Passion and science have a troubled relationship. On the one hand, scientific reason requires the repression and sublimation of sentiments, while on the other hand, passion, as one of the strongest human emotions, is the fuel of the best scientific research, for instance quantum physics being considered by its practitioners as 'passion-at-a-distance'.[1] Without passionate scholarship, in the sense of a strong consuming enthusiasm to doubt, explore, describe, argue, and discuss there would be no enthralling scientific results, no breakthroughs, and no good academic teaching.

When people study people as in the humanities and social sciences, the relationship between sentiment and research is even more problematic as many old and recent confessional accounts of ethnographic fieldwork testify.[2] Passions of all kinds, both on the part of fieldworkers and informants and between both parties in the ethnographic encounter, creative as well as destructive, are displayed in the fieldwork process. Moreover, passions are part of almost any research topic. They are omnipresent yet they are often denied on the part of the fieldworker and avoided as a research topic.[3] In the Judeo-Christian tradition, one of the sources from which anthropology as a discipline arose, passion has a strong religious connotation. The Passion of Christ as a model of and for the pure scientist who gives up (some of the) worldly pleasures in order to nurture and consume the fruit of knowledge, itself an ambivalent biblical metaphor, is an image that springs to mind. The German term Leidenschaft conserves this connotation of suffering.

Several of these different associations and meanings came together in the spring, itself a season of passion, of 1977 when I was conducting my dissertation fieldwork in a town south of Córdoba city and was confronted with the phenomenon of Holy Week celebrations (Semana Santa). As a 'cold northerner' of Catholic upbringing used to a sober and solemn way of celebrating Christ's Passion, I became fascinated by the often burlesque and boisterous enactment of religious processions. Two years later I returned with the explicit aim to further study the Passion Week phenomenon.[4]

In Andalusia I tasted ethnographic fieldwork and became a passionate ethnographer. This process was indeed boosted by the Holy Week celebrations. I arrived at the fieldwork site when the preparations were in full swing, the locales of religious brotherhoods in operation and the music
bands rehearsing. In fact, the hesitant shouts of cornets and the rolling of drums, a typical spring sound in many Andalusian towns, have become an integral part of the recollections of my first prolonged fieldwork.

2.

Throughout Andalusia the celebration of the Passion Week constitutes, together with the patron saint festival, the climax of communal life. The large number of men of all classes and persuasions organised in religious brotherhoods and the high degree of participation in the Holy Week celebration, form a sharp contrast with the dominant male attitude of indifference or hostility towards the Church, the priests and the official Catholic rites. This anti-clericalism has been part and parcel of working-class culture for more than a century and took on violent forms in the decade preceding the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). The Church had become the backbone of the oligarchy and Catholicism the ideology that legitimated the domination of the propertied classes. Consequently, religion was one of the main issues in the civil war that broke out in 1936 and a major field in which class hatred was acted out. In July 1936 revolutionaries burnt down many churches and convents and in several towns anarchists danced with exhumed corpses of nuns.[5] Followers of Franco displayed an often excessive piety while at the same time slaughtering thousands of 'reds'. The deep wounds caused by the civil war were still festering beneath the surface of social life in the late 1970s.

Religious brotherhoods survived all political crises of the twentieth century as the main carriers of popular and cultural Catholicism. They were the only institutions at the local level in which a measure of democracy was maintained. Some of them openly opposed interference by State and Church. When I arrived at my fieldwork site, a town of 2,500 in a municipality of 5,300 inhabitants, there were seven flourishing religious brotherhoods active in the staging of Semana Santa.[6] In the course of my one-year stay I found out that the social configuration of brotherhoods was a rough mirror of the local class structure.

3.

These voluntary associations were exclusively male and included men of all age grades. The fanatic drum bands of the brotherhoods consisted only of boys and unmarried men. For many participants the Holy Week processions were competitions in masculinity. To beat the drum for hours, to carry the heavy floats with the statues through the steep and winding streets, to drink in excess, to go without sleep for nights, indeed required considerable power of endurance. The religious brotherhoods were organised along class lines. Two of them consisted of 'religious purists' who viewed the Holy Week as a solemn religious ceremony. They did not open eating and drinking locales for their members during Lent as the others did. The three brotherhoods with a predominantly proletarian membership stressed festivity and sociability as their major goals. They opened clubhouses during the weeks preceding the Passion Week where the 'brothers' met
in the evenings to drink, eat and make fun together. The representatives of the former condemned those of the latter as uncultured peasants who mistook the Holy Week for Carnival. In their turn, the latter saw the former as conceited rich and their retainers who displayed a false piety. The relationship between the elite and working-class brotherhoods was one of hostile avoidance. When, for instance, one of the elite brotherhoods had its procession on Good Wednesday, most working-class people avoided the procession route. Labourers told me that they considered the procession dull and lacking in atmosphere. In their turn, the local elite and its two brotherhoods boycotted part of the Good Friday procession, in particular its route through a working-class neighbourhood. Here the main actors were the members of the proletarian brotherhoods who were more or less delirious because of liquor, fireworks, fatigue (the procession started at five o'clock in the morning) and the monotonous rolling of the drums. Early in the afternoon the procession ended in chaos in this neighbourhood.

Relations among the three working-class brotherhoods were of a passionate nature. They involved the fierce competition for honour that is characteristic among near-equals. The main issues at stake concerned the quality of the drum band, clubhouse, singers of saetas (Andalusian Passion songs), the decorations of the statues and floats; and the quantity of Bengal fireworks, wine and brandy. The processions were cheered on with hoarse yells such as "Long live Veronica, the prettiest of all" or "La Soledad is the best". At night, when the floats were parked in the parish church, members of one brotherhood tried to steal as many carnations as possible from a rival brotherhood's float. The atmosphere was always stirring, passion being fired by the consumption of large quantities of local sherry wine, but rarely did competition result in physical violence. In fact, the working-class brotherhoods created their own Holy Week festivity within and against the official framework represented by the parish priest and the elite brotherhoods.

4.

That the religious brotherhood and Passion Week were used as a means to express and celebrate class identity and cohesion rather than religious passion, was first brought home to me when I visited the clubhouses of the brotherhoods during Lent, 1977. At that time, a period of political transition, public discussion of politics was still considered dangerous. However, in the clubhouses of two brotherhoods with a predominantly proletarian membership lively debates were being held about pamphlets of the still illegal socialist and communist labour unions. Six months later when unions and political parties had been legalised, local branches were set up and led by the very men whom I first met in the clubhouses of the brotherhoods.

Political passion and the strong egalitarian ethos of the rural proletariat, which were repressed during four decades of dictatorship, were not the only ones being expressed through the cult of Jesus Christ's Passion. Most townsmen agreed that the Holy Week celebration enhanced the town's ambience. One of my informants put it as follows: "The strife among brotherhoods serves to embellish the Holy Week." He referred to local patriotism, a strong sentiment in southern Spain. The Passion Week also served a centripetal function as one of the main occasions on which hundreds of emigrants returned to their native town to join the festivities.
Although three years earlier I had probed ethnographic fieldwork as a student of cultural anthropology during two months in a small village in the mountains north of Córdoba city where I studied remigration, the real initiation into the profession took place precisely during Lent and the Holy Week celebrations of 1977. It was a hectic period not only for the fieldworker but also for the townspeople who were going through the usual season of social and cultural intensification as well as through an extraordinary phase of political change. I was being assaulted by a bewildering train of perplexities which I tried to unravel and order. I immersed myself and was drawn into different modes of sociability making acquaintances with families of different class backgrounds. I inevitably spent much time with informants in the local bars and clubhouses of the brotherhoods and became part of widening circles of hospitality and exchange. The sherry wine was the main lubricant of male sociability and this alcoholic drink also fuelled my passion for fieldwork and for the siesta which became part of my fieldwork routine. Discussions in bars were often lively and sometimes passionate (not only because one of the favourite topics was sex) involving the whole body not just the face, passionate at least compared to the mostly sober and level-headed sociability I was used to in the Netherlands. I noticed that I often enjoyed participating in these macho gatherings and it was gratifying to master not only the local dialect but particularly the cultural codes.

The fire of the fieldworking passion was thus ignited during these hectic weeks. It manifested itself in the drive to collect data, which I often regarded as exotic, to figure out patterns of social relationships, and to get cues about what local life was about. The 'discovery' of the fact that the contours of class structure were present in the configuration of religious brotherhoods, was an important moment during my fieldwork.

To be sure, there were also times, especially in winter, of boredom and stagnation when fieldwork became a kind of ordeal with a dose of mild suffering. I had to endure the drudge of social routine, the sometimes aggressive hospitality, and the rather claustrophobic macho script played out in all-male gatherings. I finally developed a dislike to the local wine and some informants were getting on my nerve. What seemed to be exotic during the first months had become familiar towards the end of my fieldwork. I was lucky that my life companion had joined me and we sometimes fled to the quiet haven of the Alcazar gardens in Córdoba city.

The beginning and end of my fieldwork year was marked by the sounds of cornets and drums. By and large it was a passionate year with an enduring impact on my life. Back home another passion began to bloom: a passion for writing and reading. But that is another, much longer, story.


[4] In fact, the religious brotherhoods which constitute the backbone of Holy Week celebrations, constituted the topic of my first international conference paper. This was presented at the International Conference on Religion in the Mediterranean Area in Amsterdam, December 1979. It was published as "Religious Brotherhoods: Class and Politics in an Andalusian Town", in: E.R. Wolf (ed.): Religion, Power and Protest in Local Communities. The Northern Shore of the Mediterranean. Amsterdam, Berlin, New York, 73-92.


[6] The larger rural settlements in the vast municipal territory had their own brotherhoods and Holy Week celebrations.

[7] Carnival was repressed by the Franco regime and was revived after the dictator's death.

[8] That story would, among many other topics, discuss stereotypes lurking in the ethnography of Andalusia, my own work included. T. Mitchell (1990), for instance, in his Passional Culture. Emotion, Religion, and Society in Southern Spain. Philadelphia, turns the Passion into the key to and essence of Andalusian culture. Writing about millions of people, Mitchell holds that "The plot line of the Passion according to Andalusia can be summarised as suffering, death, burial, and suffering without end." He links the Passion "as lived by the Andalusians" to a penitential ideology that profoundly influences their worldview. Such sweeping statements echo the preconceptions of earlier French and British travellers who were infected by the 'Mediterranean passion'.