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FULGOR

Flinders University Languages Group Online Review

Volume 3, Issue 3, November 2008

<http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/deptlang/fulgor/>

ISSN 1446-9219

Migrating Madonnas: The Madonna della Montagna di Polsi in Calabria and in Australia

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses how psychological trauma and cultural bereavement is negotiated by rituals performed in two parallel festivals in honour of the Madonna della Montagna di Polsi (in the province of Reggio Calabria) and in Melbourne, Australia. Both are celebrated by people from the same Italian region. Using a framework derived from Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino, the article examines the rituals performed during the festival in Polsi as forms of catharsis which assist in resolving existential traumas.

The article then looks at cultural bereavement as a condition that can severely compromise the psychological health of migrants. The Madonna della Montagna *festa* in Melbourne, albeit different to its Calabrian epigone, continues to perform a psychologically healing role. A manifestation of authentic popular religiosity, this *festa* has become the privileged locus within which the Calabrian migrant community reaffirms its identity and resists pressures to assimilate exercised both by the Church and the wider society. The collective celebration of the Madonna della Montagna of Polsi in Melbourne re-connects participants with their previous ideal symbolic order in Calabria and also establishes a new – hybrid – one in a process that can attenuate the psychological traumas deriving from migration and settlement in an alien culture.

Introduction

I have noticed that when Italians moved from one area to another, the Catholic parish from where they departed showed more a sense of relief than of regret! The Church it seems has always considered migrants as a problem rather than as a natural phenomenon of human mobility [...] the Australian Government was just as anxious to achieve integration and the Catholic Church was of the same opinion (Capuchin Father Patrick Colbert quoted in Paganoni 2003:184).

This recent comment reveals how distant Church institutions and government have been towards the religious practices of Italian emigrants. A sort of embarrassment transpires at the persistence of such overt traditional religious practices. This attitude, however, has not solely been directed against the religious celebrations of migrants, but it has informed the whole centuries-old history of institutional attempts to hegemonise popular culture. In his pioneering work on Southern Italian belief systems, Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino pointed out that these popular manifestations play a fundamental therapeutic role in attenuating psychological suffering and trauma.

The focus of this essay is to compare two parallel religious festivals that take place in honour of the 'Madonna della Montagna'. One is in the old world and the other in the new. The old world festival is celebrated at Polsi, a hermitage and shrine located in a steep narrow valley among the foothills of the Aspromonte massif in Calabria. The new world one is held at the Reggio Calabria Club in Melbourne, Australia. In both, participants have been subjected to hegemonising pressures in an attempt to make them conform to 'acceptable' religious practice. In both cases they have resisted. Rituals in both address "crises of presence" to use De Martino's expression. In the former these pertain to the existential sphere, in the latter they are the consequence of cultural bereavement or separation from one's cultural *koiné*. I will look at the similarities and differences between the practices characterising these two events. In each case their role in alleviating psychological suffering can only be guaranteed within a symbolic order that has maintained its viability and currency.

The Madonna della Montagna di Polsi in Calabria

There are many legends about the Madonna della Montagna. One of the oldest is that of the 'Maga Sibilla', a witch who dwelt in these mountains and who was tempted by vanity to challenge the Madonna. Defeated and enraged, the escaping Maga Sibilla left a giant fiery footprint on a stone. It is said that the traces of her footprint remain visible to this day. Another legend from the Middle Ages tells of an escaped bull that was found by its minder kneeling before an ancient iron cross that it had dug up with its hooves. This sacred cross is still venerated in the shrine at Polsi.

Archaeologists today believe that the origins of the *fiesta* at Polsi hark back to well before the Medieval era. They have found *pinakes* or votive clay artefacts manufactured in pre-Roman times by settlers from the nearby Hellenic colony of Locri, that indicate the existence of a female fertility cult associated with Persephone. After Christianity was introduced to Italy, Basilian monks founded a hermitage there in the 7th century celebrating Greek rites in honour of the Madonna until the Church of Rome expelled them and imposed the Latin rite in the late 15th century (Leuzzi 2007).

The Madonna cult has acquired prominence in the symbolic order of many countries where the Catholic Church introduced it to hegemonise pre-Christian belief systems. However, this process was not entirely successful: the discourse of the Madonna continues to embody the same gender specific signifieds such as fertility, motherhood, succour and solace, which were originally vested in pagan rituals. In the Italian paradigm, the dynamic between the Madonna and believers reveals intense binary emotions: fear and adoration, resentment and gratitude. This is because Italy's Madonnas can concede their grace or just as easily deny it, a faculty shared with their

pagan antecedents. These Madonnas *demand* veneration in exchange for their favours (Carroll 1992:53-54). Indeed as has been pointed out: “la Madonna non solo rassicura ma anche intimorisce” (Sole 2000:129). The Madonna della Montagna is no exception to this rule: her reputation is one of vindictiveness towards those who offend her (Marcoaldi 1997:29). Hence, the Madonna della Montagna incorporates an ambivalence between good and evil, as is implicit in the Maga Sibilla legend.¹

The Madonna cult is a discourse whereby the believer’s psyche seeks to reconcile threats such as suffering, bereavement, illness and death. Anthropologist Ernesto De Martino developed a theory where he argued that such existential challenges could lead potentially to a “crisis of presence”. If unresolved, this crisis could result in what De Martino termed an “apocalisse psicopatologica” or mental breakdown. In response to this danger, he argued, cultures devise mythologies and rituals. Mythologies and religions provide adherents with the opportunity to engage in “controlled absence”. In other words, they suspend participation in everyday reality by involving the faithful in collective rituals where existential threats can be confronted and controlled. The final objective of these rituals is to enable the traumatised individual to be re-integrated into society. De Martino termed this process “apocalisse culturale” defining ‘apocalypse’ as ‘revelation’. Religions, however, do not advocate ‘absence’ *tout court*, but only a temporary and partial suspension from everyday life. Hence, they still leave ‘presence’ captive to unresolved conflicts with reality. Their real purpose is to control the “crisis of presence” through the sacred sphere, not to negate it (De Martino 1995:118, 134).

The Madonna della Montagna is worshipped throughout the Province of Reggio Calabria and as far afield as the province of Messina in Sicily. She is akin to those religious figures like Saint Francesco da Paola or la Madonna del Rosario whose veneration extends beyond the confines of a single location, but embrace whole regions or even the whole of Italy. Thousands of pilgrims begin their journey to the sanctuary for the Madonna’s feast days from the 1st to the 3rd of September.

The sacred sphere created by the rituals that surround the Madonna della Montagna celebration contains numerous examples of these processes of “controlled absence”. Many of the devotees practise what are termed *penitenze* or penances. In Catholicism penance is the expiation of sins, normally in the form of prayer or fasting. However, in popular Italian Catholicism, penance can involve acts of physical suffering. In Polsi these include: continuously dancing the tarantella night and day, walking barefoot or on one’s knees, or carrying heavy stones. The *penitenze* serve to earn graces or favours from the Madonna for which the devotee has made a *voto* or commitment. Alternatively, they may be in gratitude for graces already received. These are often graphically represented by votive statuettes reminiscent of *pinakes*, called *ex-voto*, which are donated to the church. The Polsi shrine contains many thousands of these (Alvaro 1992:6-7).

The dialect prayers recited in honour of the Madonna during the *fiesta* bear witness to the Madonna’s role as refuge for those who suffer, but also her prerogative not to heed their calls:

¹ There is a vast literature on the anthropological and psychoanalytic aspects of Madonna worship; see for example, Warner, Marina (1985). *Alone of All Her Sex, The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, Picador, London.

Vui siti la patruna di lu mundu [...]	You are the ruler of the world
Liberatindi di li peni di lu mpernu	Free us from the torments of Hell
di tutti li disgrazi di lu mundu [...]	From all the suffering of this world
A cu' nsi cerca grazzi nsi li duna,	Concede your grace to those who ask
cu nd'ha cori malatu nsi lu sana [...]	Heal hearts that are ailing
Vergini bella, non nd' abbandunati [...]	Beautiful Virgin, do not abandon us

(Direzione del Santuario di Polsi 1981:298)²

What is immediately apparent here is the *Weltschauung* of the devotees: the world is full of perils and temptations, an evil place that can be likened to Hell itself. The Madonna is a safe haven, a port of sanctuary. The *penitenze*, the *ex-voto*, and these prayers (or *giaculatorie*), are part of the ritual process of “controlled absence” that De Martino theorised.

It is not surprising that the emotions associated with such a “cultural apocalypse” are very strong. For Corrado Alvaro, one of Calabria’s most famous writers, the tension felt by the Madonna’s devotees is palpable. This is how he describes the relationship between the Madonna and the faithful as they wait in the Church for the procession to begin:

Questa Madonna non ha nulla di dolce, bensì d'imperioso [...] anche le grida di rito che lanciano le donne rivolte alla statua al termine della processione nulla hanno di mite e misericordioso ma esprimono anzi una fede testarda e determinata: [...] “eu non mi movu ‘i cca si la grazia Maria non mi fa” [...] (io non mi sposto da qua se la Maria non mi concede la grazia) (Alvaro 2005:100; Direzione del Santuario di Polsi 1981:303).

Just as the Madonna expects veneration, so too can the faithful insist she accede to their requests. Prayer involves a robust exchange in which entreaties can often be highly charged.

The high point of the festival is on the 2nd of September with the procession of the statue (simulacrum) of the Madonna with child. The statue used for the procession is a more manageable version of the original that weighs 800kgs. This normally resides in the shrine and is moved only every fifty years. Fashioned in 1560 by devotees from Messina, it is unusual in that the infant Jesus is wholly naked (his private parts are sometimes covered with a skirt of blue and golden strings). Both statues portray the Madonna as having a fair complexion and brown hair, possibly a reflection of the fact that in the Italian symbolic order such complexions are often associated with ‘goodness’.

For the annual procession, the lighter simulacrum of the Madonna is brought out

² Also see site: <http://www.cittanovaonline.it/cantomaria.htm>.

from the church accompanied by fireworks, tarantellas and gunfire. This statue is similar to the original but in this case the infant Jesus' private parts are permanently covered with a swirling white sheet. The symbolic transience typical of pilgrimage is vested in the traditional songs accompanying the procession, which have gathered greater resonance since mass emigration was inscribed into the history of the region. These aspects are reflected in the following pilgrim's song:

Vergini bella, japrìtindi li porti,	Beautiful Virgin, open the doors
ca stannu arrivandu li devoti Vostri. E nui venimu sonandu e cantandu,	For your devotees are arriving. And we come singing and dancing
Maria di la Muntagna cu' Vui m'arriccumandu.	Mary of the Mountain, I commend myself to you
Vergini bella, dàtindi la manu, ca simu foresteri e venimu di luntanu.	Beautiful Virgin, give us your hand, we are strangers here and come from afar
M'arriccumandu la notti e lu jornu, 'na bona andata e 'nu bonu ritornu! (Direzione del Santuario di Polsi 1981:310) ³	I commend myself to you night and day, for a good pilgrimage and return journey

The statue of the Madonna is carried around the sanctuary by devotees from the nearby town of San Luca in whose parish Polsi is situated. This is considered a privilege and was previously performed by worshippers from Bagnara on the Tyrrhenian coast of Calabria. Before re-entering the church, the statue is turned to face the Aspromonte massif. This is a re-enactment of the miracle of her divine confrontation with the pagan 'Maga Sibilla' who symbolises death in popular discourse. This ritual can also be read as the popular rendition of the ostracism visited by Church doctrine upon the collective memory of long repressed pagan fertility rites for women. (The Sibyls were sacred virgins whose gift of prophecy was conferred on them by the god Apollo).

Another ancient ritual that is still practised is the consumption of goat's meat. Until it was prohibited only a few years ago for hygienic reasons, goats were slaughtered during the festival and their skins hung up on wires alongside the routes leading to the main church. On my visit to Polsi in 1991, I witnessed the blood of these slaughtered goats colouring the waters of a stream that flow past the church. Goats are symbolised in pagan mythology as satyrs or emblems of fertility and carnal desire, whilst in Southern Italian lore they are often synonymous with the devil (Teti 2002; Levi 1976:54).⁴ The date for the festival appears to be significant, falling as it does on the eve of autumn. Its origin may have been a rite to propitiate the coming of the following Spring by the symbolic act of the spilling of blood, or to augur the arrival of life giving rains after the long dry season. Goat slaughter was also part of an Ancient Greek ritual in honour of Dionysos (Burkert 2001:7-9).

During the festival some of the devotees dance the tarantella throughout the day and night as a form of *voto*. The tarantella is customarily seen as a typical form of folklore, as a celebratory bucolic dance specific to Southern Italy. In fact, its heritage

³ Also see: <http://www.brutium.info/storia/storia09.htm>.

⁴ For the symbolic significance of the goat sacrifice see Teti. Carlo Levi describes the symbolic meanings attached to goats as satyrs or forces of nature.

attests to its deeper significance as a form of a ritual collective catharsis called 'tarantismo' popularly believed to heal participants from the poisonous bite of the 'taranta' or black-widow (red-back) spider. In his most famous work on the survival of tarantismo in southern Apulia, *La terra del rimorso*, De Martino argued that there were psychoanalytic aspects to this ritual which helped dancers ('tarantati') to release their troubled psyches from unresolved conflicts whose origins had been repressed:

Il simbolo della taranta mette in movimento un dispositivo di sicurezza che ha tutti i caratteri della plasmazione culturale: attraverso il proprio orizzonte e gli orizzonti simbolici minori a cui presiede, le singole crisi individuali sono sottratte alla loro incomunicabilità nevrotica, per ricevere una comune plasmazione nel comportamento dell'avvelenato e per fruire di un comune trattamento risolutivo per mezzo della musica, della danza e dei colori e di quant'altro dispone il dispositivo in azione (De Martino 1976:178).

Like its Ancient Greek ritual antecedents, 'tarantismo' also had a significant role in regulating otherwise unmanageable sexual desires. Not surprisingly, the practice of dancing the tarantella as a cathartic ritual was opposed by the Church, which saw it as a distasteful vestige of Bacchanalian rites. However, the alternative proposed by the Church, or exorcism, was found to be ineffective (De Martino 1976).⁵ The healing aspects of 'tarantismo' were effective precisely because the ritual was integral to the symbolic order of the participants, whereas the Church-based alternative was not. This contrast between popular rituals and Church disapproval has continued to inform the Madonna della Montagna *festa* as it is celebrated in Australia.

Calabrian society was traditionally highly conservative in terms of sexual mores and it strictly regulated contact between men and women. *Feste* such as at Polsi were one of the few occasions where women would be free to circulate unchaperoned. Tarantella dancing, albeit strictly codified and limiting physical contact, represented a rare opportunity for men and women not bound by kinship to relate publicly. The exceptional 'freedoms' enjoyed during the *festa* are reflected in the invocation that can sometimes be heard among the pilgrims particularly after nightfall: "Forgive us Madonna, for we are sinning." The tarantella at Polsi can thus be seen both as propitiatory of fertility and as a ritual of controlled abandonment to instinct/inner pulsations (Plastino 2003:149-153).

As is the tradition in many Italian religious festivals, the faithful give the Madonna money, jewellery and other expensive objects as a sign of devotion and sacrifice to earn or recompense her benevolence. During the procession, banknotes are pinned to the simulacrum. Securing the Madonna's approval is part of an exchange where the devotee will make an offering and undergo physical suffering, but in return expects the Madonna to do her part.

The mythologies associated with the Madonna della Montagna together with the accompanying rituals attenuate the psychic suffering and existential fears deriving from life's vicissitudes (particularly bereavement, illness, death) by channelling them

⁵ See pp. 31 and 226 on Ancient Greek antecedents to tarantismo; p. 177 on its role in sexual release; pp. 34 and 172 on Church attempts to stamp out the cult; pp. 172 on parallels in Calabria and 178-179 on tarantismo as reflecting an *ethos* common to all of Southern Italy. On tarantismo's musical aspects see chap. IV "La catartica musicale", pp. 219-227 and Carpitella, Diego "Appendice III", pp. 335-369.

into a collective practice of worship: “cu nd’ha cori malatu nsi lu sana”. In terms derived from De Martino’s theoretical framework, those faithful whose psyche is threatened by a “crisis of presence” can participate in a “controlled absence”; a transposition of the travails of life’s journey from birth to death through a symbolic pilgrimage that involves sacrifice and a return to society after having merited salvation. The suffering embodied in the *penitenze* is a necessary catharsis by which the psyche is empowered to negotiate trauma. At Polsi, it is the *festa* and its ceremonies that make myth operative and real. In the *festa*, the technique of communication and the message are inseparable (Neri 1998).

The symbolic order of belonging and identity, which includes the cosmic order, the struggle to adapt to real existential challenges, are all structured into the metaphysics of this part of Calabrian society, and are intimately bound up in the mythology and ritual of the Madonna della Montagna.

The Madonna della Montagna di Polsi in Melbourne

The techniques that traditional cultures use to deal with psychological trauma are often extended to the post-modern spaces occupied by the hybrid realities of migration. I shall now analyse the celebration of the Madonna della Montagna in Melbourne Australia to determine how it addresses the new psychological and identitarian traumas endured by migrants as a result of their departure from their original cultural koiné.

The psychological disruption described by De Martino among individuals suffering from a “crisis of presence” is also commonly faced by newly arrived immigrants who abandon their intact symbolic orders to inhabit a frontier land whose unfamiliar boundaries are constantly being crossed and re-crossed both physically and mentally. The space and time of the migrants’ different pasts are constantly being woven into an unfamiliar present, their habitual modes of thought challenged by new realities. Their entry into this diasporic space threatens their psyche by breaking down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside (Bhabha 1994:1,116). Migration reflects a typical aspect of post-modern culture; the creation of a hyperspace that “has finally succeeded in transcending the capacity of the individual to locate itself [...] in a mappable external world.” From the alienation typical of the modern era, we proceed to fragmentation and, ultimately, the “death of the subject” (quoted in Jameson 1984:83, 63).

A sense of the enormity of this passage from the old world to the new can be gained from the following anecdote. In a note in his *La fine del mondo*, De Martino relates the story of a Calabrian peasant who was induced to leave his village Marcellinara by car. When he lost sight of the bell tower of the town, he panicked (Gallini 1977:lxxvii). For the first time in his life, the ‘campanile’ (the bell tower), which in the symbolic order of many cultures is a signifier for the signifieds of ‘home’, ‘family’ and ‘belonging’, had disappeared from view. The signification process that sustained individual identity had suddenly disappeared leading to a fundamental “crisis of presence”. De Martino further elaborated this concept:

Nella misura in cui gli oggetti si separano dalla rete di relazioni domestiche, dalle memorie culturali latenti che li mantengono in ambiti ovvi [...] si fa valere il rischio di un loro caotico

relazionarsi [...] in una vicenda inarrestabile di assurde coinonie
(De Martino 1964:122-123).

De Martino argued that mental disease – psychosis, schizophrenia or neurosis – could be the result of such a process of detachment of signifiers from their signifieds. However, he also believed that mystical-religious practices could draw in the traumatised psyche of the individual and attenuate its suffering (De Martino 1977:62-63).

More recent developments in ethnopsychiatric research have highlighted the traumatising impact of migration. Psychiatrist and medical anthropologist Maurice Eisenbruch developed the concept of “cultural bereavement” to express the psychological condition of migrants subjected to the “catastrophic loss of social structure and culture” (Eisenbruch 1991:674).⁶ He analysed the culture of Khmer immigrants to Australia, who believe that individuals can be possessed by spirits. Although Western medicine would normally classify such ideas as psychotic, Eisenbruch argued that instead these beliefs should be considered as a resource in assisting Khmer to resolve the psychological trauma associated with migration. Analogously to De Martino, he found that participation in religious rituals substantially attenuated painful feelings of cultural loss. Moreover, he viewed psychological suffering as a useful sign just as De Martino did, because it could offer the traumatised individual the opportunity to enter or re-enter a social system by restoring the validity of their own culture and social values. In contrast, a culturally alienated person could develop a variety of psychiatric disorders (Eisenbruch 1991:674-675, 677). It is not surprising that psychiatrists working with Italian immigrants in Switzerland have been able to draw on De Martino’s theories to develop a methodology that takes into account the sufferers’ own cultural model to improve the healing process (Risso 1992:165).⁷

The positive impact of cultural symbols and celebrations such as holy days and saints’ days has been recognised in the sociological literature regarding the Italian communities of Australia as a binding force helping to maintain cultural viability as well as resisting the cultural hegemony of the host society (Vasta 1992:167). As Robert Pascoe points out:

ritual reifies power (by occupying space), displaces attention (its participants temporarily become someone else), is impersonal (collectively) and neutral (they set aside political or ideological differences). A successful ritual welds together a group of people

⁶ Full quote: “I defined cultural bereavement as the experience of the uprooted person or group resulting from loss of social structures, cultural values and self-identity: the person or group continues to live in the past, is visited by supernatural forces from the past while asleep or awake, suffers feelings of guilt over abandoning culture and homeland, feels that memories of the past begin to fade, but finds constant images of the past (including traumatic images), intruding into daily life, yearns to complete obligations to the dead and feels stricken by anxieties, morbid thoughts, and anger that mar the ability to get on with daily life. It is not of itself a disease but an understandable response to the catastrophic loss of social structure and culture.” On cultural bereavement involving Italian migrants see Beneduce 2005: 378.

⁷ Risso and Böker’s thought was cited and translated in: Beneduce (2005:379) as follows: “The possibility of accepting the illness in a cultural model accepted as much by the patient as by his native environment, allows the ill person to preserve the continuity of his or her existence in the community.”

who were feeling alienated, divided, powerless and homeless. [...] Rituals such as the Italo-Australian *festa* indeed sacralise the new urban environment – often in contest with the host culture (1992:95).

These comments are particularly relevant in the light of the reception that Italian religious practices have received in Australia.

The history of Italian religious integration in countries such as the USA or Australia where the hegemonic model belonged to the Irish Catholic tradition contains many attempts by the local Catholic Church to discourage Italian religious practice in favour of an Irish model of worship. The fact that Italians did not regularly attend Sunday Mass and were not quick to fill the local parish envelopes was directly cast as the “Italian problem”. In the Irish-Australian Catholic model there was no place for the celebratory style of veneration typical of *feste* such as the Madonna della Montagna. Analogously to what had occurred many centuries before in Southern Italy, the perpetuation of these rituals in both the USA and Australia was considered distasteful by the local Catholic clergy who viewed the Italian style of worship as superstitious.⁸ Traditional Italian religious practices such as Requiem Masses and *feste* with their fireworks were stigmatised as “ridiculous”. Many Italian-Australian religious practices are still characterised as “superstitious” by some clergy today. Others see them as practices for which “enlightenment” is still necessary (Paganoni 2003:183, 205, 206, 223). As was affirmed in 2001 by an Italian Benedictine monk who worked with Italians in Australia and has evidently appropriated the dominant cultural discourses that essentialise Southern Italians:

It bothered me, then, to see money stuck on statues or wasted on fireworks; in case it scandalised the Australians [...] I’ve tried to curb the interest for “Feste” and “Messe da morto”, but they have not disappeared. They are part of a deeply embedded religious culture: St Rita, St Anthony, “Madonna e Rosari”, pellegrinaggi and other devotional practices – not to mention the attachment to the dead, through Requiem Masses – are still going strong (Paganoni 2003:183).⁹

The Madonna della Montagna celebration is but one of the many religious traditions that some clergy have given up trying to abolish or “enlighten”. Indeed, the Madonna della Montagna is doing her part to proliferate and flourish.

Not incidentally, the Madonna della Montagna in Melbourne is not venerated in a church, but in a locale that Calabrian migrants feel belongs to *them*, an appropriation of the Australian landscape almost in defiance of paternalistic or hegemonic attitudes whether they emanate from Australian society in general or the Catholic Church in particular. This Madonna is not located in mountainous country reminiscent of Polsi, but is honoured by being placed in a special purpose-designed brick shrine located at the edge of the Reggio Calabria Club car park in metropolitan Melbourne. Fortunately, it is not distant from sound barriers erected to shield the faithful from the

⁸ On Australia see: Paganoni 2003: 237-249; Tolcvey 2007; Santamaria 1939; Lewins 1979; Kelly 1979. On the USA see: Aquila 1999: 154-164; Batule 1999: 175-181; Quinn 1999.

⁹ This quote was taken from a questionnaire submitted by Italian Benedictine monk Alberico Iacovone.

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roar of traffic from a nearby freeway. The door to the shrine is a steel frame with glass panels allowing the Madonna to be venerated from outside. The skyline south of the 'sanctuary' site is not the crowning peaks of the Aspromonte massif, but the skyscrapers of a post-industrial metropolis. On the other horizons we witness the customary suburban silhouettes of brick veneer houses and functionalist street lamps. In contrast to the remoteness of Polsi, this location is more like the many traditional metropolitan Madonna shrines of Italy, which are close to the everyday lives of the populace.

The simulacrum of the Madonna della Montagna venerated at the Reggio Calabria Club of Melbourne was crafted in Sicily just like the one in Polsi. However, it is a variant of the lighter simulacrum in that the private parts of baby Jesus are covered by what appears to be a modern nappy! Moreover, the Madonna has steely blue eyes, unlike those of the original(s), heightening their grave aspect and 'imperious' manner to an even greater degree.



*The two simulacra: the Madonna at Polsi and in front of her 'shrine' at the Reggio Calabria Club - Melbourne, Australia (October 2006).*¹⁰

The procession and the celebration of the Madonna della Montagna in the grounds of the Reggio Calabria Club of Melbourne was announced in the local Italian newspaper (*Il Globo*) as a "Family Fun Day" with a list of events typical of any Australian parish fête: "Rides for kids; Jumping Castle; Raffle; Live Band; Fireworks and Folkdancers" but not of a religious festival (*Il Globo* 11-10-2006).

On the day of the *fiesta* the statue was moved from its lodgings to the basement of the Club where the Mass was held in Italian by a priest from the local parish. At least one thousand people were present. After mass the Madonna's statue was carried out on a dais by members of the local Calabrian community. The procession began with the Madonna rising up from the basement via a ramp. She then performed a circumlocution of the Club as if to sacralise it and traversed the car park back to her shrine. The procession was accompanied by traditional Italian band music played by the local Italian-Australian 'Banda Bellini' and the singing faithful. Just before it was placed in its shrine it was turned around to face south towards the city perhaps inadvertently reminiscent of the Madonna at Polsi being turned around to face the Sibyl. Was the rival no longer the pagan witch, but the encroaching city skyline of

¹⁰ The first picture was taken from: <http://www.gambarie.com/polsi/>; the second was taken by the author.

Mammon? The faithful pinned money on the strings festooning the statue and received sacred images of the Madonna in exchange. The statue was then placed in its shrine facing outwards and the money removed.

Following the deposition of the Madonna, the *festa* began. There was dancing performed by local primary school children, followed by both Ukrainian and tarantella exhibition dancing from a nearby dancing school. In a distant echo of the goat slaughter in Polsi, a collective BBQ sold meat. The participants appeared mostly to come from the club's membership. In short, the celebrations were more reminiscent of a parish fête than of the event in Italy. A stronger affinity with religious celebrations in Calabria was the fireworks display that concluded the event.

Some rituals were similar to those in Calabria: the procession, the music from the 'Banda Bellini' reflecting the municipal brass bands ubiquitous in Italy during religious festivals, and the pinning of money to the statue. But compared to the Polsi event, participation was more subdued: there was less singing, no extemporaneous outbursts, no *penitenze* or tarantella dancing among the public. Gone were the votive artefacts; gone was the exit and dramatic re-entry of the Madonna from the church.

Apart from the few exceptions, the Melbourne *festa's* 'attractions' are radically different to the celebration in Calabria. This reflects a dynamic also observed among migrants from other backgrounds, for whom it has been noted that cultural manifestations "can exist or rather survive only with those significations which are allowed, accepted or verified by the acceptant society" (Oravec 1996:3). Likewise, the celebration of the Madonna della Montagna in Melbourne has been hybridised reflecting some aspects that are expected and customary in Australian Catholic practice. This departure from the Italian 'originals' towards local models is shared by other saint day celebrations in Australia and has parallels with the Italian migrant *feste* of the USA, which had already become somewhat 'Americanized' by the 1940s (Quinn 1999:99-103).

It should be noted that there are a number of Calabrian clubs in Melbourne and there is at least one other Madonna della Montagna. She is located at the Parish of Saint Anthony in the suburb of Hawthorn. Here the *festa* is organised by the Capistrano Social Club, because traditionally the Madonna della Montagna is also venerated in the town of Capistrano in Calabria. The simulacrum held at St Anthony's is not like the one located in Polsi, nor that of the Reggio Calabria Club, because it is modelled on the one held in the Cathedral of Capistrano. As such it represents an appropriation of the festival according to the local mores typical of Italian communities both in Italy and abroad. Indeed, *this* Madonna della Montagna is also celebrated by the *Capistranesi* in Toronto Canada, once again using a simulacrum that reproduces the one located in Capistrano (*Il Globo* 24-11-2006).¹¹

The Reggio Calabria Club's objectives are to host social functions for the community and provide entertainment such as gambling. However, through its hosting of the Madonna della Montagna it has appropriated the site, mythologies and rituals of Polsi in Aspromonte and aspires to the role of representing Melbourne's Calabrian community. By its direct association with the sublime symbol of the Madonna della Montagna, the Reggio Calabria Club has become the pre-eminent sacred *Calabrian* space.¹²

¹¹ For Canada see: www.italiani.ca/node/1661 [Accessed 14-03-2008]: Here, the event was held completely outdoors, with the Holy Mass celebrated on hill in a local park where the procession also took place. On Capistrano see: <http://www.mpasceri.it/> [Accessed 08-05-2008].

Conclusion

Although these contexts are totally different to the Calabrian setting, the rituals accompanying the Madonna della Montagna festivities in Melbourne address the cultural caesura caused by migration which jeopardises the very identity of the immigrant. The celebration of the Madonna collectively reaffirms both re-connection with a previous ideal symbolic order and the re-establishment of a new hybrid one that can negotiate the psychological trauma associated with migration and settlement in an alien culture. Similarly, it has been recognised that Italian migrant religious celebrations in the United States also enable migrants to maintain their psychological health and adjust to an unreceptive host society (Scrofani 1999).

What we behold in its final aspect is therefore a performative ritual in a clearly public space subjected to all the fragmentary presences of the post-modern, whose nefarious psychological impact is kept at bay despite, or perhaps because of, its aesthetic incongruities. It is through participation in the Antipodean version of the ritual that migrants can cross and re-cross cultural and symbolic boundaries, thereby re-constituting a performative narrative of selfhood. It is a process of re-inscription and empowerment for Calabrian migrants.

The “crisis of presence” experienced by migrants, whose identities and belief systems have been challenged by the host society, can be negotiated through the “controlled absence” offered by the rituals of the *fiesta*. The Madonna della Montagna in Melbourne becomes a fundamental signifier for the identity of Melbourne’s Calabrians: the fact that she resides permanently on the Reggio Calabria Club’s grounds means that she will be able to vigil perpetually over their selfhood.

It can be argued that the Melbourne Madonna della Montagna has acquired its own viability as an icon, becoming a truly Australian Madonna. In this role, the original meaning of the festival in Calabria with its focus on fertility and existential crises has shifted to become an event of re-inscription of a hitherto hegemonised space and a ritual of re-affirmation of collective identity and belonging. Through this celebration, the Calabrian community of Melbourne creates its own locus of meaning, binding together many aspects of modern day life in Australia through a Madonna whose steely blue eyes are as ineffable and hetero-directed as ever.

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¹² See Pascoe, p. 96: “The institutions created within the neighbourhood provide its cultural structures. They are containers in the placemaking process, giving a sense of identity more durable than one ritual event”.

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