

The symbolism of the black sheep as a talisman in extensive and transhumant ranching in Spain: an anthropological analysis

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The symbolism of the black sheep as a talisman in extensive and transhumant ranching in Spain: an anthropological analysis

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ABSTRACT

Extensive Spanish cattle ranching boasts a strong, deeply rooted tradition: the use of completely black sheep, the offspring of white mothers, as magical elements to protect flocks from bad luck. Conditions are very specific, so they are unique, exceptional animals. These characteristics make them special, sacred sheep that are kept in the herd with special care until their death. There is an explanation for this symbolic and magic practice: it has existed to sustain, before Mendel discovered the laws governing genetics, the purity of white wool in sheep by isolating mutations in black ones. In this text we examine the scope of this practice and analyse it from the perspective of the anthropology of symbolism.

RÉSUMÉ

Le symbolisme du mouton noir en tant que talisman dans l'élevage extensif et transhumant en Espagne: une analyse anthropologique.

Dans l'élevage ovin extensif espagnol, l'utilisation de brebis entièrement noires, issues de mères blanches, est une tradition bien ancrée dont le but est d'éloigner le mauvais sort de l'ensemble du troupeau. Les conditions très spécifiques en font des animaux uniques et exceptionnels; ces brebis sacrées et spéciales sont gardées dans le troupeau jusqu'à leur mort avec un soin particulier. Cette pratique symbolique et magique a une autre explication: avant que les lois de Mendel ne soient connues, elle permettait de maintenir la pureté génétique des brebis produisant de la laine blanche, en isolant les moutons porteurs du gène donnant une laine noire. Ce texte étudie l'étendue de cette pratique et en propose une analyse sous l'angle de l'anthropologie du symbolisme.

KEY WORDS

Anthropology of
symbolism,
transhumance,
magic,
wool,
genetic selection,
Spain.

MOTS CLÉS

Anthropologie du
symbolisme,
transhumance,
magie,
laine,
sélection génétique,
Espagne.

INTRODUCTION

There is a strong tradition in large-scale Spanish ranching of keeping a black sheep in the flock, based on the firm conviction that it provides the larger group with good luck. This custom, historically documented by the leading ethnologists who have worked in the areas of transhumance, and livestock breeding practices in general, is still quite prevalent, and not associated with a specific breed.

The practice aims to stress the exceptionality of the black sheep relative to an immense majority of white ones. This uniqueness has proven sufficient reason to preserve these animals, based on the belief that they, in a range of different ways, furnish the flock with good fortune.

In spite of the difficulties this practice entails, according to the interviewees consulted, most of them have or have had black sheep in their flocks anyway. The reasons cited are all quite similar, but we were able to detect interesting, less explicit factors, which we hope to be able to set forth in the following pages.

The expression “black sheep” is a traditional Spanish term, widely used in everyday language, related to many sayings and expressions such as “you are the black sheep of the family”, and even linked to a folk tale. An intriguing relic of this tradition is maintained in contemporary Spanish, where the term “black sheep” refers to “a person who, in a family or small group scenario, is unfavourably different to the rest”.

RESEARCH PRECEDENTS

The first reference to this custom in the research is by the ethnologist Violant i Simorra, whose fieldwork focused on rural communities in the Pyrenees in the 1940s. He indicated that in Taüll (Boí-Lleida Valley), black sheep were believed to bring homes good luck (Violant i Simorra 1981: 254). In the town of Alfara de Carles, in Tarragona, “when a black lamb was born, they did not cut off its tail, they did not brand it, or cut its ear, nor did they shear it, and it remained in the flock as an amulet to protect it from lightning” (Violant i Simorra 1981: 256). The author points out the same custom in the small town of Gistaín, in Huesca, where “when a completely black sheep was born, it was named the ‘marta’, they let it grow up free, without marking its ear, or branding its body, or shearing it—so as not to hurt it, which might result in a wound producing bloodshed. It was believed that the marta was not to be harmed, and that it was to remain in the flock as an amulet to protect it from shooting stars and lightning, and left to die of old age” (Violant i Simorra 1981: 259). This is a phenomenon that could also be found in the towns of Fortanete, Mosqueruela and Cantavieja, all of them in Teruel, featuring a strong transhumant tradition.

Along this same line, Pallaruelo (1988: 180) notes that in the town of Guaso, in Huesca, “they say that if one suffers an accident producing a bruise—like a fall from a window—it is good to cover it with the skin of a black sheep”. In these same lands between Aragón and Valencia we find additional

such references, like that by Vidal-González (2013), who confirmed this practice to ward off lightning, and with the other features aforementioned. Martínez (1991: 297) also describes this custom amongst Valencian breeders of the *oveja tronera*, or *zoína*, sheep that are, by definition, “completely black, and must never have bled. Hence, they were not sheared, and their tails were not cut. If it bled, due to some accident, it lost all its protective properties.”

Barandiaran (1961) also verified that amongst shepherds in Sare, a town in the French Atlantic Pyrenees near the Spanish border, having a black sheep was thought to guarantee good luck.

In La Rioja we also find references to this tradition. The black sheep was “a referential symbol to protect the flock” (Elías 2002: 27), and also helped to keep wool “always white in the offspring” (Elías 2002: 107). In the region of Cameros black sheep also “provided protection from various diseases”, and in Ezcaray (La Rioja) this sheep was called the *murga* (Elías & Muntión 1989: 92).

In Lumbrales, Salamanca, small pox in sheep was staved off by placing a cowbell, with a frog inside it, or even soil from the most recent burial, on a sick or black sheep. In this way “not only was the infected sheep cured, but the epidemic was ended” (Cortés Vázquez 1957: 25).

In any case, when the various authors speak of the *oveja negra*, the black sheep, they refer specifically to the female sheep, as opposed to the ram, the male, whose symbolism is negative.

As we have been able to show, this practice, which we can define as magic, boasts a strong presence in Spain, existing across a range of areas featuring strong transhumant traditions (Fig. 1). It is noteworthy that none of the authors indicates the breeds with which this practice is observed, although we can suspect, based on the scope of the testimonies given, that it is not confined to a single breed.

Curiously, we do not find prominent equivalents in nearby areas. Neither Brisebarre (1996), with reference to southern France, nor Ravis-Giordani (2001) or Doazan (1995), for Corsica; nor Mahdi (1999), for the Moroccan Atlas, refer to this practice.

We have only been able to find parallels to this symbolic and sacred character of black sheep in three largely unrelated references. In Grey County, Ontario (Canada), amongst shepherds descending from Irish immigrants “it is good luck to have one black sheep in a flock” (Wintemberg & Wintemberg 1918: 87). In the faraway state of Rajasthan, India, the practice can also be found. There black sheep are rare and highly valued, their wool being worth five times more than that of white sheep. Geerlings (2004: 15) notes that “black sheep are said to protect a herd against death and sickness, and are used in purifying rituals”. Finally, among the Wambugwe and Wagogos tribes of East Africa these animals are sacrificed, along with others of the same colour, to precipitate rain (Frazer 1922: 101). As can be seen, these customs are widely scattered and distant from each other, only associated by the use of these animals based on the fact that they are different, a minority, with respect to most white sheep in the flock.



Fig. 1. — Map with places named in the article.

METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY

For the execution of this work semi-structured interviews were conducted with ranchers and transhumant shepherds in various provinces of eastern Spain having strong livestock raising traditions. Specifically, we present fourteen interviews with shepherds and ranchers in twelve mountain villages in the provinces of Castellón (CS), Cuenca (CU), Teruel (TE) and Valencia (V) (Table 1). We gave priority to interviews with active livestock raisers, in order to corroborate the persistence of this practice. We also interviewed former ranchers and shepherds in order to flesh out the details of this custom. To protect the interviewees' privacy and anonymity, their names were omitted. Only names of the towns of origin are indicated insofar as they are geographically relevant to this study.

These interviews covered various issues related to transhumant activity, and were not limited, as a single object, to customs and meanings attached to this symbolic practice. In any case, we did include questions about this and other practices related to popular religiosity and symbolic practices. We perceived some reluctance to talk about the contents of

TABLE 1. — Location of the shepherds and ranchers interviewed for this study. Abbreviations: **CS**, Castellón; **CU**, Cuenca; **TE**, Teruel; **V**, Valencia.

Number of the informant	Village and province
1	Pina de Montalgrao (CS)
2	Puebla de San Miguel (V)
3	Cortes de Arenoso (CS)
4	Terriente (TE)
5	Aldea de La Yesa (V)
6	Aldea de El Collado (La Yesa) (V)
7	Puebla de San Miguel (V)
8	Alobras (TE)
9	Salvacañete (CU)
10	Fortanete (TE)
11	Cañada de Benatanduz (TE)
12	Allepuz (TE)
13	Allepuz (TE)
14	Allepuz (TE)

this article. Thus, we avoided leading with questions related to these practices, reserving them for later, after a greater degree of trust had been established. All the interviewees were very familiar with the subject at hand, many stating that

“they say”, or “they have heard”, or “they know that others”, though, ultimately, they all recognised that, in reality, they observe or have observed this practice.

Finally, it should be noted that the ranchers interviewed work or have worked with a range of different sheep breeds, mainly for meat production, with local breeds like the *churra*, *ojinegra*, *cartera* and *alcarreña*. Nobody reported the use of Merino sheep, which are practically non-existent in the area.

INTERVIEWS WITH SHEPHERDS

As a result of the interviews conducted, we were able to establish different categories based on what the shepherds told us, for a better understanding and analysis of the contents.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SHEEP

The first point on which all the interviewees agreed is that, as our Interviewee 1 from Pina de Montalgrao (CS) stated: “it has to be the female offspring of a white sheep, and be totally black, without any white at all”. Interviewee 13 also stated that the sheep in question must be “the female offspring of a white sheep”. Interviewee 3, from Cortes de Arenoso (CS), meanwhile, agreed that “the sheep had to be all black”, although this phenomenon was very rare; as our Interviewee 11 from Cañada de Benatanduz (TE) pointed out: “it is very difficult for it to be completely black”. Interviewee 6, from the village of Collado, in La Yesa (V), reiterated that “the sheep has to have a black tail and everything”. Having an animal with these characteristics was extremely uncommon, as explained by Interviewee 7, from Puebla de San Miguel (V): “it is very difficult for them not to have a single white spot”. Clearly, according to the tradition, the sheep in question must not have a single white spot, despite the fact that finding sheep presenting these traits is “very difficult”, as indicated by Interviewee 3, to such an extent that “they were never sold”.

Only one interviewee, no. 9, from Salvacañete (CU), specified yet another requirement, rendering the animal even rarer still: “the black sheep has to be born on Friday” in order to perform its special function.

PHYSIOLOGICAL SENSE

When black sheep met these exceptional requirements, our interviewees insisted that they represented truly special animals. According to Interviewee 7: “black sheep are stronger”. Likewise, Interviewee 12 affirmed that these sheep “had thinner skin”, an observation ratified by Interviewee 13, who said that “they are more delicate”.

SYMBOLIC AND SACRED SENSE

These sheep were considered different. According to Interviewee 11: “they were named Marta.” Interviewee 10, a shepherd from Fortanete, clarified that they were called *troneras* (from the Spanish *trueno*: thunder) because they fended off thunder. Interviewee 1 said that this sheep “was blessed, it was born blessed”, such that “it was a sacred animal”. They receive this special treatment as a result of their sacred nature,

which is respected to the point that they “grow old, old” in the flock and are “never sold”, according to Interviewee 3. No. 5 echoed this idea: these sheep “were not touched or sold. They were left to die naturally”.

However, some of our interviewees offered additional information on this symbolic sense. According to no. 3, if the sheep were wounded, as previously mentioned, this “brought misfortune to the house”. Interviewee 1 explained that “the black sheep was blamed for everything, whether warranted or not”. Interviewee 13 also concurred that black sheep “are pure”, and that they maintain this nature: “you have to keep them pure” by never hurting them. In line with beliefs already cited, he agreed that “if you have made them bleed, they are no longer useful”.

HANDLING

The second characteristic about which most of the interviewees agreed is how these sheep are to be treated. Our Interviewee 2, from Puebla de San Miguel (V), stated: “no blood can be drawn from a black sheep, you cannot cut off the tail, or the ears”, since, if they are wounded, they “are no longer useful”, a view echoed by Interviewee 13, from Allepuz (TE). Similar ideas were conveyed by Interviewees 11 and 12.

As part of this care and precautions, special caution is also taken when shearing it. As our interviewee 3 stated: “you have to shear it with care”. This same individual indicated that “an effort was made to prevent it from breeding”. Interviewee 14, from Allepuz (TE) explained that these sheep “lose the special charm they have if they breed”. With regards to this point the interviewees did not offer us more details or explanations, although everything seems to indicate that the bleeding from delivering lambs is thought to spoil the black sheep’s qualities, which shepherds wish to preserve. This same interviewee summed up the best practice nicely, stating that “they are left just as they were born”.

Hence, no interviewee indicated that these sheep were castrated, as this would entail bloodshed, such that we assume that other techniques have been and are employed to prevent the ewes from becoming pregnant.

FUNCTIONS

Black sheep with the characteristics indicated by our interviewees and receiving the care that has been indicated, possessed, according to the consensus amongst our interviewees, a range of different functions. The most important of all these was to prevent lightning strikes. Most of those consulted confirmed the existence of this practice. “To keep lightning from killing the livestock”, and “to avert lightning bolts and ball lightning”, indicated Interviewee 1. “There’s no lightning,” said our Interviewee 2. “So that he would not be struck by lightning”, confirmed our Interviewee 5, from a village in La Yesa (V). Yet another interviewee, no. 6, a resident of the previous locality, agreed: “It is good to keep lightning from striking”. The existence of this practice was amply confirmed, with our Interviewee 8, from Alobras (TE), offering additional confirmation: “so that lightning does not strike the flock”. Interviewee 12 stated that they are used to “stave off lightning” and, according to no. 14, “they were good against storms”.

However, we also confirmed other uses that are more practical and lacking in the decidedly magic component indicated here. In this regard, Interviewee 4, from Terriente (TE) only mentioned the fact that they facilitated “counting the flock”. Another application is the one cited by our rancher no. 9, according to whom the practice was: “when the shepherds slept, they tied a black sheep, so that it would stretch the line when the flock moved, and wake him up”. A final practice is that indicated by our Interviewee 13, who explained that “if there is no black animal in the group, the flock would be frightened”, explaining that “if the flock is not used to the black sheep, they themselves kill it”.

RITUALS IN ANTHROPOLOGY OF SYMBOLISM

As we have seen, the various practices associated with the presence of black sheep in flocks (Fig. 2) represent a paradigmatic example of the kind of magic and rituals extensively identified by the anthropology of symbolism. The black sheep, due to its exceptionality, represents a symbolic element and an extraordinary tool, in perfect accord with the principles of homeopathic magic indicated by Frazer (1922: 32): “inanimate things, as well as plants and animals, may diffuse blessing or bane around them, according to their own intrinsic nature.”

The information provided by our interviewees accords with that advanced by the preceding historiography. They concur in considering black sheep as an adequate vehicle for magical practices, although we believe that our ranchers took an additional step in terms of the information provided. Experience spanning centuries had confirmed the rare but consistent presence of completely black sheep born of completely white mothers, long before the laws of Mendel’s genetics helped to explain it. Because this phenomenon was unusual, and important, extraordinary explanations were given for it, and it came to be identified with practices to attract good luck. An Australian team recently explained the complex genetic origin of this recessive mutation causing pigmentation in sheep (Norris & Whan 2008). It is, indeed, a peculiar phenomenon, one which human reason could hardly explain. The exceptional nature of these sheep is what furnished them with special meaning, giving rise to a magical practice in response to a paradigmatic difference.

Unfortunately, we can find close parallels to this belief, as other unusual genetic phenomena can generate strong and pernicious superstitions. A case in point is albinos and how they are treated in the countries of Southern Africa. According to Baker *et al.* (2010: 177) the “ritual killing of people with albinism for use in traditional medicine” has been documented, as albinos are thought “to belong to both the living and the dead” (Baker & Djatou 2007: 66). We may observe how the exceptional, the out of the ordinary, possesses a strong symbolic component, so strong that it becomes magic, a vehicle of good fortune and predilection, along with the dire consequences of which we are aware for people with this genetic disorder.



FIG. 2. — Black sheep in a flock in Santa María Sando (Salamanca, Spain). Photo by Santiago Bayón.

Black sheep meeting the very specific and thorough requirements shepherds recognised in order for them to be considered differentiated beings (born of a white mother and completely black, without any white spots) renders them something exceptional and, therefore, an object of symbolic attention, of magical practices. Following the dichotomies of Leach (1976), the ordinary stands in contrast to the extraordinary. A contrast is generated between white and black, the good and the bad, the profane and the sacred, the ordinary and the extraordinary. The black sheep, in its difference, embodies all these symbolic contradictions. “[...] symbols occur in sets and that the meaning of particular symbols is to be found in the contrast with other symbols rather than in the symbol as such.” (Leach 1976: 59)

The various responses by our interviewees coincide in identifying black sheep as clear objects of differentiation (Fig. 3). Exceptional powers, and even sacred meaning, are attributed to them, mainly as a protection strategy against the devastating effects of lightning. This practice seems to follow exactly what was indicated by Douglas (2002: 123), when she wrote that “some powers are exerted on behalf of the social structure; they protect society from malefactors against whom their danger is directed.”

The shepherd manages capital of great value, his flock, under conditions characterised by great imbalance, and exposed to all the risks of nature and loneliness. There are hazards posed by vermin, by people, and also natural ones that man is not able to control. Hence, shepherds turn to different strategies to protect their animals (Vidal-González 2013). In this regard it was necessary to reduce uncertainty and calamities that could mean the ruin of several families, as sheep often constituted considerable savings accumulated over the course of many years. Any incident could become a true catastrophe. Among the most devastating threats was lightning, which could decimate hundreds of sheep in an instant. Today this hazard still exists on ranches, as evidenced by accidents that continue to regularly affect flocks, and about which we can find documentation in newspapers and digital media.



FIG. 3. — Black sheep in a flock in Villares de la Reina (Salamanca, Spain). Photo by Santiago Bayón.

To avert this disaster ranchers established a relationship with black sheep, identified as magical animals able to ward off lightning. In the mountains of Cevennes, in France, we find other practices with the same purpose, such as placing a “lightning stone” in the bell of one of the flock’s animals, or painting a cross on the back of one of the best sheep prior to transhumance (Brisebarre pers. comm.). All these strategies have been considered valid if they succeed in preventing catastrophes.

In the words of Wittgenstein (1922: 57), “Superstition is the belief in the causal nexus”. Over time the black sheep became a symbol, a totem, capable – due to its uniqueness

and the symbolic care it received – of protecting the entire flock. The sheep became “a blaze or landmark, something that connects the unknown with the known” (Turner 1967: 48). Thus, it was possible to secure the flock and shield the shepherd from one of the greatest threats facing him, comforting him in the face of difficulties, and providing him with equanimity.

As Douglas (2002: 77) notes, “as a social animal, man is a ritual animal” who needs these practices to protect himself and reaffirm his truths and certainties. He needs to trust in and employ ritual practices as elements of conviction and security. According to Rappaport (1999: 26), ritual is “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers”. Through these practices shepherds and ranchers overcome uncertainty and avert fury unleashed from the skies from ruining their livelihoods

The rancher and the shepherd, those who grapple with uncertainty daily, must be able to secure tools that spare them from daily drama, from the threat of the loss of their flocks. Hence, they embrace the symbolic practices that comparative anthropology has repeatedly studied. The application of magic, according to Malinowski (1948), is always practical, forming part of a relationship between the human being and nature, in which man must recognise his technical incapacity to control the world. This type of ritual practice shows how overwhelmed the human being feels before the force of nature, its unpredictable power, and his lack of control over it. In response to this, it is necessary to turn to tools that offer him tranquillity.

CONCLUSIONS

In Geertz’s view, symbols are “vehicles of ‘culture’” and the human being uses, in a permanent and repeated way, different symbols as elements of care, protection and trust (Geertz 1973). One of the professional activities where man is exposed to the greatest degree of uncertainty is extensive livestock breeding, as we have already indicated. The shepherd finds himself alone in nature and exposed to external threats, guiding his flock, a fragile and valuable group of animals. There exists, therefore, a strong dichotomy between great value and great fragility. Therefore, protection strategies are necessary against catastrophe, the uncontrollable, and the unknown. It should not surprise us that the world of livestock is one featuring a major symbolic component and pronounced magic content, with innumerable expressions for protection. This is another reflection of the rancher’s practical sense, expressed via the use of measures to propitiate good fortune, in addition to the shepherd’s skills and experience.

All the interviewees stated they had heard others talk about this practice, or knew people who observed it, but the reality is that the custom persists. Many of the interviewees asked me if this practice was actually effective, but the fact is that, just in case, they were still employing it.

A second purpose of the practice, already lost and unknown by the interviewees themselves, is genetic selection. We are dealing with a manifest example of purity and contamination, to borrow from the title of the famous book by Mary Douglas (2002). In short, it involves isolating the sheep; specifically, the black females. Isolation prevents the transmission of this contaminating element, the black colour, to future generations. Contamination is produced, according to the custom, by blood, such that all ritual practice centres on preventing drawing any blood from this kind of sheep. In addition, they must be prevented from reproducing, which would mean the loss of their sacred nature, according to the interviewees. In other words, their isolation would not make sense without these restrictive rules. The practice constitutes a notable system of observation-based genetic selection, which sought to separate the genes that favoured genetic inheritance from black sheep in an effort to protect the great value that white wool possessed at a time when sheep's worth stemmed their production of wool, with which fabrics were later made. As the shepherds themselves stated, they selected those sheep that produced "a finer wool", discarding the animals that did not. The dark wool was of little value, as it was difficult to dye.

We believe that this system of white wool management stems back to at least the Middle Ages, a time when wool from Spanish merino sheep, the breed *par excellence*, was extremely valuable. The absence of this practice in other areas having strong livestock traditions allows us to trace its origins to specifically Spanish livestock, including the Merino breed, renowned for the unparalleled quality of its wool. We find the paucity of explicit Christian religious practices surprising. Only one interviewee stated that the sheep must be born on Friday, in reference to Good Friday, so we venture to postulate an earlier, perhaps pre-Christian origin.

At present, the primitive purpose of the practice has been lost, as the main value of sheep is for their meat, that of their wool being very limited. However, the original magic and symbolic dimension of this practice has been preserved, adapted to new breeds of sheep and for protection against lightning and other calamities.

Finally, it should be noted that some shepherds continue to keep black sheep in their flocks for a much more practical reason: to identify the black sheep in order to verify whether the whole flock is present, and to keep their flocks from fearing sheep of another colour. We believe that these are secondary and subsequent adaptations of the initial symbolic and ancestral sense of the practice.

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