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### Saint Agatha Religious Festival in Catania: Stakeholders' Functions and Relations

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#### ABSTRACT

The purpose of the paper is to develop an explorative analysis of the functions and relations among actors involved in the organization and implementation of the Saint Agatha Religious Festival in Catania attracting nearly one million presences during the first week of February. The research is based on the survey of different sources of information, such as literature, news, media, and deep interviews with key informants pertaining to civil and religious institutions. The survey is designed to profile the Festival in terms of history, the character of the stakeholders, size, origin of assets, venues used, decision-making structure, and programs. The Festival's use of volunteers and sponsors is specifically addressed. Empirical research sketches the network of stakeholders, the relationship between organizations, the importance of local social actors and strategies in enhancing local culture and sustainable tourism, regarding, in particular, the socio-cultural impacts of religious tourism. The local society has historical peculiarities which impose prudential considerations in generalizing about findings, and a comparative study with other Sicilian and/or Italian religious festivals will be important, mainly in order to delineate the actual sustainability of Festivals. The framework developed in this study can be helpful in the application of local social policies and also help comparative festival studies.

**Keywords:** Religious Festivals; Sicily; Catania; Stakeholders' Functions and Relations

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Il lavoro espone i risultati di un'indagine sulle relazioni e le funzioni che legano gli attori coinvolti nella festa religiosa di Sant'Agata a Catania, che nella prima settimana di febbraio attrae in città circa un milione di persone. La ricerca si è basata sull'analisi di diverse fonti di informazione: letteratura scientifica, notizie di giornali e altri media, nonché interviste dirette a una dozzina di informatori privilegiati appartenenti a istituzioni civili e religiose. L'indagine è stata impostata per descrivere la festa in termini storici, carattere dei portatori di interesse, dimensione e tipo delle risorse impiegate, luoghi, nonché struttura delle decisioni, programmi, partecipazione dei volontari e degli sponsor. La ricerca svolta consente di descrivere con precisione la rete di interessi coinvolti, l'importanza degli attori, le strategie orientate alla valorizzazione della cultura locale e allo sviluppo sostenibile, con riferimento particolare all'impatto socio-culturale del turismo religioso. La società locale analizzata ha caratteri talmente specifici da imporre prudenza sulla generalizzabilità dei risultati; uno studio comparativo con altri casi siciliani e italiani sarebbe necessario per definire in modo più puntuale la sostenibilità delle feste religiose. Tuttavia, il quadro di insieme delineato può essere utile come riferimento per studi analoghi sulle politiche locali di sostegno al turismo tramite l'organizzazione di feste religiose.

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**Keywords:** Feste religiose; Sicilia; Catania; Funzioni e Relazioni tra Attori

A religious festival, what is a religious festival in Sicily? (...). It is, above all, an existential explosion, as it is only during religious festivals that Sicilians abandon their state of loneliness.

Leonardo Sciascia, *Feste Religiose in Sicilia*, 1965, p. 30.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In Italy, religious tourism has big potentialities for framing local development through effective policies, and good practices of hospitality. Religious tourists are motivated by the wish to discover the roots of spirituality and travel to holy places. The related business is becoming particularly flourishing with lots of significant, beautiful and charming Italian destinations where Christianity deposited a deeply rooted culture and abundant amenities. Many sacred sites are the location of cultural heritage, masterpieces of architecture and art, libraries, picture galleries, and emplacement of popular traditions, stories and narratives descending from a very long lasting history.

Religion is amongst the main motivations for traveling, as UNWTO assesses that 300 to 330 million tourists visit the world's key religious sites every year, with approximately 600 million national and international religious voyages in the world, 40% of which takes place in Europe (UNWTO, 2014). Religious tourism may also help the sustainability of heritage sites that often are also key tourism destinations, where tourism fosters economic growth also providing essential meeting grounds for visitors and host communities (UNESCO, 2009). In history, religion and spirituality have been motivations for travels and social contacts, with many major tourist destinations having developed largely as a result of their connections to sacred persons, places and events (Raj & Morpeth, 2007). Tourism in sacred sites has often initiated at a ground community level and sometimes with the support of the public sector in an attempt to enhance local revenues and employment, leveraging religious tourism as a potential economic development tool (Corinto & Nicosia, 2015; Page & Connell, 2012).

Religious tourism is a type of cultural tourism, widely practiced not only for spiritual urges and art-historical and architectural values of the visited places, but also for the desire of intimate experiential enrichment (Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003). Contemporary cultural tourism is shaped by new needs of consumers, more and more eager to combine physical needs with psychological, cultural and social experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). Italian scholars (Trono & Oliva, 2013) have enlightened that the present religious tourist is in search of a combination of visiting holy places, walking along religious itineraries, even experiencing ancient pilgrimage routes and satisfying emotional and intellectual needs of culture, authenticity and spirituality. In this sense, religious tourism can also offer opportunities to meet different cultures, opportunities to socialize and build up trustable relationships with hosting communities (UNESCO, 2009).

Otherwise, religion and religious festivals are substantiated by social practices that are

the glue for community cohesion, production of space and cultural identities (Durkheim, 2015) even more if not intentionally designed as tourist attractions. Nevertheless, the interest of tourists for visiting sacred sites and attending religious festivals is increasing even though many of them are still frequented mainly by residents and short haul tourists or daily excursionists (UNWTO, 2014).

A sacred site or a religious festival, as a matter of fact, is a mix of goods and services market within which the local community is on the supply side and tourists are on the consumption side. In the case of festivals, the aspects of being a “cultural show” for visitors are quite evident, and religious sites are seemingly to be paired to “museums” or “exhibitions” of local culture. The two categories of actors—residents/suppliers and visitors/consumers—might collaborate in producing a sustainable model of behavior or alternatively produce a maleficent alliance capable of destroying the authenticity of the local culture (Bimonte & Punzo, 2003; Corinto, 2016). Thus, religious festivals are becoming of increasing importance for local policymakers eventually interested in the difficult agency of both enhancing and protecting local culture and economy.

South of Italy is rich in religious sites and offers a very large number of religious festivals of diverse scale, cultural importance and attractiveness. Notwithstanding an effervescent scenario of public initiatives, it still suffers for a minor visibility and notoriety and religious sites and festivals are barely international tourist attractions, being still local and in some cases parochial events.

A paradigmatic case study could be the religious festival of Saint Agatha that occurs every year from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> of February in Catania, attracting mainly Sicilian residents and few foreign tourists. The paper focuses on profiling the Religious Festival of Saint Agatha in terms of history, the character of stakeholders, size, the origin of assets, used venues and particularly stressing its socio-cultural features. We have only sketched the main financial aspects, privileging other specific research questions, i.e.: (i) which are the social relations among stakeholders behind the decision-making structure?; (ii) which are the relationships among organizations and local main social actors?; (iii) which are the strategies for enhancing local culture and folklore for tourism development?

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The next section reports a brief literature review discussing relations between religious festivals and community identity and sense of place. Section 2 gives some brief on the Saint Agatha Religious Festival in Catania. Section 3 explains the adopted methodology and section 5 reports results. In the Conclusion we discuss the results and make some final considerations also about purposes for public policies and future research.

## **1. Literature on religious festivals, community identity and sense of place**

Scientific interest in festivals is rapidly increasing within the recent development of event studies, that “is the academic field devoted to creating knowledge and theory about planned events” (Getz & Page, 2016, p. 2). In this line also religious festivals and pilgrimages can be considered events, yet having a very particular linkage with local

culture and sense of belonging to places and communities (Getz, Andersson, & Larson, 2006).

A religious festival matters with community identity and its relations to the sense of place. Yet, the term "sense of place" has become suitable for various purposes, due to the multifaceted nature of the concept. The topic has been studied by many social sciences, such as anthropology, environmental psychology, landscape history and architecture, sociology, and geography scholars. In human geography, a place, to be named "a place", should have a meaning, originating from a subjectively sensed and experienced human practice (Tuan, 1977). Perception and sense of places descend from individual experiences and are specific to different cultures so that places themselves may be understood as unique and constructed by cultural attitudes and social habits (Hetherington, 1998). In this sense, a sense of place and social identities are strongly related. After the 1980s, for the "new cultural geography", place should be intended more through the lens of power which imposes identities related not to intentional individual behavior but to relations as determined by asymmetrical social position (ibid.).

Religion and religious festivals determine social practices capable of producing a sense of belonging to a group or a community and even relations to a particular place (Brace et al., 2006). During the "performance" of a religious festival, gestures, movements and practice of music and singing hymns are determinant in defining the boundaries of a social group and/or a broader community. Participation in a group produces the sense of self and the other, through the identification in a practice and in a religious totem (Durkheim, 1915).

So it is the homogeneity of these movements that gives the group consciousness of itself and consequently makes it exist. When this homogeneity is once established and these movements have once taken a stereotyped form, they serve to symbolize the corresponding representations. (Durkheim, 1915, pp. 230-231).

The physical practice is reputed an essential experience in producing a sense of belonging to a group and the possibility itself for the group to exist. The group cohesion, which moves as a whole, repeating and singing or chanting the same words, the same prayer, is named a "muscular bonding" (McNeill, 1997). And movements make people euphoric to be in a group and having a collective sentiment. The body produces signs, movements and choreographies being the sensorial tool among collective rituals, including religious festivals, or recreational and formal dances (ibid.). Through its rites, religion acts as a source of solidarity, identification, and cohesion and provides occasions for people to gather and reaffirm their social norms (Durkheim, 1915).

All these theoretical acquisitions deal completely with the introducing quote of Sicilian eminent writer Leonardo Sciascia, even sustaining the focus of our research and field survey.

## 2. Main Aspects of the Religious Festival of Saint Agatha in Catania

In the whole Sicily, the patron saints are honored with festivities often lasting several days. The Religious Festival of Saint Agatha is the most important of the city of Catania and is celebrated every year from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> February, the 12<sup>th</sup> of the same month and on August 17<sup>th</sup>. The days in February coincide with the martyrdom of Saint Agatha date and the day in August celebrates the return to Catania of her body, which was held eighty-six years in Constantinople by byzantine general Giorgio Maniace as a war trophy in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. During the festivity week about one million visitors crowds the city, attending diverse events and processions of the festival, within the center and peripheral districts of the city. They are mainly excursionists almost exclusively from Sicily, rather than tourists coming from other Italian regions or abroad.

Saint Agatha is a Christian virgin martyr tortured for her unwavering faith in Christianity. The religious festival dedicated to her as Patron Saint of Catania is stated as the third one in the world, for presences and intensity of popular participation. It ranks after the Semana Santa in Seville, Spain, and the Corpus Domini in Cusco, Peru (Merlino, 2014; Ortiz-Hidalgo, 2011).

It is impossible to estimate the exact beginning of the celebrations, but traditionally it is reputed that in 1126 the Saint's relics were brought back to Catania from Constantinople (Di Leo, 1997), inciting spontaneous celebrations that filled the town's streets (Merlino, 2014). Afterwards, every year a religious procession with the relics of Saint Agatha takes place in the presence of religious and civil authorities, the archbishop of Catania, the mayor, the knightly orders and devout individuals and pilgrims, who recently come also from all over the world. During the celebrations and processions, many devotees wear the "sacco", a short white tunic, a velvet black hat and white gloves, remembering the same dress that the inhabitants of Catania would have been wearing when receiving back the Saint's relics (ibid.).

Popular participation in mass celebrations is large and especially the populace does express deep devotion and commitment to Saint Agatha as the patron saint of the city. During the religious processions two rows of thousands of people pull the "fercolo" (a sedan) of the Saint along the city itinerary in a very crowded situation. The urban corporations of art and crafts carry on the shoulders of four to twelve men eleven heavy "candelora", namely a rich construction showing holy emblems and candle lights. The smallest one was commissioned by Bishop Ventimiglia, after the volcanic eruption of 1776 that threatened the villages of Pedara and Nicolosi, and the more recent one pertains to the Saint Agatha City Society, founded by Cardinal Dusmet in 1874. Singular devotees bear by hands or on their shoulders candles which weight is proportional to the sins to be amended.

The Religious Festival has a powerful effect on local society as a whole and with respect to singular private and public components. Its very long tradition has pervaded the culture of the entire populace and has become a cultural emblem (totem) and a landmark, even in a complex way. Regional and international media frequently report individual components of the local mafia families appeared in the "first row" of the religious procession, often bearing the "fercolo" of the saint (Condorelli, 2013; De Luca

and Santangelo, 2015; Squires, 2015).

### 3. Methodology

The research was explorative and aimed at describing and analyzing the network of stakeholders surrounding the Religious Festival of Saint Agatha in Catania. For this purpose we followed the case study method (Yin, 2013) gathering data from diverse series of sources (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and observing the local reality using personal experience and knowledge (Anderson et al., 2003), directly attending several editions of the festival. In addition, we gathered further primary data from a dozen of direct interviews with key informants<sup>2</sup> (see list in Table 1) helpful also in validating and supporting knowledge retrieved from direct observations (Mack et al., 2005). Considering that: "(...) research interview is not an open and dominance-free dialogue between egalitarian partners, but a specific hierarchical and instrumental form of conversation, where the interviewer sets the stage and scripts in accord with his or her research interests" (Kvale, 2006, p. 485), this qualitative analysis allows us to depict the roles of actors involved in the festival actually having distinct aims, power, and leadership. Thus, we argue it is useful for describing the way the local community is capable of improving social cohesion and build its identity, sense of place and space construction.

**Table 1:** List of Key Informants (KIs)

1	Devotee of the Saint (Lawyer)	7	Researcher
2	Officer of Chamber of Commerce	8	Municipal Administrator
3	Public Safe Municipal Officer	9	Café Manager
4	Member of Saint Agatha Circle	10	Restaurant Manager
5	Archeologist and Expert of St. Agatha Festival	11	Hotel Owner
6	Red Cross Volunteer	12	Hotel Owner

Source: personal data

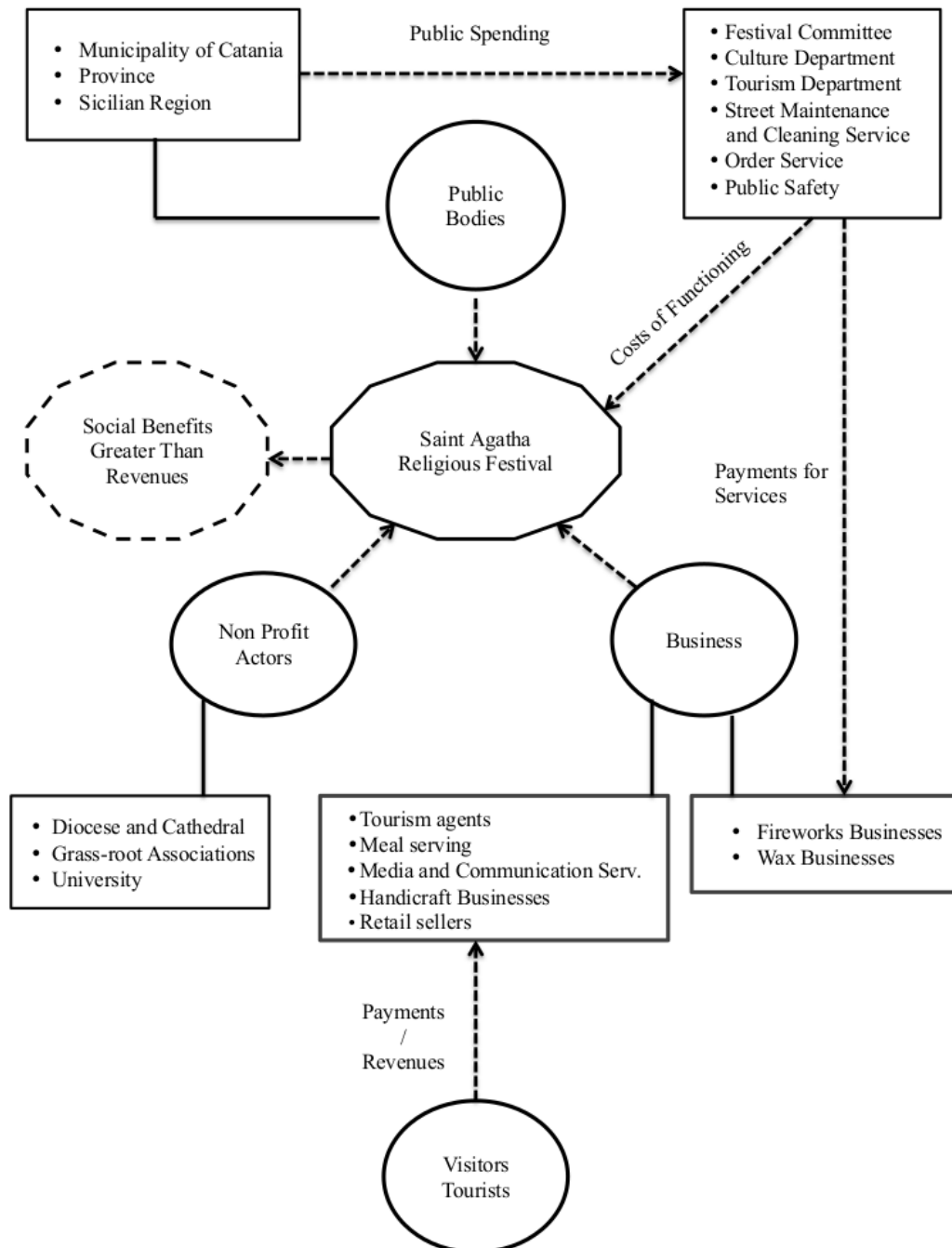
### 4. Results

Analysis of all the sources described in the preceding section produced the following results. First of all, it is possible to describe the main aspects of the organization, the actual relations among stakeholders involved in the religious festival, and in the civil event functioning. They are both individual and collective agents, private and public bodies, alternatively running profit companies or not-for-profit organizations (Fig. 1). In Figure 1, the relations among the main actors involved in the functioning of the festival are described. It was possible to individuate three core categories of

stakeholders, namely public bodies or institutional actors, non-for-profit organizations, and companies interested in for-profit activities.

The functioning scheme of relations and linkages is as follows. Since several decades, the institutional and administrative bodies provide the necessary money funding for the whole festival organization and functioning. In recent years, the implementation of the festival necessitates about one million euros per year for the overall organization and functioning. Main funders are the Municipality, the Province of Catania and the Sicilian Region. Every year they transfer an amount of near 450 thousand euros to the Festival Committee that in its turn provides the financing of all third private companies for furnishing fireworks, architectural public lights, chandeliers bearing, flowers supply, general maintenance, and production of shows in streets and squares, and exhibitions in museums. Public administrations are also involved with other sections and departments that provide the necessary workers, materials and services for street maintenance, street cleaning and waste removal after the festival, patrol service, communication, printing and promotion, and a press room for the rest of necessary funding. The service of public safety is assured by hundreds of volunteers under the municipal patrol control.





**Figure 1:** Saint Agatha Religious Festival. Stakeholders' Relations and Functions  
Source: authors' data.

The non-for-profit organizations are the Diocese and the University. The Diocese is the collector of donated wax candles, holds the saint relics, and it performs liturgical ceremonies and the overall religious program. The Diocese Museum is charged with

religious artifacts and relics conservation, and the University is interested in cultural activity and research. Moreover, three citizen clubs (namely the Circolo Cittadino S. Agata, Circolo di Santo Carcere and Circolo S. Agata al Borgo) are charged all year long for cultural activities and religious and civil events during the festival week and other singular dates. The social role of these "circoli" is fundamental in producing community cohesion because the large majority of Catanese citizens do participate in the social activities of these societies.

While public bodies fund the major part of total spending, visitors and tourists afford a variety of costs to attend the festival such as expenditure for tourism services, hospitality, and meals, purchase of wax candles, religious gadgets, souvenirs and handicraft works. An exact assessment of the subsequent total private business revenues is impossible, due to the overall lack of official data and big diffusion of the black market, especially for small retail vendors. Official budget for the not-for-profit organizations is very low.

It should be underlined that the spending for the firework exhibition and wax selling corresponds to the exact total expenditure amount of the Festival Committee. This underlines the actual strict relation between the public spending and the private incoming for the fireworks show and candles to be used in the processions and celebrations. The whole economic benefits of the festival for other private companies are difficult to be assessed and can be only described in term of variation of percentage with respect to the preceding series of the festival, following declarations of informants. Owners of bars and kiosks declared their revenue increased during the festival week by 80/100%, owners of restaurants by 10/20% and those of pubs by 5/10% in comparison to the preceding year.

In the last few years, the pattern of the festival has changed a lot, risking losing its original identity. On the contrary, it attracts much more people than in the past, especially from the whole Sicily and from abroad, hosting foreign visitors who are seeking a cultural event. Illegal behaviors are still occurring, as places for abusive vendors are under the control of the Mob. Only long lasting stalls have a regular permission to occupy the public ground.

Anyway, the festival brings many benefits to the entire city, supporting the revenues of cafés, restaurants and all the commercial activities. In city center, the revenue of a shop can even increase of about 200 percent, decreasing going to the periphery. Every year, the economic "push" of the festival begins within three, four and also five days before the Festival week, and all the hotels are crowded during the hot time, the central days of the week. During the festival week, all hotels and restaurants are crowded with clients, and the whole city is full of visitors. Event though the event is considered being fundamental for business and for social aspects, it is generally considered as a very socializing event for residents and emigrants. Since last few years, the religious procession is worldwide broadcasted by the Internet, watched also by millions of emigrants from Catania who arguably would like to come back and visit their own city of origin.

An important finding pertains the social cohesion induced by the Religious Festival. According to Durkheim's thought (1915), we found that through its rites, religion acts as a source of solidarity, identification and cohesion and provides occasions for people

to gather and reaffirm their social norms. Through this Religious Festival the local community produces and reinvents its social identity, marking its own territory and producing a defined cultural and imaginary space. Both “muscular bonding” and chanting during the fatiguing processions are strong signs of a very diffused sense of social belonging and not only of religious worship. Even the participation of reputed “mafiosi” shows the social importance of the event also in terms of building (even illegal) power and social control. Social cohesion is still a questionable item, because the presence of illegal behavior of some families is counterbalanced by the authentic participation and adhesion of the common people to a very religious festival.

Alliances between population and the public administrators are reinforced through public resources, use of public spaces and participation in social events and discussions. Public administrators “since ever” do spend public money to sustain, through the Festival Committee, the functioning of the festival directly paying private companies. These last provide all the material devices and services necessary for religious and civil events scheduled for the festival duration.

Besides financing of private companies, the public bodies run public services such as washing streets and squares, dirtied mainly by wax leaked by bunch of candles borne on the shoulders by devotees. They also provide services for order and public safety.

Recently, the Mayor of Catania, Mr. Enzo Bianco, launched a promotional campaign regarding the figure of Saint Agatha in fostering the territorial image. Starting from the analysis of an Instagram community on Catania, it emerged a considerable use of two iconic elements, the Etna volcano and the festival of Saint Agatha (Gigliuto, 2015). These two symbols match the emotions of both residents and tourists with a significant impact. Then, the Municipality charged the artist Milko Vallone to design a new logo for the city of Catania, combining the shape of the summit of Etna with the “A” of Agatha, the Patron Saint (ibid.). About this point, a large popular discussion is still ongoing.

## Conclusion

The field research allows stating the Religious Festival of Saint Agatha in Catania has powerful implications on local society as a whole and with respect to singular components and community relations. It has a very long tradition that has pervaded the entire population and is also becoming a popular cultural event worthwhile for territorial and tourism marketing.

The adopted methodology, mixing and comparing diverse sources of information with directly detected primary data, in order to have an appropriate scheme of stakeholders' relations surrounding the festival, proved to be useful to enucleate the main features of the religious and civil event. Direct observation and interviews allow us to assess the popular participation as authentic in religious sentiments and the community willing to partake and fortify social values. In term of the possibility to use the Religious Festival of Saint Agatha to foster tourism and hospitality in Catania, direct observation still allows perceiving the naïve popular participation gives the best sense

of cultural authenticity. Any public intervention to forcefully orientate the religious event to tourist purposes should be run by exercising much prudence. The ongoing municipal initiative for promoting the image of the city using the emblem of Saint Agatha should be analyzed by a specific future survey.

Results of the research allow us to maintain future interest toward the topic for the absolutely intriguing issues about social and spatial definition. The city of Catania is trying to enhance its visibility for tourist purposes. Local folklore and cultural traditions linked to a very important religious festival are immaterial assets to be surely used in territorial marketing and place branding policies. In recent years, the importance of events as an industry capable of increasing tourist presences in a destination has been recognized. Religious festivals are considered as cultural experiences within a cultural tourism scheme. Nevertheless, social participation in religious festivals can be driven by genuine faith, being people not immediately interested in the economic aspects. So that the actual implementation of a religious festival as a tourist attraction should be well evaluated by policymakers and public fundings. The event industry is becoming one of the world's largest contributors in people employment and giving major positive economic impact on destinations. A full understanding and conscious management of religious festival as a tourism event should be necessary. After the reported research, we are aware that local authorities use religion as a social tool and private business profits from the massive arrival of visitors, so that it is largely thought that the Festival has positive features to be fostered in tourism development.

At present, it is premature to say if the Religious Festival of Saint Agatha will risk a harsh folklorization, because it attracts mainly Sicilian residents and a minor part of visitors from abroad. Indeed, it appears to maintain a large popular participation and some features of individual and collective faith expressions, being even positive in stimulating private businesses and public promotional initiatives.

A future formal stakeholder analysis will help us to better understand social roles and interests in term of power and leadership, and will also help policymakers in producing a collaborative governance to match both public and private goals.

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<sup>2</sup> Complete data of interviews are retrievable at the authors.