Ritual Symbolism and Communion in the *Zangarrón* of Montamarta

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an ethnographic analysis of the winter masquerade of the *Zangarrón* of Montamarta (Zamora), one of the most complex rituals in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula. On New Year's Day and on Epiphany, two different young men repeat the rite and embody this masked figure, who is the central character of a festival of considerable ritual density in which the entire village participates. Drawing on fieldwork and a review of the ethnographic literature, the article examines its historical development, the transformation of the figure, and the organisational changes promoted by the community. The ritual dressing, the materiality of the mask and costume, the route followed, the collection of offerings, the runs, the interaction with civil and religious authorities, and the integration of the ritual into the Christmas celebrations are described in detail. The analysis interprets the rite as a symbolic structure of solstitial regeneration, in which the masked figure embodies an ambivalent daimon that articulates playful violence, fertility, and social cohesion. Attention is given to the episode of the bread, proposing two readings: the historical hypothesis of a possible paraconsecration that has now disappeared, and the contemporary interpretation of the ritual "theft" as a redistribution of blessed food with symbolic efficacy.

KEYWORDS

Winter masquerade; *Zangarrón*; ritual costume; communion; blessed bread; identity.

In memoriam Bernardo Calvo Brioso
Debitum tibi

That divinity may inhabit a material object—whether a sanctuary, a mask, a fetish, or a piece of bread—is ritualism in its purest manifestation.
(Mary Douglas, 1998)

Introduction

The *Zangarrón* of Montamarta (Zamora) is one of the most complex winter masquerades in the Iberian Peninsula. It belongs to the typology of *zangarrones*, distinguished by the centrality of a single masked scourger whose symbolic importance persists within its original communities. In the province of Zamora (northwestern Spain), three winter masquerades of this type survive: two under the name *zangarrón*,[1] in Sanzoles Montamarta, and one known as *tafarrón*[2] in Pozuelo de Tábara.[3] Since 1987, when the first gathering of the

three was held, the communities that preserve them have developed a strong awareness of both what unites them and what distinguishes them (Rodríguez Pascual 1987).

Although there have been significant changes in the past decades, the celebration in Montamarta retains the archaic elements that have survived to the present day. This is because, although the festival continues to be organised by the village youths—as in many other traditional celebrations—they are guided and advised by association the Asociación Cultural "El *Zangarrón* de Montamarta," which belongs to the provincial federation of associations "MascaraZa." The association is highly active and, in addition to maintaining the tradition in Montamarta, it frequently takes part in parades and other extemporaneous and decontextualised appearances of the mask.

The winter masquerade of Montamarta is performed by a single principal masked character who acts on two separate dates—1st of January (New Year's Day) and 6th of January (Epiphany)—without a fixed procession or permanent companions, leaping as he runs so that the cowbells attached to his costume produce a continuous ringing sound. This physically demanding performance, now undertaken by a different young man on each day—whereas traditionally the same performer appeared on both dates —evokes pre-Roman rites of winter purification and fertility. In these rites, the character embodies the *demone*, who renews both the community and nature, as noted by Bernardo Calvo Brioso (2012, 447). (Photos 1 and 2)

We shall not dwell further on this question for reasons of space, but there is evidence that the celebration may once have been held, as it still is in Sanzoles and Pozuelo de Tábara, on the feast day of Saint Stephen, one of the seven deacons ordained by the apostles themselves and who was martyred by stoning for his charity. Bernardo Calvo Brioso (2012, 439-40) provides various historical data concerning the confraternity dedicated to this saint, which was suppressed in 1725 owing to a lack of active members, when its goods—lands, revenues, and obligations—had been incorporated into the benefice of the Parish Church of San Miguel in Montamarta. The liturgical and charitable obligations in honour of the saint were still recorded until 1840. This confraternity, typical of unmarried young men in solstitial contexts, reflected the general decline of such institutions during the eighteenth century under Tridentine pressures that required formal statutes, normative adaptation, and the deposit of financial accounts under ecclesiastical supervision. The parish of San Miguel, where the principal acts were held, was extinguished in 1824, and the statue of Saint Stephen was removed in 1827 owing to its poor condition. Nevertheless, certain customs survived among the young men until 1899.

However, we must not lose sight of the fact that the *Zangarrón* de Montamarta mask—which is actually made up of two masks, as we shall see later—has a history that we do not fully understand, and that it part of a long-standing tradition of cultural diffusion that remains difficult to decipher. Today, we are observers situated in a particular time and place, perceiving a contemporary reality;[4] yet we are aware that, in the *longue durée*, in cultural phenomena such as masquerades multiple temporal layers coexist. This indeterminacy, which provokes a certain "horror" (as described by Zygmunt Bauman 1993, 97 ff.), often suggests recourse to the idea of survivals in the search for ancestral origins. However, ways of life are not timeless, and there is also a changing history of shorter duration, supported by recent historical records that contextualise the use of masks in modernity and suggests that their existence can no longer be considered ancestral (Calvo Brioso 2021).

In this regard, the four-stage periodisation proposed by Paula Godinho (2011, 56) for the masks of Trás-os-Montes[5] (a region in northern Portugal) is particularly illuminating. In a study that synthesises two of her earlier publications, she distinguishes four stages. The first corresponds to traditional rural society, where masks fulfilled a cathartic function



Photo 1. The *Zangarrón* walks through the streets in the morning to offer Christmas greetings to all the villagers in their homes and to receive the traditional Christmas gift. In the image, he wears the black devil mask. Photo credit: Miguel Ángel Cruz Sánchez



Photo 2. In the surroundings of the parish church of Santa María and the adjacent cemetery, the *Zangarrón* interacts with people who tempt him with money to make him start running. Wearing the red mask of 6th of January, he displays his prize. Photo credit: Jesús Caramanzana Carrera.

and served as mechanisms of social control, allowing symbolic transgressions of norms. The second is a phase of suspension (1960-1970), when mass emigration and religious and civil repression caused the decline of the festivities. The third is a post-1974 revitalisation, when, following the Carnation Revolution (25th of April 1974), the masks were reinvented as symbols of cultural hope in a revolutionary context.[6] The fourth is a stage in which the festivities have been emblematised and exported as tourist spectacle, losing part of their ritual context while gaining greater external projection.

The *Zangarrón* of Montamarta has likewise become a consumer good within "liquid modernity," where fashion and ephemerality shape group belonging and the search for identity. Although this mask, like others in the surrounding area, is not a major tourist product, it is nonetheless highly valued by public institutions.

The mask moves between gift and commodity. It acts as a synecdoche for the entire Zangarrón celebration, and as an object with a social life that forms part of the communal life of Montamarta and of masking traditions more broadly. It is a gift on the 1st and 6th of January each year, yet it becomes a commodity when the festive sphere is extended to serve the logics of heritagisation and tourism (Panero 2025, 180-8). In this article, we disentangle the ethnographic development offered by a unique celebration that nevertheless shares similarities with others, and in which a complex ritual has endured for as long as living memory allows, providing the people of Montamarta with an inherited yet restless identity that is continually reconstructed. We describe this specific variant from the northwestern area of the Iberian Peninsula, exploring its meaning in contemporary practice.

A complex ritual

The selection of the *Zangarrón* role—today regarded as a source of pride and family honour—has evolved over time. In the past, the choice was made on New Year's Eve and "in secret." The *Zangarrón* was either a volunteer young man or, if several young men were interested, the role was decided by drawing lots. Cards from a deck were distributed, and the young man who received the ace of coins was chosen. His identity remained secret until he arrived at the church shortly before Mass. Nowadays, if there are several candidates, the role is still decided by lot, and the selection continues to be made by the *quintos*—and the *quintas*.[7] However, the identities of the two young men who are to perform as *Zangarrones* on New Year's Day and Epiphany are known much earlier, sometimes even a year in advance. The element of secrecy[8] has thus disappeared, and the *Zangarrón* now speaks to journalists and photographers even before the preceding Mass have begun. His name appears in the local press as a sign of prestige for the young man and his extended family—which, in effect, is the entire community of Montamarta. This highly positive perception contrasts markedly with a widespread belief, which we have not been able to verify, that during the difficult post-Spanish Civil War years, the *Zangarrón* was chosen from among the poorest youths in order to ease the economic hardship of his household through the gifts he received. Such a situation is plausible, although the association with poverty does not appear to have threatened the continuity of the tradition, as might otherwise be expected. According to this collective memory—whether historically accurate or merely plausible—a transition has taken place from a certain stigma during a significant part of the twentieth century to a form or mark of distinction today. One change that did take place, by decision of the young people at a certain

point, was the introduction of two performers—one for each of the two festival days—instead of a single *Zangarrón*. (Photo 3)



Photo 3. The mystery surrounding his former anonymity has disappeared. The *Zangarrón* poses and, before the mass, speaks to the media. Photo credit: María Pilar Panero García.

In any case, originally the role functioned as a rite of passage in which the young man was required to demonstrate his physical strength.[9] Just as in the past, today he must jump and run almost continuously for hours, after first standing almost motionless for approximately three hours while his costume is put on. During this time, he must refrain from eating and drinking—except for a cup of coffee and occasional rinsing his mouth—because his costume is sewn directly onto his body. Consequently, he cannot urinate, put on additional clothing, or remove any layers during the roughly twelve hours in which he performs his role. In preparation, the young men train during the preceding months by running and climbing the stairs leading to the church of Santa María del Castillo, situated on high ground in Montamarta, in order to achieve an adequate physical condition, as some former *zangarrones* attest.

In recent years the process of making the costume directly on the young man's body has ceased to be a private act and has become public, even though it begins very early in the morning and lasts for about three hours. The costume is assembled by a specialist costume-maker and an assistant. José Ramón Pérez Pérez learned the craft from Feliciano García, known locally as "Señor Tano." He has carried out this task for twenty-five years—first as an assistant and, since the death of "Señor Tano," as the principal expert. Before dawn, the young man arrives at the place where he is to be dressed, having spent the night at home, and stands still, even though his peers and other young people gather in the same space in a festive atmosphere and dance and drink alcohol. His companions may approach him occasionally, but he follows only the instructions of the tailor. He removes his clothes and remains either in underwear or in thin thermal garments.

The first items to be sewn onto him are the trousers, made from two towels forming the two trouser legs. On the 1st of January the towels are yellow and brown, while on the 6th of January they are red and yellow. These terry-cloth towels have replaced the small shawls used in earlier times. The towels are sewn to white socks, which match the footwear—today typically tennis-style trainers. From a damask double-bed bedspread, a blouse is fashioned with an internal pocket that serves as a purse. The tailor keeps his sewing box containing thread and needle close at hand throughout the celebration in case any seam needs repairing.

Once the trousers and shoes are in place, they are decorated with flowers made of tissue paper, with one larger flower standing out, sewn at groin level. These flowers are prepared in the days preceding the festival by people from the *Zangarrón's* social circle, although in the past this task was performed by the *quintas*. The young man's mother and other relatives are present during the process. On New Year's Day, he wears relatively few flowers on the trousers, since he is said to represent "a devil who ends the year and dies;" whereas on Epiphany he wears many more flowers because "he is a devil of good fortune," dressed in

festive splendour to welcome the New Year, as José Ramón Pérez Pérez explains. (Photo 4)

Once fully dressed, a scarf is placed on his head to protect him from the mask. Afterwards, a belt bearing three large cowbells is fastened to his back. This task requires the assistance of two men, since the belt must be tightened firmly to prevent injury while the *Zangarrón* jumps under their weight.



Photo 4. An expert tailor, José Ramón Pérez Pérez, sews the costume directly onto the young man's body. The process, which begins before dawn, lasts approximately three hours. Photo credit: María Pilar Panero García.

Finally, the mask is placed on the *Zangarrón's* head and, like the number of flowers on the costume, distinguishes the festival day. It consists of a cork disc mounted on a frame of horizontal and vertical wicker supports, crowned with hare ears. On the 1st of January the mask is black, representing a devil, while on the 6th of January it is red, signifying the end of the festivity or gala. Black symbolises absolute passivity and a state of death, although the flowers indicate that this state is reversible. Red represents life, strength, and imminent rebirth. In both masks, the eye and mouth holes are outlined in white, resembling teeth. A cork nose painted black is attached, and moustaches and eyebrows made of horsehair or synthetic fibres are added—white on the 1st of January to contrast with the black mask, and black on the 6th of January to contrast with the red mask. Over the cork frame and attached to the upper part of the mask is a *mantilla*, which covers the back of the head and falls from the shoulders down the back. The *mantilla* was traditionally made of animal skin (kid, goat, or dog in the past), but now it can be made of synthetic material. Coloured satin ribbons are also attached, including the Spanish flag and the traditional red stripe, while historically strips of coloured paper were used. On the 6th of January mask, small paper flowers similar to those on the costume are added. Traditionally, the mask did not bear flowers, not even on Epiphany. However, in recent years they have been added to make it more visually striking, as José Ramón Pérez Pérez notes with calm resignation. As with any aesthetic practice—and the mask, as a handcrafted product, is a unique object—both formal and structural changes occur, becoming visible in its appearance (Ocampo 2007, 91). Pérez Pérez also makes masks and advocates maintaining the traditional model while using the materials and techniques available in the twenty-first century. This formalisation, accounting for the two festival days, helps stabilise or institutionalise the mask at a time when many innovations elsewhere emphasise the bestial and diabolical qualities that are entirely alien to the Montamarta mask. While it clearly has animal elements and represents a devil, even today, in a disenchanted world, it retains a religious dimension because it is numinous: "something vague, mysterious, supra-human, not yet crystallised into 'divinity'" (Otto 2009, 79).

Once the *Zangarrón* is fully dressed, he is given his main attribute: an iron skewer shaped like a trident (Rodríguez Pascual 2009, 73), larger than an ordinary skewer and adorned with brightly coloured satin ribbons. He will use this tool to strike those who come within reach during the performance. It is remembered that in the past the *Zangarrón* used to strike people more lightly with pig bladders rather than with a trident. Other masked figures still use pig bladders,[10] but not in Montamarta. Regarding the ritual implements used for striking, we note the information provided by Pedro Álvarez [Gómez] to Julio Caro Baroja in

his famous *El Carnaval*... (1986, 321). It is important that this work was published in 1965, but the work had begun to take shape before the Civil War (1936-1939). Julio Caro Baroja refers to a *purridera* ("pitchfork") instead of a skewer and a *zurriago* ("leather whip" or "cord") instead of pig bladders. It is likely that in the past the *purridera* was used only during Mass, since using an agricultural implement to strike people would have caused serious injury, while the *zurriago* served as an instrument and symbol of temporal and playful authority.

The difference between the celebrations on the 1st and the 6th of January lies in the costume and the mask, worn by two different young men. The route, collections, and skirmishes described below, are repeated on both days with only minimal variations, reflecting that different people perform them on different days, though they appear almost identical.

Around 9 a.m., the *Zangarrón* starts to visit all the houses in Montamarta, except those where the inhabitants are in mourning. He is closely accompanied by a friend who provides assistance. Rodríguez Pascual calls this person "a page" and mentions that there are two (2009, 73-4). We have observed one or two, although in recent years many people—particularly photographers and photojournalists—have followed mostly the *Zangarrón* due to the interest the celebration generates.

In the past, it seems that the New Year *Zangarrón* toured the old quarter, while the Epiphany *Zangarrón* covered the new quarter (Calvo Brioso 2011, 220). Today, each young man visits every house to extend New Year greetings and receive the *aguinaldo* (Christmas gifts), which traditionally consisted of products from the pig slaughter, especially *chorizo* (a sausage made from pork and paprika). Families would save these items to offer the *Zangarrón's pitorro* (*chorizo*). Nowadays, these gifts in kind are largely symbolic, and neighbours typically offer money instead. With the collected funds, the two *Zangarrones* may invite members of their age group to dinner, although participation is voluntary.

Around midday, the *Zangarrón* makes his way up to the parish church of Nuestra Señora del Castillo, Montamarta, located on a hill outside the village.[11] Access is via the Roman road, and along the way he pursues young men who challenge him. Upon catching them, he strikes them three times on their backs with his trident. Upon arriving at the church, he first kneels and, traditionally, recites the *Lord's Prayer* at the entrance of the cemetery, as a sign of respect for the ancestors, whose memory is thus incorporated into the festival. This is followed by runs and skirmishes in which someone shows money to provoke the *Zangarrón*, who then chases the person and attempts to "steal" it.

As in many other masked festivals, in the past he would "harass" young women by attempting to lift their skirts. This practice is now obsolete and occurs only rarely for two reasons: few girls wear skirts that day, and the gesture is considered in poor taste, especially when directed at strangers. When it does occur, it is regarded as a playful prank and received with the same good humour as striking with the trident. The violence associated with this character—like that of other masked figures—is symbolic; he is a scourger, and his transgression unfolds within a playful, agile, and festive performance. When he catches someone who has



Photo 5. The *Zangarrón* strikes three times those young and old whom he manages to catch during the run. Photo credit: Miguel Ángel Cruz Sánchez.

provoked him, he always delivers three strikes. If the target is one of his peers, a young man like himself, the blows are strong, but in other cases they are lighter. (Photo 5)

Before Mass, on the esplanade in front of the atrium of the parish church of Santa María del Castillo in Montamarta, the *Zangarrón* symbolically marks the space by tracing a circle on the ground with his trident, flanked by the year's *quintos* and *quintas*, who wear black Castilian capes adorned with a rosette from which satin ribbons hang. In front of the civil and religious authorities, he performs a codified sequence. First, he traces a circular or near-circular space—the "ring"—to clear the area. Once the circle is complete, he flexes his left leg, plants the trident in the ground, raises the mask, and performs three jumps as a gesture of submission to the priest and the civil authorities. The sequence ends with three more jumps, after which everyone—the authorities, the *quintos*, and the community—enters the church, except for the *Zangarrón*. (Photos 6 and 7)



Photo 6. The *Zangarrón* shows respect to the civil and religious authorities before and after the mass. The image captures the bows performed prior to the Eucharistic celebration, under the gaze of his peers—*quintos* and *quintas*—the young men and women of the same age group, recognizable by their black cloaks and the satin ribbon rosettes pinned to the cape at chest height. Photo credit: Jesús Caramanzana Carrera.

The Christmas Mass follows its four main components. First, the introductory rites prepare the assembly for the celebration, including the procession and entrance hymn, followed by the sign of the cross, the priest's greeting, and the penitential act ask forgiveness for sins. Then the *Gloria* is sung, and the introductory rites conclude with the *Collect* prayer, which gathers the prayers of everyone in the church. In the Liturgy of the Word, a reading from the Old Testament is followed by a responsorial psalm, a second reading from the letters of the New Testament, the proclamation of the Gospel, for which the congregation stands followed by the homily. The *quintos* and *quintas* participate in the readings, and the priest addresses the young participants with affectionate words, acknowledging the importance of the *Zangarrón* celebration for the community. The assembly responds with the *Creed* and



Photo 7. During the mass, the *Zangarrón* remains alone in the church atrium, wrapped in a blanket.
Photo credit: Miguel Ángel Cruz Sánchez.



Photo 8. During the final blessing of the congregation, the *Zangarrón*—as if enacting a parallel celebration—pierces two round loaves of bread with his roasting fork under the gaze of all present. Photo credit: Jesús Caramanzana Carrera.



Photo 9. The *Zangarrón* "steals" the bread and leaves the church with his face uncovered, as a sign of respect, without turning his back on the altar or the priest. Photo credit: Jesús Caramanzana Carrera.



Photo 10. A young volunteer, who is not one of the quintas, distributes one of the loaves "stolen" by the *Zangarrón* among the whole community. Photo credit: María Pilar Panero García.

the *Prayers of the Faithful*. Third, the Liturgy of the Eucharist is celebrated: the bread and wine are offered, the Eucharistic Prayer is recited, and during the consecration the gifts are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. The Communion rite then follows, including the Lord's Prayer, the sign of peace, the breaking of bread, and the reception of the Eucharist. Finally, the concluding rites include the prayer after Communion, the final blessing, and the dismissal, sending the faithful forth to live out what has been celebrated.

During the Mass, the young man—without his mask and wrapped in a blanket to keep warm after several hours of activity—remains seated on a bench in the atrium. This pause allows for any necessary adjustments to the costume after the physical exertion. The costume-maker remains nearby with his sewing kit until the celebration concludes.

On the altar, on the Epistle side, the *quintas* have placed two *obladas* (round loaves of bread), which have been kept in a basket during Mass. In the final part of the service, when the priest gives the blessing, the *Zangarrón* enters the church with his mask raised and performs three bows before the altar. He then impales the two loaves on his trident, steps back without turning his back to the tabernacle, and performs three genuflections. He leaves the church, and once everyone else has exited, he offers one loaf to the *quintos* and the other to the *quintas*, who distribute it among all those present, according to Rodríguez Pascual (2009, 78). Today, this blessed bread—acquired through the ritual "theft"—is shared among members of the village community, although the distribution is handled by whichever volunteers are available. We will return to the distribution of this bread later. (Photos 8, 9 and 10)

The Zangarrón then returns to the village, arriving at the Plaza del Sol next to the fountain, where he waits for the villagers coming down from Santa María del Castillo and for the authorities to take their positions within a second circle. He then repeats the three bows and three jumps before the authorities, this time holding the trident aloft, and continues running through the streets until he returns home to eat and rest.

In the traditional rural society, a complete festive sequence included collections, rounds, ritual shared meals, Mass, physical tests, social critique, and dance. In Montamarta, there is no trace of social critique, although the memory of the dawn rounds accompanied by the two *dulzaineros* (double-reed pipe players) remains, and there is interest in reviving this practice. Despite these losses, the ritual preserves archaic elements associated with a numinous past.

The symbolism of the festival and two forms of the ritual theft of bread

Within the symbolic worldview of Christianity from the Middle Ages onwards, the number three signifies fullness and perfection. Its meaning, however, is not understood in mathematical terms but in theological and cosmological ones. Three represents the totality of the mystery of the Trinity and therefore possesses a sacred and supernatural dimension. The number three is widely associated with abundance and spiritual harmony. It represents an intellectual and sacred order—in God, in the cosmos and in the human being—and expresses the synthesis of unity and duality (1 + 2), as well as the union of heaven and earth. For this reason, it appears in multiple traditions: the three Magi (King, Priest, and Prophet), the three theological virtues, and the three principles of alchemy (sulphur, mercury and salt) (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1989, 1577).

The *Zangarrón* of Montamarta carries three cowbells, bears a trident, strikes and leaps three times, and pays respect three times to the village represented by its authorities. The community itself explains the association between the masked figure and the number three, by reinforcing—even if not explicitly articulated—its sacred character and its function as a *daimon* (Greek δαίμων).[12]

As has already been suggested, the *Zangarrón* of Montamarta was originally linked to the annual regeneration of nature, as it is part of a solstitial celebration and its figure participates in rituals associated with bringing fertility and abundance. Its mask is ambivalent as it possesses both sacred and profane qualities, particularly within Christianity that has tended to diminish the former profane meanings. Where such pre-Christian ritual elements could not be eradicated, as is the case of Montamarta and in other cases, Christianity adapted festivals of ancient origin into its own ritual framework.

Depending on the perspective adopted, we are faced with either a pure or an impure form of representation within a framework of public theatricality and a highly complex allegorical structure which, beyond the striking aesthetic of the principal character and the elaborate ceremonial, ultimately finds its purpose in the participation of the entire village community. In traditional society, blessed bread (*pan bendito*) represented the solidarity essential for collective survival.

Blessed bread can be prepared as cakes or ring-shaped loaves, either sweet or savoury, and is a religious offering, either collective or individual, made to a saint or to the Virgin Mary within the framework of patronal festivals, confraternities, and guild-based forms of stewardship. It is therefore a practice that combines spiritual meaning, social cohesion, and festive expression, and appears throughout the ritual calendar, including in winter celebrations such as the feast of Saint Blaise (Gaignebet 1984, 86-7; Sierra and Boldú 1934, 649).

In Pozuelo de Tábara, on the 26th of December, during the Mass in honour of Saint Stephen, the steward or stewardess carries a branch decorated with fruit, while other young people bring a *bollo maimón*[13] and a basket containing pieces of bread. During the Mass, the priest expressly blesses the branch, the cake, and the bread. The bread is then distributed among the devotees after they have kissed the saint's relic, as they leave the church. The Tafarrón, one of the Zamoran masked scourgers, also participates in this Mass, although with his face uncovered.[14] In other masked festivals of Trás-os-Montes, such as those of Grijó de Parada, Ousilhão, Parada de Infanções, and Rebordãos, bread is likewise blessed during the Mass of Saint Stephen. In Pinela, the festival *A Festa do Natal e o Charolo*[15] is celebrated, during which the priest blesses the bread at Mass. In Varge, the bread is not blessed but is distributed outside the church (Pinelo Tiza 2015 and 2026, *passim*).

From a symbolic perspective, blessed bread represents a popular offering through which divine protection is sought in response to a particular need. Such protection could assume a collective character, when it was requested for a local community or for the members of a confraternity, or an individual one, when protection was sought for the extended family. In many celebrations, both dimensions were combined, addressing communal and familial concerns simultaneously.

Integrated into ecclesiastical festivities, blessed bread acquires a specifically Catholic symbolism that reflects the Christianisation of earlier traditions. The blessing of the bread transforms this offering into an element with Eucharistic resonance. When the faithful consume it, they symbolically partake of the body of Christ, understood as spiritual nourishment. In this way, the act of eating transcends the material dimension and becomes a gesture of religious communion.

A particularly significant feature of this practice is its equal distribution during festive celebrations. Blessed bread is shared among all those present, regardless of their socio-economic status. This gesture embodies a central Christian principle: the equality of all before God.

Likewise, the distribution of blessed bread was understood as a manifestation of Christian charity towards those most in need. It is therefore no coincidence that, in certain contexts, it received designations such as *caridades* or "bread for the poor" and was accompanied by cheese and wine (Prieto 1622, 330). Such expressions underscore its solidarity and redistributive functions, as well as its capacity to reinforce social cohesion within the community. Bread symbolises essential nourishment, both material and spiritual. In Christianity, it represents Christ, the "bread of life", and the sustenance of eternal life (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1989, 1232). This is the food that the *Zangarrón* "steals" from the altar.

According to the information provided by the writer Pedro Álvarez Gómez, at a time that cannot be precisely determined, but before the 1960s,[16] when Julio Caro Baroja revised his work for publication, the *Zangarrón* is said to have performed a parallel and false form of consecration at the same place and at the same moment as the priest: "He disguises himself as the Devil and attends the High Mass, positioning himself in the centre of the church crossing; to his right and left they place wafers which he pierces and raises aloft with a *purridera* at the moment of the elevation of the host" (Caro Baroja 1986, 321). For the faithful, the consecration was believed to bring "great goods and benefits, and among them one—and not the least—was [...] that by virtue of this Sacrament, says Jansenius, the Saints shall multiply like hay and grass upon the earth, for the predestined are countless and without number, as Saint John said after having counted the predestined of each tribe." (Prieto 1622, 269)

We do not know whether, at that time, the *Zangarrón* entered with the mask fully covering his face or raised, as he does today, leaving his face uncovered. If such a parallel and false consecration[17] did indeed take place, then the act of distributing the bread would likewise be interpreted as a parallel and false form of communion, and the masked figure as a parallel and false priest. This is an interpretation that cannot be verified, and no memory of such practice survives in Montamarta. It would likely have been prohibited, like other youthful performances enacted by burlesque authorities, which operated at the margins of excess, mockery, and laughter, such as the *boy bishops* or the *swineherds' kings*, which the Church endeavoured to suppress (Caro Baroja 1986, 298 ff.). This brief account suggests that a masked figure enters the Mass and imitates the actions of the priest, although there is no indication that the priest and the *Zangarrón* interact.

From living memory to the present day, however, this ritual theft takes place at the end of the Mass, precisely during the final blessing of the faithful, rather than during the

consecration. The priest has previously consecrated the bread and wine during the Mass, transforming them into the Holy Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, and the faithful have received Communion. Unlike other celebrations, such as that of Pozuelo de Tábara, there is no explicit blessing of the loaves deposited by the *quintas* on the right-hand side of the altar, which the *Zangarrón* pierces with his trident, carries outside the church, and offers to the people at the church door. A ritual ambiguity thus arises: the bread is considered blessed and therefore a form of spiritual nourishment, yet it has not been explicitly blessed. It is difficult not to associate the consecrated host with the *Zangarrón's* loaves, which have occupied the same ritual time and space, yet they actually belong to different symbolic planes. The *Zangarrón* is a *numen* combining human and animal traits and distributes gifts of abundance and regenerative vital energy that reinforce the community through their shared consumption. This practice bears the characteristics of a non-institutional form of the sacred. First, it does not belong to the sphere of everyday life. Second, its presence is indetermined and ambiguous. Third, it follows normative and ritualised patterns. Finally, it concentrates essential values of the community, including the respect for the deceased, whom it honours in the cemetery and acknowledges by avoiding entering the homes of relatives in mourning.

According to Mary Douglas (1998, 64-5), Catholic communion represents the most intense form of this ritualism. In consecrated bread, the cosmos, the history of the Church, and the tradition linking the sacrifice of Melchizedek to Calvary and the Mass are symbolically condensed. Its meaning is not limited to symbolism but also entails real and transformative efficacy. According to Catholic doctrine, through the prayers of consecration, an invisible transformation of the bread and wine takes place, and communion exerts a salvific effect on the person who receives it. The *Zangarrón* of Montamarta, like the priest, offers *communio*, understood as the union created through participation in what is shared. The mask serves as a highly recognisable marker of Montamarta's identity, both within and beyond the community. However, the ritual gesture operates on a different plane, constituting a parallel rite. The inhabitants of Montamarta participate in both without perceiving a contradiction between them, accepting both as part of their tradition.

Final considerations

Ritual functions as a kind of "symbolic mask" through which human beings interpret the world and organise their relationship with the past and the future from the standpoint of the present. To understand a ritual in relation to its origins is to recognise that it is not an arbitrary act, but a practice linked to specific historical and social conditions, as well as to a communal need, whether religious or civic. Ritual contributes to group cohesion because, through a precise formalism, it enables deeply held convictions to be expressed without the need for explicit articulation. In this way, it transforms individual emotions into collectively recognisable forms and strengthens the individual's integration within the normative frameworks of society. Beyond its representational dimension, every ritual may refer back to an originating event whose meaning is renewed through the ritual act itself. At this level, ritual not only conveys meaning but actively re-enacts and reaffirms it (Flores Arroyuelo 2006, 11). This is precisely what takes place in Montamarta on the 1st and 6th of January each year.

The mask is an extraordinary artefact because of its capacity to engage and provoke/unsettle the viewer, exerting a powerful attraction on the viewer through the encounter

with an extraordinary face. This capacity has been reflected in modern art from the works of Francisco de Goya to the present day. However, a distinction must be made between the use of masks in art, which tends to treat the mask as an extension of the face and thereby obscures its status as an autonomous object (Ocampo 2007, 46), and ethnological masks such as that of the *Zangarrón* of Montamarta. The latter does not challenge notions of identity or individuality, since it is understood that behind the object lies the concealed face of a unique individual, with his own subjectivity.

We are aware that, in a society such as our own, masks—like other objects that have come into fashion—form part of an economy of spectacle in which aesthetic considerations often predominate. Masks are displayed and marketed as products of cultural, tourist, and heritage consumption, serving institutional and commercial interests. Their appeal frequently lies in their exoticism, their perceived ethnic rarity, and their aura of mystery (Panero 2026, 180 ff.). Nevertheless, masks belong to a living culture meant to be experienced and shared, whose principal function is transformation: they cover the human being and turn him into something other, insofar as the person wearing the mask acquires attributes or prerogatives of the beings represented. In this metamorphosis into a *daimon*, the mask is accompanied by a costume, shawl, and accessories arranged according to a more or less fixed model, whose origins remain unknown to us. We do not observe any cathartic function or actual transformation, as is sometimes claimed, but rather a form of play that has persisted into the twenty-first century through tradition.

The *Zangarrón* of Montamarta, like other masks that have endured through history—albeit with necessary adaptations—finds in the circuits of spectacle an opportunity to reinforce its use in the original context. It functions as a powerful marker of identity, both internally and externally. However, we consider that the central element of this celebration lies in the cultural articulation of the blessed bread, given its symbolism and communal function, which is associated with the act of extending seasonal greetings to all members of the community without exception. Beyond its symbolic or magical dimension, the celebration embodies desirable values such as equality, charity, and social cohesion. As part of a carnivalesque form of religion, it is expressed not through dogma or scripture, but through a network of festivities, tales, characters, foods, costumes, and gestures that function as myths and rites in action (Gaignebet 1984).

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NOTES

1. A character who wears a comic, eccentric, or grotesque costume at public festivals, particularly during Carnival or other traditional festivals where masks are worn. In this context, the term also refers to a masked figure whose role is to strike participants.

2. A *tafarrón* is a type of *zangarrón*. It is a masked figure who carries a weapon.

3. The foundational literature has addressed the following figures. Ramón Menéndez Pidal (1968) characterised them as figures of a minstrel-like figures, while Julio Caro Baroja (1963, 227-34) linked them to folklore, paying particular attention to the *zamarrones*—an older form of *zaharrones* or *zaarrones*—from which various lexical variants derive, such as *zafarrón, tafarrón, zanfarrón, zancarrones, cigarrón*, and others. However, in the Zamora region, the *zangarrones* extend beyond the role of minstrels to embody archetypal figures of popular celebrations, marked by a demonic and ambivalent character.

4. We draw on the fieldwork we carried out on 1st and 6th January 2024 and on the descriptions provided by Francisco Rodríguez Pascual (2009, 67-80) and Bernardo Calvo Brioso (2012, 439-49). We also draw on a lengthy interview we conducted with José Ramón Pérez Pérez on 7th of December 2024, during which hemade a *Zangarrón* mask for the Three Kings' Day, as well as on other shorter exchanges with him at various parades and gatherings. We would like to thank them for their time and patience, as well as for their ability to convey not only facts but also the values of this festival and the emotions it evokes in those connected to Montamarta. There is no doubt that the work presented here has been enriched by their dedication and cheerful disposition.

5. This region has a long tradition of winter festivals featuring masks. The festive season begins with the feast of Saint Lucy (13th of December) and ends with Carnival.

6. Although there was no revolution, the same phenomenon can be observed in Spain regarding Carnival and other festivals in the context of a "revivalist trend intensified by the advent of democracy and regional autonomy" (Alonso Ponga 2016, 218).

7. The term *quinto* refers to a young man from the moment he draws lots until he begins compulsory military service; that is, he is a youth approaching the age of majority. The *quintas* are the young women of the same age group as the *quintos*. Compulsory military service in Spain—commonly known as la *mili*—was suspended on 31st of December 2001. The presence of girls in all these activities is relatively recent. However, from the 1990s onwards, they have appeared in photographs published in the Zamora press, as have the *quintos*, who no longer wear the traditional cape but still weare the rosettes that distinguish them.

8. In general, in the contemporary masquerades of the province of Zamora and Trás-os-Montes, the secrecy surrounding the identities of the youths who embody the masked figures has been lost. As far as we know, this mystery is preserved only in the case of the *Chocalheiro* of Bemposta, who is selected for his two roles—on the feast day of Saint Stephen and on New Year's Day—through an auction held on the eve of each event. He wears a mask, and his identity is not revealed until he has completed the circuit through the village.

9. Bernardo Calvo records the accounts of elderly people who recall that the strongest young man was chosen through tests of running, jumping, and strength (2012, 444).

10. In other masked celebrations, this implement is used to symbolise the collection of products from the pig slaughter, when the youths taking part in these festivities extend Christmas greetings and receive their *aguinaldo* (gifts or Christmas gifts). For example, in the *Zangarrón* of Sanzoles, three young men take on the role of *asadores*, each armed with a sword. The *Asador Mayor* keeps this ancient custom alive, symbolically skewering bacon and chorizo on one of the swords. This masked figure in Sanzoles also carries a stick from which three pig bladders, which are used for striking, typically hang.

11. This route, which must be completed quickly because the rest of the village is waiting for him, has become more complicated in recent years, as he is frequently stopped and asked to pose by the multitude of onlookers and photographers. This situation has caused some frustration, and the young man is advised to ignore such distractions and carry out his task.

12. This has not prevented it from being partially assimilated over time to the figure of the Christian devil. Bernardo Calvo recorded that in Montamarta and in Ferreras de Arriba—where a character known as *Diablo* appears—there is the belief that, if the young man died while wearing the mask, he could not be buried in consecrated ground. Nevertheless, neither of the two figures, despite causing unease and even fear through their wild appearance, displays the traits associated with evil (2011, 63).

13. A traditional sponge cake made with refined flour, eggs, and sugar, containing neither fat nor yeast.

14. This study is based on fieldwork conducted on 25, 26 and 27th of December 2024.

15. At the Christmas festival in Pinela (Trás-os-Montes), where masked young people take centre stage, bread plays a key role. It is called *Charolo* and is a wooden structure, resembling a litter or platform with a pyramidal shape, densely covered with rings of sweet bread.

16. Don Julio had already gathered many of the notes that would later form *El Carnaval*... before the Civil War (1936-1939), and he revised these earlier writings between 1962 and 1964. If the author—who had access to a considerable body of information—included the account provided by Pedro Álvarez Gómez who was born in the region, we may reasonably assume that the parallel rite and false consecration described above did indeed take place, and that his informant, whom he trusted completely, had first-hand knowledge of it.

17. In the Eucharist, the consecration is the central moment of the Holy Mass. During the consecration, through the priest's prayer and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

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