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Popular Religiosity and Collective Effervescence in Contemporary Sicily

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the religious feasts of St. Agata, one of the most important religious feasts in Southern Italy, in the city of Catania. Drawing upon participatory observation and a netnography of virtual communities of devotees, the Christian popular religiosity towards this female Saint can be seen to represent an annual consecratory encounter between the Saint/Sacred and the local community, and also a kind of contemporary ordeal for young people. As Durkheim suggested, religion is what brings people together by reinforcing social relations and moral norms through a “collective effervescence”. This group energy, when felt by the individual, is not recognized as the result of communitas, but is attributable to the sacred. I suggest that this event has a double aspect: on the one hand, every devotee has to submit him/herself to this initiation rite at least once in his/her life to confirm belonging to the local community; and on the other hand, worshippers experience a sort of humanization of the Saint, who becomes one of them, someone to ask for employment, good health and so on, in exchange for extreme performances of devotion, such as enduring of more and less severe trials. Once a year, the collective suffering for Agata is perceived by the local actors as an initiation rite during the three-day feast. I suggest that this religious celebration is not only a social form of embodiment but a perpetrated contemporary form of ordeal.

Key words: *St. Agata’s cult; popular religiosity; collective effervescence; new ordeal*

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the patronage dynamics of one of the most important popular Christian feasts in Europe, Saint Agata, which is celebrated in Catania (Sicily, Southern Italy) as an example of collective effervescence experienced by the local community. Patron Agata’s cult is present in forty-four Italian municipalities. She is also venerated in many other parts of the world (e.g. Malta, San Marino, Spain, Portugal, Germany, France, Greece, Argentina). The religious cult in Catania offers the most important expression of spectacle and folklore for number of participants as well as sacred rites. The feast is celebrated every year, on the 3rd to the 5th of February. Young people especially live this commemorative moment as a special appointment. According to my anthropological analysis, supported by a netnography (Kozinets, 2002) of virtual communities of devotees, this religious feast represents not only an annual renewal of the community totem (the Saint), but also a kind of contemporary ordeal for young people. I assert that this event has a dual character: on the one hand, every devotee feels she/he has to submit herself/himself to this initiation rite at least once in his lifetime to confirm her/his belonging to the local community; they witness a moment of collective effervescence. On the other hand, they perform extreme forms of devotion, such as the enduring of difficult trials in which religiosity seems to be playing a marginal role.

Several authors discussed on Durkheim’s works and his principle ideas of the permanent nature of the sacred and thus of the moral. Mei Yin Chang questions about the larger social structure in which the clan is embedded: “Oddly enough, Durkheim gives a fairly detailed description of the larger tribal system through which individual clans are linked in a universalistic cosmology, yet he ignores the implications of their obvious interdependence” (1989, p. 66). Here the author argues that religious authority is differentially distributed amongst clans. In fact, clan members perform the rites and celebrations necessary to reanimate the power of their totem and support their cult (1989, p. 67). Some sociologists tried to develop the analytical difference Durkheim (1964 [1912]) introduces between the Church and the cult to support the idea that when effervescent manifestations of the sacred are manifest within sectional groups, they can result in conflict rather than overall social cohesion. As is known, Caillois (1950, p. 171), proposed a theory of morality based on a distinction between the forces of cohesion and dissolution that can arise from the sacred. Echoing Durkheim, for Caillois, the transformative potentialities of collective effervescence increase the vital power that threatens established orders of morality in everyday life (1950, p. 227). At the same time, crucially, collective effervescence is also an emotional and cognitive *renewal* of a different form of morality; a revitalization of sacred social life. In other words, as recognized by anthropological literature, collective effervescence stimulates solidarity, but is also productive of social conflict. Shilling and Mellor emphasize, however, that “these contemporary developments of Durkheim tend to overlook at least some of the ambivalences that characterize his analysis of the outcomes of effervescent socialities” (1998, p. 201). Pointing out on *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (hereafter *EFRL*), Shilling and Mellor suggest this masterpiece work “provides a multidimensional approach towards morality, by understanding the construction of moral orders as mediated by collectivities of

embodied individuals both cognitively and emotionally engaged with their social world” (1998,p. 194). Moreover, divesting moral force of its material symbols, what remains is collective power, because religious forces can only be collective forces (Pickering, 1984,p. 86).

Starting from Durkheim’s concept of religion as a factor of social integration and the condition of possibility for regulation, everything becomes sacred when it passes into a sphere very different from the world of everyday life, which is profane (Eliade, 1957); this separation is produced by collective effervescence, and the extra-ordinariness which surrounds such moments. Believers try to attain salvation, not only by feeling remorse and repent; they need to participate in a collective and public ritual. From this perspective, Rosati (2009) points out how Durkheim seems to insist on the ritual and on its performative effects. In this sense, *EFRL* must also be viewed as Durkheim’s profoundly ambivalent stance on modernity. In fact, the rituals and the sacred are, or ought to be, in secular and religious contexts, the most important thread in uniting the social fabric, in transcending and sharing a meaningful social life (p. 41). This empirical study engages with Durkheimian self-sacrifice in considering the popular feast of St. Agata as a compelling example of effervescent experience in contemporary age.

Agata’s story – the Sicilian virgin martyr persecuted by the Roman proconsul, Quinziano, whose love was not returned, in the IV century A.C. – is well known. She was persecuted and tortured by him for her Christian faith. After Agata’s death, a terrible earthquake devastated the country and Quinziano run away on his horse, but he fell into the river Simeto and drowned. The name Agata is Greek and it means “good”. Many miracles have been attributed to her historically. Nowadays, people believe Saint Agata protects the city of Catania from natural phenomena. One example is during the volcanic eruptions of Etna in 252, in 1444 and in 1669 all the devotees held up Saint Agata’s veil in front of the lava flow to protect themselves. The feast of St. Agata excites the participation and involvement of a large number of young people. During the night large crowds of people, the faithful, tourists and especially young people, gather in the main square waiting for the mass at dawn. Devotees wear the white votive tunic, with a black cap waiting for their patron. The first frenetic moment to be faced is the opening of the church doors: devotees pass pushing over the threshold to be the first to enter and start to run along the nave towards the apse. Invocations are made to the Saint, as an acclamation and a sign of devotion, but they could seem somewhat disrespectful because of the familiarity shown by the faithful towards their patron Saint. This is but praise and gratitude expressed through the use of glossolalia. This term literally means to speak in other languages. More specifically, it refers to the use of what may seem as an unknown language: nonsense syllables or words of an unknown mystical idiom that is sometimes part of a religious rite. After each invocation to Agata, the devotee turns to his confraternity, shouting “Citizens, Citizens, Citizens” to which they answer “Long lives Saint Agata”. And then they say: - “We are all devotees; - Yes, we are.” The formula “Cittadini, viva sant’ Aita” is repeated three times.

2. Religiosity and ritual performance

From theory to praxis, when the statue containing Agata’s relics is brought to the altar, devotees become impatient. During the celebration in the church, you can perceive the totemic principle (“mana”) that human beings are searching for, as Durkheim defines “the collective force objectified and projected into things” (1964 [1912],p. 363). In fact, referring to primitive groups, “A society whose members are united by the fact they think in the same way in regard to the sacred world and its relation with the profane world, and by the fact they translate this common ideas into common practices, is what is called a Church” (Durkheim, 1964 [1912],p. 44). This case-study shows the particularity of a social performance carried out from the official religion in parallel with the popular religion. This last one plays a relevant role during the three days celebration. According to Williams, defining “popular religiosity” means understanding the phenomena that denote two of the three following elements: the extra-ecclesial nature of popular religiosity; the transmission of knowledge through vehicles other than seminaries and other official religious institutions; the expression of popular religiosity with signs and symbols that transmit the presence of the supernatural in everyday life (1989,p. 18). Observing the feast of St. Agata, all three items indicated by Williams can be found. As remarked, two different liturgical demonstrations are simultaneously enacted. On the one hand, there is the institutional church with its ministries; on the other hand, there is the popular religiosity expressed by devotees’ non ritual performance.

From an anthropological perspective, the “need of the holy” concerns experiences and behaviour derived from religion. Their function is to calm anxiety or frustrations related to human life, to give support to society and the moral order, to satisfy intellectual curiosity, to meet the need of belonging (Davie, 1994; Kraus and Wulff, 2005). The participation of the faithful in very intense group experiences is the salient feature of many feasts of patron saints. Furthermore, these events are characterized by the sharing of experiences from daily life which can be translated into states of consciousness. As observed, there must be a real experience: a dynamic and emotional way of knowing, richer than a notional way of knowing, richer than a notional one, more lasting than a vibration (Godin, 1985,p. 65). As part of the magical-religious studies, many authors have stressed the importance of the formula in the conduct of a magic ritual, because it constitutes the core of every rite. As a result, people are attracted by the religious sphere and its various symbolic senses, searching for a place where they can protect part of their existence and identity from absorption by the social structures. Religion became a social practice, society finds in religion a potent metaphor of cohesion which it tends towards but never attains, as it is torn apart by the division and competition of individual interests. In this way, religion is not seen as alienation, but as a place where human beings produce symbolic values that elsewhere cannot be put into practice (Pace, 2007,p. 96).

The ethnographical observation conducted in 2004 and in 2008, during St. Agata ceremonies, was based on Glock and Starck’s scale of religiosity with its five dimensions: belief, practice, knowledge, experience, membership (1965). My research shows that the religious experience is the most relevant dimension. Moreover, I referred to Whitehouse’s theory of modes of religiosity (2004), according to whom there is a *doctrinal* way of feeling religiosity – based on *memory* and *motivation* that take precedence over everyday matters – and an *imagistic* one, based on episodic memory. In this area of experience, initiation rites, ecstatic practices, etc., are less frequent but more powerful and challenging, whose fundamental characteristic is the absence of leadership.

From this theoretical framework, the slow and delayed return of the Saint to the cathedral during the feast in Catania is the evident result of this mechanism. The high emotional stress of a group fosters an intense cohesion. In short, religious practices that are performed only seldom tend to convey a high level of excitement to the participants. Durkheim emphasized the importance of the ritual atmosphere; in fact, a rite or a ceremony does not merely involve devotees, because “the moral forces expressed by religious symbols are real forces” (1964 [1912], p. 382). The representations brought to life during a rite serve to maintain moral life. Through them, the community affirms and maintains itself. The rite is shared through a feeling of comfort, which the worshipper draws from the rite performed. The rite facilitates a return to profane life, – Durkheim contends – with increased courage and ardour. In such ritualized performances, the belief dimension is experienced as personal and immediate. In fact, according to Alexander, “The symbolic roles that define participation in such ritualized performances emerge directly, and without mediation, from the other social roles actors play” (2004, p. 535).

The social performance or spectacle aspect of ritual (Marshall, 2002, p. 363) leads to the second part of the research, which consisted in the analysis of short films posted on Youtube it, concerning different moments of the feast, especially regarding the religious procession. I suggest it could be read as the believer’s product when he/she becomes an extemporaneous but imperfect ethnographer. In Agata’s cult, the devotees are native agents of a rite and at the same time they are also producers of a cultural representation. What is interesting about this survey is the parallelism between the point of view of observation and audiovisual media observation. From a methodological point of view, in fact, the anthropologist chooses where to place him/herself to view or interact during the event. His/her field presence is critical and rich in stimuli. Audiovisual media observation, on the contrary, requires an indirect seemingly secondary vision by the researcher. However, what emerged from the conduct experience leads us to hypothesize that the observation of media has its own strength, that is the relevance of the here and now of the author who created or collected the audiovisual source. Although not present, the researcher enjoys a privileged point of view, which is the same as that of the web narrator. In this case, it seems natural to apply the instruments of textual analysis normally used in prose and poetry, which lend themselves to a reflection on the narrator’s point of view and being so typical of narrative instruments they are relocated to the technical language used on the screen. The research carried out was also based on the analysis of film or iconographic texts; therefore we can talk of “highlight point zero” since the anthropologist’s point of view coincides with that of the filmmaker. The narrator’s view of the scene is not visible, at least not completely, so it is called the non-focusing point or highlight point zero: the point of view and the observing point are those of the web-surfer who in that precise moment becomes the agent of the rite. In the construction of the meaning of ethnographic films or photographs, there are three main actors who are essential for the comprehension of a film: the author, the filmed characters and the spectator. It is appropriate to speak of a triadic relation in whom the ideal audience/spectator/reader combines with the ethnographer and the informer. In this case, I refer to a “contracted document” which is the result of research interaction before the production of the videos. However, this interpretation is not applicable to video-clips produced on Youtube (Bitti, 2001, p. 166), which are better classified as cultural self-representations or self-ethnographies. These practices of self-representation do not only have a conservative function, but also become audiovisual sources which help to create family memory; they also produce memorial documents regarding the history of the community to which one belongs, and build a sense of belonging to the site, basing it on specific chosen aspects of the traditional culture; react to untrue representations produced by national broadcasting; re-construct an aesthetic community reliving sensorial experiences that cannot be relived in the present context; reaffirm a personal and generational identity which has changed compared to the traditional rural culture (Marano, 2007, p. 161). With regard to the above-stated triad – author, characters, and spectator – the first two elements are blended together.

In St. Agata’s ritual, both in the field and on videos, the devotees are at the same time native followers of a rite and producers of a cultural representation. More specifically, they assume both the status of authors and characters. With regard to this specific element, Durkheimian thought referred to simpler societies where rituals are made at one time and place, after which the participants scatter to engage in activities of a more instrumental and individualistic kind could be developed (see, e.g., Mauss, 1979 [1950]). Considering modern complex societies, elements of social performance have become “de-fused”. Performances are successful only insofar as they can “re-fuse” these increasingly disentangled elements. In a fused performance, audiences identify with actors, and cultural scripts achieve verisimilitude through effective *mise-en-scene* (Alexander, 2004, p. 527). Deepening, the St. Agata cult maintains some elements typical of the early societies but, at the same time, there are traces of contemporary social dynamics. Basing on Alexander’s macro model of social action as cultural performance, St. Agata feast performances are composed of a small number of analytically distinguishable elements, which have remained constant throughout the history of social life although their relationship to one another has markedly changed. Secondly, due to modern complexity, the elements that compose performance have become not only analytically but also concretely differentiated, separated, and de-fused in an empirical way. In fact, “whether social and theatrical performances succeed or fail depends on whether actors can re-fuse the elements of which they are made” (Alexander, 2004, p. 566). Referring to Alexander’s analysis on ritual, Rosati (2009, p. 46) underlines how it is prejudiced by an hypermodernist interpretation. To sum up, according to Durkheimian intuition about ritual and the sacred, participation and self-representation in Agata’s cult is a collective way by which solidarity renews itself.

3. From Initiation Rite to New Ordeal

The importance of ritual in human life has been highlighted by some contemporary authors; specifically, through the ordalic excesses that characterize the dramatic reversals of everyday, rituals can have significant effects on attitudes, knowledge, the perception of self, identity and beliefs of individuals. Particularly, Turner (1969) developed van Gennep’s model rites of passage (1909), exploring liminality as a period in which human beings found great strength in the mutual support of others in the same situation. Bloch’s theory of rebounding conquest, or rebounding violence (1992), focuses on the idea that rituals take place wherever with the same function to deny the transience of life and of human institutions through acts of symbolic violence.

On this basis, the religious fervour of the young people becomes particularly evident on the evening of February 3rd, when they assemble around the fountain, which can be considered the first meeting place of their performances. Many of them bring lighted candles weighing from ten to fifty kilos and meet to pray and stay together and to listen to each other prayers. The young people often sit in a circle or kneel down, placing a large votive candle beside them. A short while later the rite of screaming begins. It consists of crying out supplications to the Saint. The evening darkness is illuminated by the light of the candles and by the brightness of the white ritual garments. In turn, each devotee, generally a young man, takes a deep breath and shouts his devotion to the patron. The group answers, echoing his cry. After the first moments, the voices become louder and louder. Some people get friends to encourage them so that they may shout even louder; others cup their hands round their mouths in order to make their voices clearly heard and to be able to keep up the physical effort, yet others lean on their candles until they are out of breath. This is a topic episode of ordeal effervescence. In this regard, at first sight St. Agata's cult seems to present itself as "a positive rite" as defined by Durkheim (1964, [1915], p. 336), related to festivities, during which members have communion meal and are engaged in sacrificial oblations. But, deepening the hermeneutical reflection it appears as an ordeal rite. The presence of the sacrifice is a characteristic of the collective effervescence. "Every feast... has certain characteristic of the religious ceremony, for in every case its effect is to bring men together, to put the masses into movement and thus to excite a state of effervescence, and sometimes even of delirium, which is not without a certain kinship with the religious state" (1964, [1915], p. 383). The sacredness of the ceremony is reflected by the extraordinariness of the time. Believers are carried out outside their ordinary profane time to celebrate the festive moments. As mentioned, the whole feast is a continual trial by ordeal: the participant must resist until the end of the feast. A second trial consists in carrying a large candle (weighing from 20 to 100 kilos) on one's shoulders. Young people in particular respond to the symbolic needs of their group, continuously facing fascinating, almost perverse risks. For example, in 2004, a 20-year-old was trampled to death by thousands of feet during the run up the first slope (named San Giuliano). People born in Catania call Saint Agata the "little saint" (*santuzza*), because Agata is considered as one of them. It is well known that facing extreme physical trials in honour of a saint is a sacrifice offered in exchange for an auspicious future. From the participatory-observation it emerged that in Catania the religious participation of young people is acclaimed as a vital votive ritual in honour of their patron saint and, more specifically, the tests of endurance which they undergo form a veritable rite of initiation, or rather a genuine revival of the trial-by-ordeal in a contemporary setting. In fact, the annual recurrence of this collective rite marks the conclusion of a cycle and the start of a new one. This threshold has to be marked symbolically. The ordeal which the young people undergo is not the medieval ritual of justice in which one appeals to God to declare the innocence or guilt of a person. As Le Breton (2000) notes, in the contemporary era the ordeal is an individual, often unconscious, resource: through a dangerous action, an actor asks death to weigh the value of his life. We can consider it as a kind of existential response. Therefore, surviving takes the value of a guarantee and arouses an intensity of temporary or permanent being. The ordeal emerges as an individual rite even though it is lived within a community. Le Breton writes that what torments modern human being is a sense of his/her fragile identity, which carries with it a feeling of bewilderment. In this sense, the new ordeal confirms itself as a "rite of social conciliation", devoted to alleviating the tension between the subject and his group. In fact, the ordeal provokes the group and strengthens its ties through the care given to the individual on that occasion. Dodging death, the individual, through the sensations felt in close contact with danger, finds in himself/herself unexpected resources that allow him/her to be reborn, or at least to regain control of his life. Successfully facing the trial in the name of Saint Agata hides a yearly need. Its reward is a reassurance of the significance and value of existence for both the individual and the group. Survival is enjoyment, enshrining a new beginning and a new birth. Another test of endurance that devotees undergo is that of towing the votive machine, weighing 18 tons, with two ropes 130 metres long. Comparatively, Le Breton's theory of the physical pain as an abutment opposite to an expressible suffering recalls the Durkheimian idea of self-sacrifice. Similarly, the believers issue their physical co-presence and may experiment a cyber-participation to the ritual too, following it on the web. This solution was adopted by municipal administration in order to meet the need of participation of thousands of devotees around the world, especially Sicilian immigrants. Indeed, it is more appropriate to call them web-devotees, as there are so many people who, by culling physical distances, share the moment of faith and the procession. As already mentioned, there search was carried out on the field in the years 2004 and 2008, brutal so monitoring the virtual communities of devotees, from February 2008 to February 2009. The decision to utilize this combination of research methods stems from the idea of conducting an analysis of the comments posted on the website of the Saint' Agata's City Circle, from one year's feast to the next, in order to capture the evolution of interactions between devotees. A starting point, and also a contact between market research and anthropological studies, is to identify and understand the intention of tastes, desires, symbolic systems of reference and the influences on decision-making powers of consumer groups. For this reason, the netnography or "digital ethnography" is configured as a methodology of qualitative research, which aims to explore cultures and communities that are emerging through the Internet-mediated communication, on the basis of information available in discussion forums. Essentially, there is an implication that emerges from Kozinets' methodological contribute: it concerns the revelation of the anthropologist's identity; this choice – in my opinion – is not unique, because, depending on the case, the anthropologist/researcher must consider if revealing or not his identity. Of greater interest was the observation conducted on the "devotees' wall" of the same religious City Circle. For this phase, I decided not to interact with the participants, but to merely point out, according to lurkers' attitude, who visitor join the forum without participating to the discussion lists.

The ritual of St. Agata, in its traditional cult system, has a complex symbolic stratification. This great celebration, well known in all the world, emerges as a unique study of human need of a system of religious belief. In conclusion, as we have seen, without the ritual and the consequent sacralization of the fundamental actions of everyday social life, the individual is no longer given the opportunity to cultivate the spirit of morality. Moreover, rituals must be capable to produce solidarity within the group.

4. Conclusion

Starting from Durkheimian thought that the ancient ritual apparatus preserves and renews itself in the centuries, this paper highlights the collective suffering in Saint Agata cult as initiation ritual for young devotees and as a contemporary form of ordeal. Moreover, I suggest that declaring ourselves religious doesn't mean to be religious according to Glock and Starck's theory of religiosity (1965). Especially youth participation in patron feast expresses only three of the five issues: belief, practice and experience. On the contrary, I think that patron participation in worship is configured primarily as an initiation rite, strongly aggregating, but also as a review of the ordeal in a contemporary perspective (Di Giovanni, 2007). The case-study shows that especially youthful rediscover religious fervor seasonally, for its apotropaic function due to the severe trials of faith and physicality. In this regard, it is possible to find a connection with the theory of "religious bricolage" (Lucà Trombetta, 2004). The devotees of Saint Agata do not borrow from other orthodoxies and do not convert to other religious offerings; I emphasize the possible emergence of forms of "personal re-working", that is a religious consumption in the name of the traditional devotion. This case-study shows that declaring oneself to be religious does not necessarily involve a pure sense of faith. As expressed in *EFRL*, the first component of any faith is belief in salvation by faith (Durkheim, 1964 [1912], p. 419) and salvation derives not merely from belief but from communion of the believers with their God. To clarify, "salvation is communion with other individuals, self-transcendence by way of sharing a community of faith" (Rosati, 2003, p. 14). Although young devotees consider their participation in Agata's cult as a clear expression of belief, practice and experience, I argue that for them the cult becomes a strongly aggregative initiatory rite.

5. References

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