us from growing in Christ. (214)

In the context of Saturnalia, the ‘change of heart’ that happens is not permanent, the ‘letting go’ is only temporary and restricted to the duration of the festival. Next comes community. Fahey states,

...pilgrim' is often associated with the lone figure, travelling on dusty roads, a passing guest, in contrast to the tourist enjoyment of life with many pals and friends. However, it is not the number of people that make a community but the inclusiveness of all within that company. Tourists can seek the company they choose, the persons that they eat with, the people they talk to on a tour. Pilgrims shouldn't. They must and should be open to all, for 'often, often, often goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.” (215)

As it has already been established, Saturnalia is in its truest sense open to all- male and female, young and old, rich and poor, weak and mighty, master and slave and so on. They all celebrated the festival together embodying the true spirit of unity.

Fahey next points out the importance of a sacred space which can be either internal or external. “For the essential journey of the pilgrim is the journey inwards to that sacred space within the heart where the Holy Spirit dwells.” (215) Saturnalia definitely does have an external sacred space where the ritual sacrifice is carried out and the statue of Saturn is freed from its fetters- the Temple of Saturn. The next element is ritual expression which is supposed to be an “externalization (engaging mind, body, heart, spirit, imagination) of what is happening within. And the outward expression helps to internalize and make more secure the change that has taken place. The lighting of a candle, the throwing of a stone into a river or lake, a ritual washing or bath, a burning of our ‘sins’, an extra prayer, a walk on bare feet, are expressions of a change of heart.” (216) The lighting of the Sigillaria, the sacrifice of the bulls, the freeing of the statue of Saturn, the excessive feasting and gift giving all fall within the domain of ritual expressions when it comes to Saturnalia.

Votive offering is the next element mentioned by Fahey “it is the leaving behind of some part of ourselves- a symbol of our ‘letting go’. These votive offerings come in all kinds of sizes and shapes... It is the symbolic leaving behind of some part of ourselves that has been changed- a sign of atonement, a symbol of regret, a token of gratitude.” (217) We don’t see any such votive offering when it comes to the Roman Saturnalia since the sacrifice of bulls is not done on an individual level but rather on behalf of the entire community. Moving on, celebration is one of the most important elements of pilgrimage as “We are refreshed, enabled and transcended. There is a joy and happiness that comes with that. So, it is a joyful expression of the Spirit alive in us, bringing his peace. It isn't the celebration of the 'tourist' that needs another kind of spirit to get into a celebratory mood.” (217) Needless to say, the Roman Saturnalia embodies the true spirit of celebration. Lastly, Fahey quotes an Irish saint and writes that “short bursts of excessive piety are the work of the devil” and that “the anvil of holiness is perseverance”. (217) According to Fahey, perseverance is the commitment that the “pilgrimage is never over. It is always journeying into the mystery of God and our conscious participation in that mystery and God is infinite.” (218) Saturnalia, however, had very distinct starting and ending dates. It used to happen annually in pre-Christian Rome and there was a significant going back to the structured and hierarchical social order once the festival was over. The Romans used to wait with bated breath for the celebration of Saturnalia to commence once again the following year but in the meantime, they went back to their daily lives and fulfilled their designated roles.

Conclusion

First and foremost, we must remember that the Saturnalia was an ancient pagan festival and like most other pagan rituals or festivals, for instance, the Lupercalia, the Bacchanalia, Saturnalia too focused on ‘pleasure’ and the stimulation of the senses. Most pagan rituals involved a ritual sacrifice and were usually followed by grand feasts in which the whole community participated as is evident in the elaborate ritual instances described in Iliad, Aeneid, Odyssey and other such Greco-Roman epics. Instead of searching for true meaning or a wholeness as one can find in later pilgrimages, especially Christian pilgrimages, keeping the Gods happy were almost always uppermost in the minds of the pagans, and grand feasts and elaborate sacrifices were just their methods of ensuring that. We see the same motivations governing the celebration of the Roman Saturnalia. This materialism and need to satisfy the senses were what made the Christians construct Rome as a sort of void, defined in opposition to the more sublime and abstract values of Christianity that succeeded it. Besides, Frank Fahey, we must remember, was a Christian priest. So, we can definitely not equate his conception of what constitutes a true pilgrimage with how the ancient pagans perceived it. The two constructions are bound to differ. Saturnalia was a very subjective, open-ended experience. Different people engaged with the festival in diverse ways. It was a blend of sacred and secular, the holy and the unholy, life and death,

high and low, embodying the true spirit of a carnival, the true essence of God Saturn himself who represented both life and death, prosperity and impoverishment, light and dark and so on. Hence, it will not be correct to surmise that Saturnalia did not lead to social change or personal transformation. Here it becomes necessary to quote something that Standhartinger (2012) specifically mentions,

The Saturnalia like other carnivalesque festivals, is a ritual occasion that provides the opportunity not only to drink and to cast dice but also to assemble in larger groups, to speak more or less openly, to mock, and to share in protest. Satire and mock-laws led one to assume that social criticism was common. In late antiquity some even fear that Saturnalian freedom was used for revolt. Though we do not exactly know how the multitudes of slaves celebrated their Saturnalia, we can be sure that they made something out of it for themselves...

and this is where the ancient Roman carnivalesque comes closest to resembling a pilgrimage.

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