

The Past ‘Interpreter’.

Historical Stratifications in the Ritual Symbolism of Saint Joseph Festivals and Holy Week in Sicily

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Abstract: The themes of cultural continuity and ‘survival’ of ritual symbolism have been at the centre of debate in the anthropological and historical religious fields. They became topical again in relation to the issue of the patrimonialization of ‘traditional’ religious festivals such as Saint Joseph and Holy Week, festivals whose ritual symbolism (sacred banquet, procession, evergreen branches, ritual breads, songs and dances) shows an evident pre-Christian and agrarian root. A number of questions emerge about both the usefulness of historical sources (archaeological and documentary) with regard to the understanding of contemporary ritual reality, and about the issue of the chronological continuity of practices and beliefs; these deserve to be reconsidered on the basis of renewed research and observations, considering the dissolution of what has been defined as ‘rural civilization’ and the renewed interests towards immaterial patrimony by communities searching for their identity matrices. We can and must go back to asking ourselves: can material and immaterial tokens of the past, even the remotest ones, help us understand what we observe in current festive contexts?

‘Archaic’ contexts



Fig. 1: Sacrificial ox in Roccavaldina (ph. A. Russo – G. Muccio)

Roccavaldina (the Nebrodi mountains, Province of Messina), first week of August. A young, white, immaculate ox is slowly advancing through the crowd. It is blindfolded and bound with red ribbons, and follows docilely the procession of the sacred simulacrum of St.

Nicholas, the patron and protective saint of the community, toward the sacrificial spot, an ancient millstone (**fig. 1**).

Upon arrival it is blessed by the priest and then slaughtered in an expert manner with a knife to the jugular.¹ The carcass will be butchered and its meat, after having been cooked in large pots, will be brought in procession by officiants to the Piazza del Duomo, where, in front of and *with* the saint, after the distribution of blessed sandwiches the faithful will collectively consume this sacred meal, *u cummitu* (the banquet) (**fig. 3**).

¹ This practice was abandoned about twenty years ago due to the intervention of animal rights associations.

Today the ox is slaughtered directly in the abattoir according to standard procedures.



Fig. 2: Two girls representing St. Agatha and Catherine in Ali Superiore (ph. A. Russo – G. Muccio)



Fig. 3: Procession with ox's meat in Roccavaldina (ph. A. Russo – G. Muccio)

Ali Superiore (the Nebrodi mountains, Province of Messina), third week of August. Through the steep and narrow streets of this mountainous locale the *cilii* – the traditional processional carriages – are advancing, followed by a multitude of the praying faithful. The first carriage is transporting a parallelepiped structure in purple cloth, at whose centre a picture of St. Agatha is shown. She is lined with unleavened breads in the shapes of nails, hammers, hands, palms, crowns, and other shapes referring to her life and martyrdom, and also

with numerous bells (*ciancianeddi*) and red and white ribbons. The second carriage is covered with a canvas canopy on which several pieces of gold jewellery are attached as votive offerings. It is transporting two girls, representing St. Agatha and Catherine, who are weaving on a traditional wooden loom (**fig. 2**).

Ventimiglia di Sicilia (the Madonie mountains, Province of Palermo), second week of August. On the occasion of the feast of Our Lady of Graces or of the Rock, which traditionally concludes the harvest period, a pilgrimage takes place. The faithful go to a sanctuary located near two massive boulders that together form a kind of small cave. Inside this cave the worshippers deposit candles and flower bouquets *ex-voto*, thereby recalling a cultic context that is foreign to Christian liturgy.

Troina (the Nebrodi mountains, Province of Messina), last week of May. Sounds of gunfire and indistinct shouts emerge from a dense forest of oak and holly. Suddenly pilgrims appear out of the curtain of trees, exiting the forest in an orderly procession. They appear to be trees themselves, laden as they are with intensely green leafy branches (**figs. 4–5**).

These are laurels, *Laurus nobilis*, or *u ddauru* in local parlance. They are the branches of the sacred plant of St. Silvester, patron saint of Troina, which the faithful gathered on the previous day in a dark valley of the more distant Caronia forest and which are now being brought to the saint, at his grave in the city temple, for the purpose of fulfilling a vow or requesting his favour.

We are in Sicily in the 21st century, but in light of such ritual performances and symbolism as these, one may believe us to be in remote places and times: in a sacred procession through the streets of Greece or Rome behind a sacrificial

victim;² in Athens, in a peplum-filled procession to the Panathenaea;³ on the top of a hill by a megalith sacred to the *Meteres*;⁴ or in the forests of Parnassus on a pilgrimage to the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi.⁵ Yes, it would really seem as if we were in distant places and times, were it not for the diverse scenery, the dress of the faithful and of the pilgrims, the sunglasses, the smartphones...



Figs. 4-5: Laurels in procession in Regalbuto and Troina (ph. I. Buttitta, A. Russo – G. Muccio)

St. Nicholas is neither Jupiter nor Mars, St. Agatha is not Athena, Our Lady of Graces is neither Tanit nor Demeter nor any of the other life cycle goddesses, St. Silvester is not Apollo, nor is the forest of Caronia the Vale of Tempe, and the *ramara* ('branch-carriers', as the

pilgrims are called) are most certainly not the *daphnephori*. On close examination, ancient and contemporary ceremonies and their ritual symbols have their distinct characteristics and do not appear to be entirely comparable, not even morphologically, and so it does not seem possible – at least not at first glance – to assign similar functions to the rites of the past and those of the present, or analogous motives to the various cult actors of differing eras. On the other hand, it is undeniable that the beliefs, cultic expressions, festive rituals, and pilgrimages that involve many Sicilian communities even today display strong resemblances with those of even quite remote times and places, and this not only on a superficial level⁶ – so much so, in many instances, that if we arbitrarily extrapolate a single ritual from its socio-historical context, namely that of the popular religious festival, that ritual may appear to us timeless, or to be an instance of 'eternal return', as Eliade described it.⁷

² See Burkert 1981; Grottanelli – Parise 1993; Scheid 2011; Detienne – Vernant 2014. Esp. on "sacrifice" in modern and contemporary peasant ritual and in ancient cult practices: Georgoudi 2014. On bovine sacrifice in Greece: Paus., *Perieg.* I, 24, 4 and I, 28, 10 (*Bouphonia*); *Od.* III, 6–7 (sacrifice of black oxen to Poseidon); *Od.* III, 430 (sacrifice of a white heifer to Athena). For the whiteness of the bovine pelt: *Il.* XXIII, 12–34: "and many white bulls (πολλοὶ μὲν βόες ἄργοι) were slaughtered" (v. 30). See McInerney 2010, esp. ch. 6–9. Literary and iconographic testimonies in ThesCRA 2004, I, 59 ff.

³ Gulh 1860, 199 ff.; Deubner 1932, 22 ff.; Simon 1983, 38 ff.

⁴ Angelini 1992; Corradini 1997; India 2014. There is a vast literature aiming to demonstrate the relation between popular Marian cults and those of pre-Christian female deities (James 1959; Warner 1980; Neumann 1981; Baring, Cashford 1991; Pestalozza 1996 and 2001; Gimbutas 1990 and 2005). This hermeneutic standpoint has been criticized by various scholars (e.g. Georgoudi 1994; Chirassi Colombo 2008; Greco 2016), both regarding the supposed presence of a

shared prehistoric religiosity centred on the Great Goddess, and also regarding the continuity between prehistoric female deities and the divine figures of the ancient Pantheon and Christianity.

⁵ Plut., *Quaest. Graec.* XII; Elian., *Var. Hist.* III, 1. The ritual in Thebes mentioned by Pausanias and Proclus is similar: Paus., *Perieg.* IX, 10; Procl., *apud Photii Biblioth.*, 321. See Jeanmaire 1939, 388 ff.; Brelich 1969, 387 ff. 413 ff.; Calame 1977, 117 ff. 191 ff.; Buttitta I. E. 1992; 2013.

⁶ Wittgenstein 1974, 46–47; 1975; Needham 1975; Perrissinotto 1997, 88–95. There are many other symbols and ritual practices in Sicily's religious festivals that recall those of classical and Near Eastern antiquity: the processional use of evergreen branches, the lighting of bonfires and torches, alms for children, ritually formalized food consumption, dances and races of giant puppets and of carriages transporting sacred simulacra, ceremonial dances and ritual games, and demonic and theriomorphic costumes (Buttitta I. E. 1999; 2002b; 2006; 2013; Bonanzinga 2013; Giallombardo 2003).

⁷ Eliade 1999.

First considerations

If we hypothesize – albeit one that cannot be philologically proven⁸ – that at least in some cases ritual behaviour and symbols of an archaic flavour are seamlessly derived from the past and without being cultural events that have been separately and/or independently caused by various events (social upheavals, ethnic or cultural changes, political exigencies, etc.), then we must ask ourselves what the main factors were that allowed for such a long duration.

There are very specific reasons for the continuation of archaic symbols and behaviour in contemporary festivals, even if these have been transformed and invested with new meaning, and for their presence through the millennia in a fundamentally agricultural and pastoral society. First, the deep relationship between Christianity and the popular, especially farming, world,⁹ and the reiteration of cultural and behavioural patterns whose persistence could be connected, at least to some extent, to maintain – in the European countryside until fairly recent times – some essential elements of the lifestyle and the existential framework which had characterized pre-existing rural societies.¹⁰ We find no valid reasons for assuming that in the peasant and pastoral societies of the post-pagan world there had to be any radical change in the mythopoeic mechanisms, the ‘expectations’ of hierophanies, the elective places of the

manifestations of the holy.¹¹ Rather, both historians of religion and anthropologists are aware of how the continued renewal of analogous practices suggests to the *homo religiosus* a consolidation of worship and therefore sustains the persistence over time of its ritual forms.¹²

Christological and hagiographical reinterpretation has certainly contributed to the conservation – and not merely survival¹³ – of ancient symbolic heritage (especially to its iconic and performative aspects) in its historic concentration to evangelize the Italian farming and urban common people.¹⁴ It thus happened that an original valorisation of the Christian message that could be defined as “cosmic Christianity” developed in the rural sphere.¹⁵ Within this framework, the Christological story of incarnation, death, and resurrection is rejected, and its linearity subverted, in narratives and ritual expressions, in favour of a circularity that views nature – that is, life and fertility – and humanity as cyclically redeemed and renewed.¹⁶

Other important factors have also facilitated the long morphological – if not functional – duration of ritual symbolism. At least since the early Middle Ages these surely include the continuous manipulations – sometimes secret,

⁸ Some rare exceptions are those contexts where it is possible to reconstruct through archaeological and textual evidence, even if only imperfectly, the development of cults in Carthaginian and Greek Sicily up to the present. Among these we have for example the cult of the Madonna of Bitalemi in Gela (Buttitta I. E. 2018).

⁹ See Niola 2009, 101. The attitudes of local churches to the expressions of so-called popular piety have not been homogenous or consistent: Colombo *et alii* 1979; De Rosa 1981, 75–114; Tagliaferri 2014; Berzano, Castegnaro, Pace 2014. See also Gurevič 1986; Schmitt 2000.

¹⁰ See Seppilli 2008, 545

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Pagliaro 1972; Miceli 1989.

¹³ The phenomena of magic and popular religiosity have been explored starting with studies in evolutionary anthropology and then in the research on

“survival” or religious remnants: Tylor 1871; Saintyves 1932; Cocchiara 1978; Belmont 1988; Lauwers 1988–1989; Lanternari 2006.

¹⁴ See Niola 2009, 101. Cirese, commenting on the letters of St. Gregory the Great regarding the evangelization of Sardinia and England, observes that, given the obvious strength of the resistance and the need for compromise (*duris mentibus simul omnia abscindere impossibile esse non dubium est*), it is no wonder that, in spite of hundreds of prohibitions and disapprovals of the *consuetudines non laudabiles* declared by ecclesiastical Councils or Synods in two thousand years, ‘popular’ religiosity is still largely permeated with ‘magical’ and ‘superstitious’ elements. He underlines that there are many examples of mixing and confusion of pre-Christian and Christian beliefs and observances (1997, 100–101). On this issue, see also Lelli 2014.

¹⁵ Eliade 1997, 144.

¹⁶ Auf der Maur 1990; Cullmann 2005.

sometimes overt – of historical and political¹⁷ identity and, in more recent times, reinvention and development in the tourist-patrimonial arena. The heterodox practices and beliefs that characterize Sicilian ritual contexts, far from being mere remnants, rather turn out to be functional mechanisms for affirming and negotiating individual, familial, and communal identities.¹⁸

If, then, we are faced with a heterodox symbolism that is mostly connected to the themes of vegetal and human fecundity and of the return of life and abundance, and with the specific agrarian temporality of certain para-liturgical rites, “non è certo il caso di ipotizzare fantasiose filiazioni dagli antichi culti [...], appare ancor meno sensato chiudere gli occhi di fronte a certe analogie. Che non sono mai una risposta ma una domanda” [it is certainly not the case to hypothesize imaginative parentages from the ancient cults [...], it seems even less sensible to close the eyes in front of certain analogies, which are never an answer but a question].¹⁹ This is a solicitation to examine carefully, but without prejudice, the formal connections and the resemblance between the rituals of the past, including the remote past, and those of the present.

The festival of Saint Joseph

The framework we have just outlined is particularly evident in Sicily when it comes to the rites and symbols of spring festivals, notably those of St. Joseph and of Holy Week.²⁰ Within the rural ceremonial calendar these festivals are configured as New Year's celebrations, as the renewal of life cycles and social relations, but also as the recollection and sharing of a specific cultural memory.²¹

It is no coincidence that in Sicily St. Joseph is one of the most revered saints. He is the

protagonist of special celebrations in many parts of the island, in some more than once per year. These celebrations in his honour do not exclusively fall close to March 19, but also in April and May and in the summer, a period in which many areas of Sicily experience higher numbers of people, both tourists and migrants who temporarily return home to honour their patron and protector saints.



Fig. 6: An altar for the celebration of St. Joseph in Leonforte (ph. A. Russo – G. Muccio)

¹⁷ Halbwachs 1952; Hobsbawm, Ranger 1994; Assmann 1997; Fabietti – Matera 1999; Bausinger 2005; 2008; Spineto 2015, 3–44.

¹⁸ Bravo 2001: esp. 149–199; Bonato 2006; Palumbo 2003; 2009; Fournier 2013; Giancristofaro 2017.

¹⁹ Niola 2009, 101.

²⁰ Buttitta A. 1990; Plumari 2003; Giallombardo 2006.

²¹ Lanternari 1976; Grimaldi 1993; Buttitta I. E. 2006.

In addition to the procession with the statue and carriage, the ritual elements that most characterize the celebrations of St. Joseph are: alms and offerings of wheat (always more common than money), ‘tables’ and ‘altars’ (fig. 6),²² sacred images (a recurrent motif is the flight into Egypt²³), and the lighting of bonfires. As is the case with the public cults of many other saints, stemming as they do from the faith of the same ecclesiastical matrix, the celebrations of this patriarch presents – and almost always without the participants being aware of it – a pre-Christian ritual symbolism. The period of the year in which the saint’s celebration takes place is of particular interest for agricultural life, as it appears in the rural religious calendar as a period of change, as a veritable ceremony of seasonal passage from winter to spring.

The nature of this rite of passage becomes explicit first of all in the widespread use of *vampi* (bonfires). They are lit in the evening of March 18, the eve of the festival, and are traditionally advertised as winter’s last fire. They mark the end of the cold and thus the definitive extinguishing of the braziers used for heating. Like all ritual fires in winter (among which are those for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Saint Lucia, Christmas, St. Anthony the Great), the *vampe* of our patriarch seem to recall archaic purifying and apotropaic rituals, ceremonies of cyclical renewal that have been

reconfigured over the centuries at the hand of historical processes and socio-economic events.²⁴



Figs. 7-8: Banquet with children performing St. Joseph, baby Jesus, and Mary, often accompanied by poor or orphaned children in Salemi and Capizzi (ph. A. Russo – G. Muccio)

This dimension of the festival of passage between different time periods can also be seen in the preparation of the votive tables and altars and in the banquet in which the ‘saints’ participate as representatives of St. Joseph, baby Jesus, and Mary, often accompanied by a varying number of usually poor or orphaned children

²² Tables and altars with steps, made for fulfilling a vow to the saint (but also for replying to a request from the saint presented in a dream), framed by branches of laurel and/or myrtle and covered with white fabrics on which an image of the saint is embroidered, breads of the most varied shapes (of animals, vegetables, and stars, related to the story of the saint and of Christ), and the dishes that will be consumed by the actors who represent the Holy Family and those accompanying them: *apostuli, santi, virgineddi, vicchiareddi*, etc. (apostles, saints, maidens, old men, etc.) (Pitrè 1881, 230 ff.; 1900, 445). The table of the god placed on the steps where the sacred image is located, and the table below containing the dishes for the Holy Family and the other guests, constitute a single sacred space where bread is a connective, connotative and commemorative substance (see Cusumano 1992, 73).

²³ *Matthew 2*, 13–23

²⁴ As already on Lemnos the extinguishing of the fire refers to chaos and death, and its rekindling marks the recomposition of the cosmos and the resumption of life on both the human and cosmic levels (Philostr., *Heroik.*, XX, 24; Dumézil 1924; Delcourt 1957, 171–190; Burkert 1992, 35–56; Bettini 2005). Ritual bonfires appear in various contexts: from the Persian *Nowrouz*, in which on the last Tuesday of the year (*chāršamb-e sūrī*) large bonfires are lit during the night over which people jump, to the fires dedicated to saints, lit during festivals and seasonal passage rites (especially in connection with equinox and solstice) in various parts of Europe (Ariño 1992; Buttitta I. E. 1999; 2002a; Lombardo 2010; D’Onofrio 2018, 90 ff.).



Fig. 9: Consumption of grains and boiled legumes in Ribera (ph. A. Russo – G. Muccio)

(figs. 7–8). This devotional practice presents a ritual symbolism that is obviously rooted in archaic land-based imagery. It is not a coincidence, nor can it be explained purely on the basis of charity or wealth redistribution, that it is the children – and traditionally the poorest ones – that are invited to the tables to consume a symbolically very significant dish, one that is

²⁵ Lombardi Satriani – Meligrana 1989, 139. The intimate relationship between children and the deceased is unequivocally established in the child alms of *su mortu mortu* and *sas animas* that are still performed even today in Sardinia on the eve of the Commemoration of the Dead (Mannia 2015). On the liminality of children, Jesi observes that the child is closer to death than the adult is, and at the same time is closer to birth and therefore to the limit of non-existence. He is, more than the adult, near death, because death, as well as for the elderly, can strike him more easily (2013, 35). In many societies, the child is not considered to be a full human being until it has completed certain initiatory rites (Lévi-Strauss 1995; Buttitta A. 1995).

²⁶ Alcman observes that spring is the season “in which everything blossoms, but there isn’t much to eat” (*fragm.* 56). Indeed, in the spring the new seeds have started to rise but the food stores that have sustained the family over the winter are exhausted and the new

explicitly connected with the agrarian cycle and with the request for safety and abundance. The rural cultural memory, in fact, records the existence at certain times of a symbolic exchange in which the deceased are represented by the poor or by children.²⁵ Spring is the time of the most acute food shortage.²⁶ It therefore becomes necessary to celebrate abundance, promote the rebirth of vegetation, and to anticipate abundant food consumption. Here we find the necessary food offerings to the poor, children, and to helpless, people who stand for otherness and who are thereby ritually called upon to represent the deceased guarantors of life cycles and, together, to share in the food as an auspicious sign of future riches.²⁷

At the banquet with the dead

The ritual banquet that takes place around the table of St. Joseph is generally called *fari i virgineddi* (make the maidens). In the towns of the Madonie mountain range – Alimena, Isnello, Gangi, Petralia Soprana, Caltavuturo – the boys and girls are called *virgineddi*, are always odd-numbered, and are invited to the votive table together with the ‘saints’.²⁸ Among the various interesting elements of this sacred meal, which is based exclusively on vegetarian products,²⁹ is the opening dish: rice or pasta with lentils or beans, often accompanied by wild fennel. Cusumano has observed that in antiquity lentils and beans, due to their connotation of seeds in

harvest is yet to come. A Calabrian proverb goes: “*Prima Natali, né friddu, né fami / Doppu Natali, lu friddu e la fami*” (Before Christmas neither cold nor hunger / After Christmas both cold and hunger) (Teti 1978, 177). See D’Onofrio 1998, 119.

²⁷ The social value of the ritual must be emphasized. The preparation of the tables and altars requires coordination, organization, and participation among family members, relatives, and neighbours. Eating and drinking together play an essential role in social life. The meal is a form of relationship which creates meaningful bonds and duties (see Giallombardo 2006, 12).

²⁸ Sottile – Genchi 2011, 270 ff.; Giacomarra 2012.

²⁹ Vegetables and fresh fruit, as well as various dishes based on legumes, vegetables, and eggs, from which meat is traditionally absent. It may be useful to refer to the *theoxenia* (see ThesCRA 2004, II, esp. 225 ff. 247 ff.).

pods, as well as broad beans, were symbolically the food of the dead and practically the main meal of funeral feasts³⁰, but in all eras also of religious festivals dedicated to the deceased, from the *Anthesteria*, which was characterized by the consumption of a *panspermia*,³¹ “which everyone boils in the city”³² – a true and proper “supper for the souls”³³ that was forbidden to the priests and only eaten privately within the family³⁴ – to the folkloric ceremonies that anticipate the consumption of grains and boiled legumes (**fig. 9**).

Both the *cuccia* (boiled wheat) consumed for the Commemoration of the Dead as well as the soup of St. Joseph (legumes and boiled vegetables) are ritual foods based on unground seeds, and they are part of a unique vitalistic-chthonian symbolism. They represent a powerful life, one that can only express itself fully by being introduced into the earth and the kingdom of the dead: the seeds are delivered to this kingdom, and it is thanks to the dead that they are able to take root and to sprout, to gain robust stems, and finally to produce their kernels.

This relationship between the dead and the living, between the underworld and the earth above where the work of agriculture takes place, and the absolute dependence of a good harvest on the powers of the earth, were very clear to the ancient farmer. He knew perfectly well that:

The community was not merely composed of the living but of the ancestors as well. [...] The ancestors, the custodians of the source of life, were the reservoir of power and the vitality, the source whence flowed all the forces of vigour, sustenance and growth. [...] Whatever happened, whether for good or evil, ultimately derived from them. The sprouting of the corn, the increase of the herds,

*potency in men, success in hunting or war, were all manifestations of their power and approval.*³⁵

In the critical moments of the production cycle it thus becomes necessary to stand in a positive relation to those who guarantee the life and reproduction of the fruits of the earth³⁶ by offering them, as a form of “obligatory” and “necessary” generosity, vegetal items, the products of the earth – precisely the “gifts” that the deceased themselves have brought forth and must continue to bring forth through the earth as gifts to the living:

Par des offrandes alimentaires aux morts, par des rituels qui instaurent la tutelle des puissances souterraines sur les espèces végétales, le groupe veille à relancer sans cesse la circulation entre l'espace souterrain (hypochthonion) et la surface de la terre (epichthonion). Les travaux agricoles sont exécutés, mais ils ne sont pas pensés. Leur efficacité est conditionnelle. Il ne viendrait à l'esprit de personne que l'action humaine ait par elle-même le pouvoir de faire surgir les nourritures du sol: la nourriture en surgira parce que l'on aura su solliciter les puissances dispensatrices des biens. [...] En fait, tout dépend des puissances surnaturelles, l'action humaine est purement médiatrice. [Through food offerings to the dead, through rituals which establish the guardianship of the underground powers over the plant species, the group constantly strives to revive the circulation between the subterranean space (hypochthonion) and the surface of the earth (epichthonion). The agricultural work is done, but they are not thought. Their effectiveness is conditional. It would not come to anyone's mind that human action itself has the power to bring food out of the soil: food will arise

³⁰ See Cusumano 1992, 75.

³¹ The *panspermia* was consumed in Athens during funerals and also in another moment of cosmic crisis, namely at the *Pyanepsia* in autumn (Spineto 2005, 106).

³² Schol. R. Aristoph. *Ran*, v. 218.

³³ Harrison 1991, 37.

³⁴ Burkert 1981, 173; Daraki 1985, 86. For Nilsson this ritual should be compared to the Roman *Parentalia* and the Persian *Hamaspahmaedaya*, which were also spring ceremonies revolving around the cult of the dead (1992, 597).

³⁵ Rundle Clark 1959, 119. See Eliade 1976, 363 ff.

³⁶ See Gernet 1983, 47.

*because we have been able to solicit the powers dispensing the goods. [...] In fact, everything depends on the supernatural powers, the human action is purely mediator].*³⁷

Children ancestors

The evidence that at the table dedicated to the Patriarch, not only the gods and humans participate, but also those who have died³⁸ becomes especially explicit in some places, like in Cammarata and Troina. There, the young guests at the ritual table assume the same names as those that have passed away and thus reveal their own position as representatives of the ancestors.

In Cammarata, in the Sicani mountains, the traditional ritual entails food and money alms from the women of the families that have obliged themselves toward the saint with a votive. There then follow the arrangement of tables filled with dishes and breads that have been prepared by a group of thirty select women, and a banquet offered to the poor and the children, who are representing the Holy Family. These can extend from a minimum of three to a maximum of thirteen members and are called *i vicchiareddi* (the old men). The holy guests are served at the table by the head of the family and taste all the foods that have been offered, and at the end of the ritual they take the rest of the food along with them.³⁹

In Troina in the Nebrodi mountains, until just a few years ago the votive obligation (*a prumissioni*, lit. the promise) toward the saint was fulfilled by inviting the *vicchjunedda* (young old persons). *Fari i vicchjunedda* was understood to mean the organization of a table for a strictly odd number of children, which could stretch from nine to nineteen depending on the magnitude of grace required. The children, who indeed were called *vicchjunedda*, had to present themselves at the lunch without having

eaten any food during the morning. They were offered a meal in the house of the person who had taken the votive, a communal meal in which adults also took part. The number of dishes varied depending on the magnitude of the votive, but corresponding to the number of guests it had to be strictly odd. Significantly, the main dish was chickpeas, either together with pasta and seasoned with wild fennel, or chickpeas alone, upon which other mainly vegetarian dishes followed, like vegetable firstlings, boiled vegetables, thistles, fried cod, fruit (especially oranges), and sweets.

In Troina, the proximity – if not a shared identity – between children and deceased can be seen in another life cycle ritual, namely that of the *vicinièddi* (lit. young neighbours). These were an always odd number (three or five) of neighbourhood children that were invited to the houses where a death had taken place a week or a month previously. The closest family member of the dead would invite them to consume a meal, also in this case after fasting, based on lentils and vegetables. Before they commenced the meal, the children would recite a prayer with the name of the deceased, for the purpose of *arrifriscàricci l'armuzza* (lit. refreshing his soul), that is, of bringing him relief. It is significant that this ritual practice is often recalled by informants just contextually to the *vicchjuneddas* to report affinities and divergences.⁴⁰

U cùnzulu da Bedda Matri

The chthonic-funerary dimension of the ceremonies for St. Joseph is also seen in the contexts where the meal of the Holy Family assumes the explicit meaning of a funeral meal, *u cùnzulu* (lit. consolation).⁴¹ A devotional tradition on the 'death of St. Joseph' does indeed exist in several figurative expressions, based on a passage of the 4th–5th century apocryphal text *The Story of Joseph the Carpenter* (12–32). In

³⁷ Daraki 1985, 59. See Gernet 1983, 47; Propp 1978, 45; Bacchiega 1971.

³⁸ See Cusumano 1992, 76.

³⁹ De Gregorio 2008, 66–67.

⁴⁰ See Castiglione 2016, 176.

⁴¹ Lombardi Satriani – Meligrana 1989, 139 ff.; Cavalcanti 1995, 84 f.; Giallombardo 2006, 69 f.

Alimena, for instance, the ritual of the table with the *virgineddi* represents *u cùnzulu* for the Madonna upon the death of her husband. In Leonforte, the *artaru* (altar) symbolizes *u cùnzulu da Bedda Matri*, that is the lunch which the apostles themselves and relatives would have prepared for the Virgin Mary on the occasion of the departure of her husband Joseph;⁴² here, until just a few years ago, the song *Transitu di lu Patriarca San Giuseppe* (the passing of the patriarch St. Joseph), in the form of a lament by Mary on the death of her husband, was sung on the occasion of the ‘funeral meal’ for St. Joseph.

In Niscemi as well the banquet, called *cena*, is considered to be a *cùnzulu* for the Madonna after the death of her husband. The night of March 18 is spent according to formalized arrangements of a funeral wake: people pray, but at the same time next-door neighbour and homies tell happy and funny stories, people admire the sumptuous altars and play music and dance. In Niscemi there is a reference to the death of St. Joseph also in the novena (*i setti nuveri ri San Giuseppi* or *i setti ruluri ri San Giuseppi*: the seven novenas of St. Joseph or the seven sorrows of St. Joseph), which takes place from the 12th to the 18th of March. During this time the altars are temporarily opened to the public in order to allow the performance of the songs: The sixth and seventh part of the *nuvera* (novena) deal with the death and the testament of the Saint: even today the oldest witnesses define it as *u lamentu*, a term which denotes, in many Sicilian villages, the dialectal songs narrating the events of the Passion of the Christ.⁴³

Along with the funerary aspect of the banquet in Leonforte, as in other towns such as Assoro, Bivona, Mirabella Imbaccari, we also have the laments, which are polyvocal songs that tell of the passion and death of Christ, and which one would have expected to be performed only

during Holy Week processions.⁴⁴ In Assoro and Leonforte the songs are performed by *confrati* (religious brothers) and elders before the altars in a religious atmosphere. The case is similar in Mirabella Imbaccari, where in the evening of March 18 the *lamentanze* (complaints) are performed in front of altars set up in the homes of the faithful who have expressed a votive, in a calm and formal mood. During the performance everyone else is silent, most of them standing, one or two sitting down; a few women, young and old, are moved to tears. At the end the singers are offered food and drink. Both when they first appear and when they subsequently depart for a new altar, they offer their best wishes to the family. This last act is of particular importance since it rejects permanent continuity, in spite of the adaptation of the feasts of St. Joseph to the Catholic codes, of the archaic link between the figures of the “otherness” which arrive periodically and the well-being of men and the seasonal and cosmic renewal.⁴⁵

It is here, finally, that the belief that the ‘table’ should be connected to *u cùnzulu da Bedda Matri* acquires a more articulated meaning: in the *cùnzulu* offered to Mary, the community shows its solidarity with the Mother of God, which reciprocally will be bestowed upon the community of the living in the form of wellbeing and prosperity. More generally, the community commemorates death and the dead at a time when the return of life is celebrated, in the awareness that the eternal cycle of existence is destined to escape human control.

Bread spirals

This is where the spiral-shaped breads called *cudduri* become significant. They are found in Mirabella and elsewhere in other ritual circumstances (for the Commemoration of the Dead in Calamònci, Augusta, and Syracuse; for Good Friday in Longi), and they refer to the mysterious world of death and yearly rebirth. The

⁴² See Buttitta – Algozino 2006, 34.

⁴³ See Giallombardo 2006, 44.

⁴⁴ Macchiarella 1993.

⁴⁵ See Giallombardo 2006, 47.

cutting of them into two parts signifies the beginning of the ritual meal, through which the living will be united with the saints and with their ancestors in order to solicit future commitment to the living and to guarantee the cyclical renewal of life.⁴⁶ It is particularly significant, in fact, that the first piece cut from the *cuddura*⁴⁷ that introduces the table of St. Joseph, at the beginning of the 'saints' lunch and after having been tasted by the girl who represents the Madonna, is set aside to be dried, after which it is mixed with flour and wheat to be sown in the fall.⁴⁸

As Cirese has observed, the form does not nourish, it conveys information and not calories.⁴⁹ The image in the ceremonial breads of a double spiral – the union of two twin elements – has been interpreted as a stylization of sexual intercourse due to the fact that the term used to indicate it, *cùcchia*, can mean "intercourse" or "female sexual organ" as well as "couple" or "pair".⁵⁰ Even if this etymological evidence and its concomitant simplistic aetiology of gender cannot be denied, it can nonetheless be added that the breads are also part of an undoubtedly cosmological symbolism that is thoroughly attested: the double spiral is indeed reminiscent of very similar bas-relief decorations on two tomb doors from the Sicilian Bronze Age site of Castelluccio,⁵¹ but also of the spiral motifs that decorate the clay objects of protohistoric island cultures, e.g. that of Serra d'Alto.⁵²

⁴⁶ Filoramo 1993; Cavalcanti 1995, 57 ff.; Bolognari 2001; ThesCRA 2004, II, 247 ff. The ritual breads, like all dishes of the meal for the Holy Family (which traditionally may not include any meat dishes!), are to all effective purposes considered to be a "bloodless" offering. This kind of offering is recorded e.g. by Paus.: *Perieg.*, I, 38, 6; V, 14, 4 and 10; VIII, 42, 14. These offerings are not always consumed by fire but sometimes simply deposited at the feet of the gods: I, 18, 7; VI, 20, 2–3. See Ellinger 2005: *passim*; Pirenne – Delforge 2008: 234 ff. For ancient Sicily we may point to the *milloi*, the cakes in the shape of the female genitals that were offered to Demeter in Syracuse (Athen. XIV, 647a).

⁴⁷ The large circular bread features a relief of two opposing spirals or two female hands crossed over the chest. This image is considered to be a sign of Mary's

A vitalistic-propitiatory value associated with fecundity and resurgence has also been attributed to the symbolism of the *cuddura* in Mirabella, as to the two stone slabs in Castelluccio. The double spiral suggests itself as a synthetic representation of opposing sexual and/or cosmic forces and at the same time as a symbolization of the cyclical process of becoming and periodic rebirth, that is, of the process of agricultural-chthonic creation and re-creation, to which the agricultural, cosmic, and human cycles are intimately connected.⁵³

This hypothesis is confirmed by contextual analysis. The double spiral on the breads falls within a well-defined and historicized iconography – it can be compared with a long series of representations of spirals within the plastic and graphic arts, most having to do with the funerary sphere and with the sexuality and regeneration firmly rooted in Bronze Age and most likely Neolithic culture (it is enough to think of the images in the subterranean temples on Malta, or of the necropolis in Newgrange, or of the double spiral on the vulva of the Karanovo

sorrow over her husband's death. The bread therefore represents the Madonna. In the Catholic universe, the mother of Christ was able to re-assume some fundamental values of the female principle. A dual principle, liminal and therefore pregnant with that circularity between death and rebirth which the ancient Goddess impersonated, declined on spiritual isotopy by Christian catechesis (see Giallombardo 2006, 47; Buttitta I. E. 2008, 117–167).

⁴⁸ Perricone 2005, 18; Giallombardo 2006, 47–48.

⁴⁹ See Cirese 1990, 34.

⁵⁰ Pitre 1889, IV, 350; Uccello 1976, 68.

⁵¹ Tusa 1994, 131–132; Uccello 1976, 56.

⁵² Panvini 1996, 11.

⁵³ Gimbutas 1990, 279 ff. 293 ff.; Lurker 1995, 164 ff.; Guènon 1980, 46–54; Galletti 2015.

Venus). But it is the contextual reading that allows us to establish a clear relationship between Mirabella's *cuddura* and the doors from Castelluccio.

The *cuddura* is the fruit of female labour and destined to guarantee the future harvest. The bread is the door. The opening of the door, that is, the dissection of the liminal bread, is the significative and transformative act that introduces the myth into space-time. The door is the physical symbol of the passage from one space to another and of the transformation from one semantic state to the other.⁵⁴ The double-spiral bread is the diaphragm that, like the tomb stone slab, separates the living from the dead, while also being the place and object that symbolically reunites the one with the other. This introduces to St. Joseph's table and to the banquet the element that will unite the dead and the living, and gods and men. It is just like the tomb slab that opens onto the space where the relatives came to commemorate their dead with food offerings, thereby sharing the food with their ancestors and the divine powers, soliciting their commitment toward human beings and sustaining the cyclical reconstruction of life. This is the founding ideology of ceremonies like that of the tables of St. Joseph and of Holy Week, a festive occasion characterized also in Sicily by different ritual behaviour and heterodox symbolism – significantly a vitalistic ambience – such as the exhibition of physical energy, the orgiastic food consumption, and the display of evergreen branches and bread in the procession of Christ Resurrected on Easter Sunday (such as e.g. in Casteltermini and San Biagio Platani) (**fig. 10**).



Fig. 10 Easter in Casteltermini (ph. A. Russo – G. Muccio)

Conclusions

Whoever wants to find a reason for the material and immaterial expressions of ‘popular religiosity’,⁵⁵ and especially of the ritual symbolism that sustains the performative aspect, must confront the question of their historical and ideological genesis and of the morphological, functional, and semantic transformation that has affected them within the environmental, social, religious, political, and economic framework of the particular culture. It must be recognized that the festive calendar of a rural community should be observed as a coherent system that together with socio-political issues, both on the structural and symbolic levels, reflects the mythic-ritual scenarios connected to the schedule of the productive vegetal and animal cycles.⁵⁶

Recognizing the heuristic efficacy of an approach that examines the relations between forms, types, and times of production, and forms, contents, and times of the cult, and that examines the historical variability of these relations as a result of changing legal systems and political ideologies, of social regimes and religious orientations,⁵⁷ allows us to understand

⁵⁴ Greimas 1995, 35; Zanini 1997; Burgio 2015. More generally it can be observed, as does Bourdieu (1980, 374) regarding the threshold of a ritual, namely that of the saints’ lunch, which in itself is seen as a movement between two different time periods, that the transition periods have all the properties of the threshold, the limit between two spaces, in which the antagonistic principles collide and the world turns inside out.

⁵⁵ On the ambiguity and variability of concepts like “religiosity” and “popular religion”: Sobrero,

Squillacciotti 1978; De Rosa 1979a; 1979b; Prandi 1977; 2002; Lanternari 2006; Terrin 2014. More generally also: Schmitt 1977; Ginzburg 1977; Isambert 1977; Vovelle 1977; Alvarez Santaló, Buxó Rey, Rodríguez Becerra 2003.

⁵⁶ Brelich 1955; Servier 1962; Lanternari 1976; Dumézil 1929, 1989; Sabbatucci 1988; Propp 1978; Grimaldi 1993; Greimas 1995; Buttitta I. E. 2006.

⁵⁷ Cauvin 1994; Brelich 2007; Bourdieu 2012, 73 ff.

more clearly the emergence and persistence of certain ritual symbolisms and cultic beliefs and practices. It is also useful to clarify the recurrence of analogous ritual symbolisms in cultures that never came into contact.⁵⁸ In spite of

deconstructionist and anti-historical approaches we can, finally, assert that a diachronic analysis and comparison – when carried out with care and intellectual honesty – can only benefit the advancement of knowledge.

⁵⁸ D'Onofrio 2018, 237 ff.

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