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Plants in Sicilian holy simbology

Abstract

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The Sicilian religious festivals present a rich and varied plant symbolism. In addition to the widespread practice of decorating processional statues with flowers, fruits, ears of wheat, green beans depending on the season and the phases of the agricultural cycles, the use of carrying processional simple branches of laurel or more complex plant artifacts is widely observed. These uses are particularly present in the ceremonies of the Holy Week, in the spring festivals dedicated to Saint Joseph (March 19) and to the Holy Cross (May 3), in the summer ones dedicated to the patron saints. These are phenomena that clearly testify the continuity of ritual structures and symbols and which presently renew the cultural memory of a Sicilian society, lived for millennia of agriculture and farming.

Key words: feast, ritual symbolism, laurel, wheat.

In Sicily, there are still institutional manipulations, albeit among unaware transformations, recoveries and true inventions, ceremonial practices and cultural acts that reveal, formally at least, a strong bond with the typical needs of an agricultural and pastoralism civilization. Among them, suffice it to mention: bonfires, ritual masking, palanquin dances and races while carrying the statues of saints, ritually formalized food production and consumption, and the processional use of plant foliage. The spreading and types of this rich symbolic legacy testify to the vitality of traditional religious culture and its adaptability – re-semantisation and re-functionalisation - to the ongoing changes in social and economic conditions and in existential regimes.

This “resilience” of religious traditions, apart from being ascribed to their ability to meet timeless anthropological needs (protection, nutrition, reproduction) and to offer, from a religious point of view, answers to the new forms of precariousness affecting Sicilian society, can be surely traced back to the needs of several communities to save and restore a cultural memory perceived as qualifying and establishing the sense of *being there* in asserting a specific identity, as well as policies for building a legacy and the promotion of “local products” for tourism, not infrequently promoted by external agencies.

Sometimes formally unchanged, though based on new senses and functions, other times recovered and transformed also in formal aspects, archaic ritual symbols and behaviours, therefore, up to this very day, year after year, testify to the persistent continuity of ritual

structures and symbols and to renew the memory of a society that lived for thousands of years on agriculture and pastoralism.

Looking at the space-time organisation and at the symbolic contents (actions, words, material elements and so on) of the celebrations that mark the time of the island communities, mostly those located in internal and peripheral areas we can also observe how the main ritual elements are connected to the key moments of the traditional ergological agricultural and grazing cycles and are based on symbols of the related forms of production.

In particular, the organisation of the traditional ceremonial calendar is clearly connected to the wheat cycle. Within it, we can find three periods, only partially attributable to seasonal changes. The ceremonial cycles marking the three periods are: All Saint's Day – All Soul's Day, St. Joseph – Holy Week, St. Anthony of Padua – St. John the Baptist – St. Calogerus. They are real transitions: the first one connected to an external-internal movement of the wheat seed; the second to the transition from inside to outside of the sprouted plant; the third one to the removal of the plant from the ground, that is the harvesting and storage of the seed. Indeed sowing is done between the end of October and the beginning of November; complete sprouting and plant growth occur between March and April; the harvest starts in June.

These periods are generally different from the qualitative point of view and, as regards the celebrations, they are characterised by the presence of peculiar ritual symbols: the ceremonies in the autumn/winter period reveal their relationship with the chthonic dimension through the presence of the dead represented by masks, poor people, or children as well (all of them being protagonists of offertories or collective meals), by the ritual eating of unmilled seeds, by lighting bonfires with particular connotations; the spring/summer ceremonies, more evidently linked to the uranic dimension, are mainly rich in palanquin dances and races, of games and fights, the offering of the first fruits, the procession of plant elements, offerings and ritual eating of bread; the time from the harvest to the next sowing is, finally, articulated into several celebrations of Saints from June to September. They are “thanksgiving” celebrations, where several elements not immediately connected to agriculture activities, converge. In the celebrations of the Saints, in fact, society celebrates itself, its wealth, its devotional dependence, and its belonging to the “uniqueness” of worship.

Of this rich and complex celebration universe, we will only mention here some ceremonies characterised by a more explicit plant symbolism, pointing out only incidentally on the one hand the widespread practice of displaying flowers and fruits on the procession simulacrum, that is, with a clearer reference to the productive cycles, broad beans and bunches of wheat ears, an event observed in particular during spring celebrations devoted to St. Joseph (March 19th) and the Holy Crucifix (May 3rd) and the summer feasts devoted to the patron Saints; on the other, the occurrence in Sicily, as well as in other European regions, of “arboreal” Madonnas.

Plant elements in St. Joseph's celebrations. The laurel or other evergreen plants form the decoration of St. Joseph's shrines and of particular artefacts connected with his celebration. For instance, a) In Villabate, a small town of rural origin close to Palermo, *u vastuni*, a spruce shaft, about 2-metres long, adorned with multi-coloured strips, flowers, fruit and plant foliage framing one of St. Joseph's pictures, is carried

in procession by a skilful bearer on the afternoon of March 18th among the streets of the built-up area and the following day it stays ahead of the Saint's float during the procession; *b*) In San Biagio Platani and in Sant'Angelo Muxaro a peculiar ceremonial artefact, *u cannistru*, is a traditional votive offering during St. Joseph's celebrations. The preparation of *cannistru* usually starts on Wednesday. It is made up of four pieces of wood and iron fit on a small float (*vara*); the family who made the vow to the Saint writes the name of the Holy Family's member to whom this structure is devoted around its sides. The structure is then covered with foliage from the citrus fruits usually collected in the family's "private garden", and with an interesting manipulation of *aspàrachi* (asparagus). Oranges and lemons ordered in sequences are placed outside the four boards, several food offerings (wheat and sweets) are placed on the *vara*. Multi-coloured paper flowers complete the decoration. The various *cannistri*, accompanied by three people impersonating the Holy Family, are carried in procession on the morning of March 19th in the Umberto Square where a shrine is set up and where an auction is held with food products offered by the faithful as votive offerings; *c*) The presence of laurel is recorded in Ribera too; there, the tradition of St. Joseph's "tables" is still alive. In this village, the tradition of "the entrance" of a laurel bearers' parade walking along the town's streets has now ended, but laurel remains the main element of the *stràula*: a cylindrical structure of reeds, about 4 m tall, completely covered with laurel and donut-shaped bread loaves (*purciđdata*), and with the Saint's portrait inside a small shrine arranged among the branches. The *stràula* is carried in procession on a small cart pulled by a donkey on the morning of the 19th among the town's streets and then accompanies St. Joseph's statue along its evening route. Remarkably, in the past, this interesting structure was placed also in the Easter celebrations and its bread was given to poor, that is those same people receiving the offerings for St. Joseph.

Holy Week. During Holy Week in Sicily, official liturgical traditions coexist with unorthodox practices, also in terms of plant symbolism. Together with the traditional palms, though particularly shaped in some towns such as Gangi, with the traditional but unorthodox *lavureddi*, wheat sprouts and at times legumes, adorning the graves exhibited on Maundy Thursday, laurel is still present in the celebration ornaments of the Saints during the *rigattiatu* in Burgio, Caltabellotta, Villafranca, Lucca Sicula, and so on and, in some other cases, fava beans are used, as in Bronte, revealing Easter's nature as a spring feast and new beginning.

The Easter message is, after all, rebirth, and the renewal of the cosmos. The Risen Christ advances and brings back life and abundance as is clear in the bows of Casteltermini or in the *mazzuna* of Misilmeri.

Laurel celebrations. A particular kind of celebration characterised by laurel branches variously styled that are carried by the faithful in processions can be observed in several celebrations in the Nebrodi area: as already said, in Tortorici the laurel in procession appears during St. Sebastian's winter celebration; in Troina, St. Sylvester's laurel is carried in procession, after some devotional pilgrimages for its harvesting, on two different occasions: the second to last Sunday of May, on foot (*i rama*), and the last Sunday of May, on horseback (*u ddàuru*); in Gagliano Castelferrato long poles



Fig. 1. Caltabellotta (Ag), Easter *rigattata* of Archangel St. Michele (ph. Russo-Muccio).



Fig. 2. Regalbuto, Feast of San Vito, Procession of the Laurel (ph. Buttitta)



Fig. 3. Villabate, Feast of San Giuseppe, procession of the *vastuni* (ph. Russo-Muccio)



Fig. 4. Gangi, Palm Sunday, *i parmi* (ph. Russo-Muccio).



Fig. 5. Santa Croce Camerina, feast of St. Joseph, the altar (ph. Russo-Muccio).

decorated with laurel and strips of coloured tissue paper (*i virghi*) are carried in procession in honour of St. Cathal (August 29th); in Cerami, during celebrations for St. Sebastian (August 27th) and the *Madonna della Lavina* (September 7th), some complex artefacts for the processions are totally made up of laurel branches (*i bbanneri*), in order to be carried in procession with the respective statues. Laurel is also carried in procession in Regalbuto, on August 8th, for St. Vito (*i ntinni*), in Naso, the first Saturday after Easter for the *Madonna delle Grazie* (*u dđàuru*), and in San Marco D'Alunzio, on July 31st, for St. Basil the Great.

In some cases, as in Cerami, laurel is used in several events (St. Sebastian's celebration, feast for the *Madonna della Lavina*, winter celebrations in honour of St. Anthony Abbot, St. Sebastian and St. Blaise), taking different shapes and names.

The characters of the ceremonies of the passing of the seasons are present in all these rites: the presence of evergreen plants, the exhibition/display of many behaviours by younger members, the ostentation and prefiguration of food abundance through storage and re-distribution of food.

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