

Baìa!

The *Baie* of the Varaita valley (in the villages of Sampeyre, Bellino and Frassinò) are festivals taking place during Carnival time. They date back to the medieval *abbadie*: this word indicated both young people's fellowships (their leaders were in fact called *abà*, abbots, like in religious confraternities) and the celebrations they organized.

The most famous *Baìa* is held in Sampeyre every five years. Hundreds of men take part to this event, which is very important for the people of the village. The costumes, the parade and the ritual are fixed by the tradition and there isn't space for improvisation. The festival recalls an event occurred about one thousand years ago: the Saracens were chased away by confederated mountain people's troops.

There are four *Baie*, from the different hamlets of the village: Sampeyre (*Piassa*), Calchesio (*lo Chuchéis*), Rore (*Rore*) and Villar (*lo Vilà*). Each *Baìa* is a sort of army featuring a general staff and various other characters like *I Espous* or *lou Vièi* and *la Vièia*, all celebrating the re-conquered freedom. Some of the strangest characters are *i Mòrou* and *i Turc*, found only in the *Baìa* of *Piassa*: according to folk tradition they are the Saracens' prisoners, freed by mountain people. But other people think that *i Turc* could be the same Saracens, made prisoners.

The characters

“Cavalie”



These characters are found only in the *Baia* of *Piassa* and *Chuchèis*. According to tradition they represent the mountain cavalry that succeeded in defeating the Saracens. They wear green uniforms in *Chuchèis* and black ones in *Piassa*.

“Tambourin majour”

This character is present only in the *Baia* of *Chuchèis* and of *lo Vila'*; he opens the parade rhythmically beating his long pole.

“Serazine”

They represent little girls, but in the *Baia* also female roles are performed by men. The little boys shake continuously their handkerchiefs: according to tradition they signalled to the mountain troops the Saracens' movements.

“Senhourine” (“*Cantinere*” in *lo Vila'*)

The invaders were not at all gentlemen and local young girls were very much in danger... Now they can come out again and take part to the parade.

“Tambourin”

They summon people to the parade and accompany them playing drums.

“La timbalo”

He plays a bass drum and he's present only in the *Baia* of *lo Vilà*.

“Sapeur”



Another unit of the mountain army. During the parade the “*Sapeur*”, present in all the four districts, have to break with their axes the wooden barriers left by the fleeing invaders.

“Grec”

According to tradition they were Saracens’ prisoners, released by mountain troops and thus celebrating with them their freedom. They smoke oddly-shaped pipes.

“Escarlinè”

They are foot soldiers, who have decorated their clubs with small bells, called *escarlins* in Occitan.

“Espous”

They are married couples celebrating freedom. It is a funny role to be performed because they are often called to dance, accompanied by traditional music, during the breaks of the parade.

“Senhourì”

They are local rich people, no longer afraid to be robbed.

“Sounadour”



They are the “soundtrack” of the *Baia*, cheering up parade and dances all day... and through the night! They play the accordion, the diatonic accordion (here called *semitoun*), the violin and the clarinet.

“Alum”



They are the military chiefs; 8 people for each *Baia*, they follow a very rigid hierarchical order. At the end of every edition, when the in-office “*lou Segretari*” and “*lou Tezourie*” leave the scene, two new *Alumn* are chosen among the members of the parade. Five years later they will be petty officers, the “*Tenent*”. They all wear Napoleonic cocked hats and a sword. The “*Tenent*” or “*Sout-Portabandiero*” are the youngest officers of the general staff: they have the honour to carry the glorious flag of their *Baia* and at the end of the feast they are ready to be appointed “*Abà*”, the supreme and undisputed commanders of the *Baia*.

The *Abà* represent the leaders of the uprising against the Saracens; during the *Baia* but also already before the feast they enjoy widespread appreciation and a highly respected position. They take on the responsibility of the entire celebration: in the past they sometimes took a loss and even had to sell one of their cows. Only in *Piassa* one of the two is a sort of *primus inter pares* (first among equals) and is appointed “*Abà Majour*” – in fact on his cocked hat there is a M instead of an A. “*Segretari*” and “*Tezourie*” are the last two “*Alum*”: the first keeps the centuries-old book of the *Baia*, the second is tempted by the loot of the feast and steals part of it. On Thursday a trial is put on against the “*Tezourie*” (and the “*Segretari*” who is considered his accomplice): it is an enjoyable performance through which local people criticize themselves and make fun of themselves... At the end of the trial the “*Segretari*” and “*Tezourie*” are pardoned (except in *lo Vilà*) and the feast goes on...

“*Uzouart*”

The “*Uzouart*” (hussars) are the general staff’s bodyguards. They have a sword and a rifle and their tall pointed cleft cap, one of the oddest, is a kind of mitre entirely decorated with small cockades, beads, a compact mirror and long ribbons (*bindels*) hanging down at the back. The *Uzouart*’s headwear and costume can be seen also in other spring festivals of the Alpine region.

“*Granatiè*”

This character is present only in the *Baia* of *lo Vilà*: he has the task of killing *lou Tezourie*, who here is not pardoned.

“Morou”



These are funny characters, present only in the parade of *Piassa*; they have black painted faces and drag along a donkey.

“Turc”

Also the *Turc* are present only in *Piassa*; they wear a fez like the *Morou* but they are forced to walk in pairs, their feet chained.

“Cantinè”

These are the provisioning soldiers: they supply the troops with plenty of wine and walk backwards and forwards “armed” with a flask, obviously decorated with the *bindels* - the precious multicoloured silk ribbons.

“Arlequin”

They are the guardians of law and order: their assignment is to prevent the public from creating a disturbance to the parade. To carry out their task they shake squirrels’ or mice’s tails (today false obviously) in front of the people to push them back. They wear weird clothes and from their hats, decorated with coloured patches, hang snail shells.

“Lou Viei e la Vieio”

They close the parade and have a symbolic meaning: they are not only two old people celebrating with the young ones, but they also represent the *Baia* that finishes and the end of winter.

A peculiarity: according to an ancient tradition women cannot take part to the *Baia* and thus also women's roles are performed by men. Women have the demanding task of sewing the costumes and decorate them with the old multi-coloured silk ribbons.

(Occitan words are written using both the classic spelling and the *Escòlo dou Po* one. Texts taken from the flyer published by the organizing committee of the *Baia*, 2007)