

Stefano De Matteis

FROM THE ANONYMOUS SKULLS TO THE COLLECTIVE TRANCE.

RITUAL REPRESENTATION IN THE NEAPOLITAN UNDERCLASS

Gregory Bateson, the scholar I chose years ago as my ideal mentor, defined a story as an aggregate of formal relations scattered over time [see Capra 1988]. My goal today is to tell you a story. Actually the stories are two. Two stories closely linked together. The first one is about the cult of the souls of purgatory, the second relates to the ritual of Madonna dell'Arco¹. What do these two rituals have in common?

First of all, they both originate in the ancient times of history: the first dates back to the seventeenth century, the latter to the fifteenth. Both are expressions of a religious feeling, which emerged from that liminal area where Christianity and Paganism can still be confused. For this reason they have been convicted and are continuously attacked by the official Church with the aim of deleting them. Moreover these two rituals are also two forms of religious representation that belong to a specific social area. Therefore they live intertwined to the behavior of some people that are part of the so-called *Lumpenproletariat*, a marginal underclass widely spread in Naples and Campania.

¹ For a deeper and detailed description of the two cults see De Matteis, 1993; De Matteis, 2011; De Matteis, 2013; and its related references.

In addition, they both structure a direct relationship with the transcendent, between the believer and the afterlife, without any priest or any other kind of mediator. Their closeness is easy to identify into their “public” representations. These representations join together into the large number of *altarini*², which are little altars built on a wall in the streets by a single or a group of believers. These representations sprout spontaneously in the streets of Naples and its suburbs, usually a statue of the Madonna dell’Arco dominates the structure, standing at the top, while the souls of the purgatory are placed below into a niche in the wall, represented in what looks like flames.

I attended these rituals in the seventies, when I was a student of anthropology. Then I went back as a professional and started analyzing them in the nineties when, for my field work, I chose some families belonging to the Neapolitan popular classes to follow in their social and religious practices.

What I noticed was that every Monday morning some women, together with their daughters or granddaughters, went to pay homage to the souls of the purgatory; while on Saturdays and Sundays men organized their stroll around the neighborhood to collect alms, stopping at every *altarino* on their way, to pay a specific homage to the Madonna dell’Arco.

² *Altarino*: It is used here, in Italian, to express at the best the difference with the altar, considered as a typical feature of the official Church. Consider the importance of the Italian diminutive suffix *-ino* to express less officiality.

These rites are therefore enacted in the same families, but were different in one aspect. This point of distinction is of our interest: the cult of the souls of purgatory is matrilineal, meaning that it is mainly carried out by women and follows a female line of continuity. The rite of Madonna dell'Arco, on the contrary, is virilocal. It is handled by men in their own neighborhoods, united in groups that grow in proportion to the approaching of the sacred day. I will show later other points of contact between the two cults, let's now go to the insights of both stories.

The cult of the souls of purgatory, such as it was when I observed and attended it, was arranged in the same way as described by the rare documents of the early twentieth century.

The remains of poor men and women, abandoned by their relatives, and those of the people who could not afford a funeral or buy a tomb, have been collected into several churches's hypogea of Naples (Santa Maria del Purgatorio ad Arco, San Pietro ad Aram) and into the high tufa caves of the cemetery of Fontanelle, dug under the hill of Capodimonte, in the area known as Sanità. But these places have hosted mainly skulls and bones from mass graves that were realized, even occasionally, at the time of the plague in the seventeenth century.

Naples has a certain familiarity with death, which results in a peculiar kind of willingness to accept these "abandoned souls" who lost their name and identity. The

city of Naples considered them as victims of disasters and catastrophes, it briefly imagined them as people who had a hard and fragile life, made of misery, ended in a “bad” death: without any condolence, proper burial and appropriate arrangement. We could say that a process of identification was created between the faithful and the skull-souls, but we will return to this later.

Those abandoned skulls are seen as the concrete representation of souls in need of help and care. The religious imaginary places the souls, represented by those skulls, into the purgatory, where they are destined to suffer in flames, but also waiting to be retrieved to the eternal life, in heaven. It is, in fact, in heaven where these lost, abandoned souls can finally be given relief and consolation.

As I have mentioned earlier, Monday is the day dedicated to the souls of purgatory and devotees – mothers and daughters, grandmothers and granddaughters, in their teenage years or younger – go to sacred places to pay their homage.

From the nineteenth century’s documents up to what I personally witnessed, we found that the usual practice has always been to “adopt” a skull and to “work” for it with prayers and masses offered for it.

I want to make clear to you that the cult of the souls of purgatory is a Mediterranean rite. It was widely spread in past and it took on local configurations according to different places and cultures where it was held. Since it is a “popular” cult, we have

no written documents but evidence can be found to support the hypothesis that it was widespread among the Neapolitan lower classes throughout the twentieth century.

The circulation of this cult was orally based but at the same time the narrative level also had a basic function. In fact, people used to talk about the souls of purgatory and to narrate stories and events about them. These stories often crossed the border of fear and dread, and almost all of them were about the afterlife.

The cult of the souls of purgatory puts us in front of the most traditional form of communication of the experience: we have mothers and grandmothers who narrate, relate, invent and accompany younger women to sacred places, showing them how to act practically and what to do with skulls. Yet it is not only about this: all of the above feeds, lie dormant and also strengthens the collective imagination of the hereafter, defining an afterlife made of a sort of continuation, an extension of the terrestrial life.

As we said, the cult took place in underground dungeons belonging to churches, fraternities, associations that were ran by the devotees. Among the most dedicated, some, both male or female, were chosen to work as guardians. The guardian was in charge of opening and closing the place, keeping it clean and collecting offerings. But above all it had a key role because it conveyed narrations and stories about every single soul of the purgatory: people talked about their interventions and, most of all, reported news and information about them.

Where did the faithful get this information?

The answer to this question leads us to one of the classic elements of folkloric communication with the dead and the afterlife: dreams. The primary form of communication between the souls in purgatory and the faithful on earth were dreams. A real and genuine dialogue was established between the dead and the living: the first telling their stories to the believers, the latter reporting them in the sacred places on Mondays.

In some cases the soul not only told its story; it gave as well the credentials of recognition. There was a soul in San Pietro ad Aram who was familiarly called “the abandoned man”. He appeared in a dream of a woman who was especially devoted to him to tell her who he really was, asking her to tell everyone so they would stop calling him that way.

Every single story contributed to the consolidation of the heritage of the cult in general and the repertoire of collective memories linked to that specific place as well as the broader cult. And in this dialogical universe, the guardian was the main recorder and narrator, if not the only one.

Then, a diffused narrative excitement spread around these places, a Gothic redundancy that structured and amplified its mythology: stories of lost souls, adventurous and exemplary tales of mystery and terror. Stories that reached popular

novels³ and the theater⁴. A redundancy that in time went beyond local narrations to affect the cinema, for example: Roberto Rossellini places a sequence of *Journey to Italy* (1954) right in the cemetery of Fontanelle; the latest film by Mario Martone, *Leopardi* (2014), shows precisely the practice of the rite⁵.

Anyway, the souls of the purgatory have been an integral, I would say substantial, part of the collective religious and devotional imaginary of Neapolitan people: the common people went to these places to pay homage to the souls of the purgatory or to adopt a skull and work for it. Let's outline the steps.

The first level of devotion was generic and widespread: it consisted of going to these places, saying prayers and lighting candles.

There is then a second level of participation: devotees who attended more regularly these places could easily be “attracted” from a specific skull, or they may ask the guardian or the more expert believers for an advice on which skull to adopt. This meant to start a personal relationship with the afterlife, because it meant to have an own personal “reference”.

³ Such as those of Federico Mastriani, and others that also reached.

⁴ Such as the “social dramas” by Federico Stella: narrations that often are set in these places as well.

⁵ These two names are only some of the best examples: there are B and C category movies of the seventies on local organized crime – known as *Camorra*, a type of mafia spread in Campania – that are often set in cemeterial environments, not to mention *Gangs of New York* by Martin Scorsese, who set a scene into the caves of Fontanelle cemetery but without framing the skulls. On the way the ritual was used and on the filmic documentation referring to the cults we are dealing with see De Matteis, 2015.

But it could also happen that people were “called” by the soul itself. This can be considered another folkloric function of the dream, a feature that widens the cult’s horizons, framing it into culturally widespread dream practices: the call in a dream. The soul, in its human substance, could go into a dream of a woman believer and ask for her help. Moreover, the soul gave precise indications of its location to facilitate recognition: which rooms, line, corner it took up. On Monday the faithful went to the hypogeum or cemetery and, with the help of the guardian, identified the skull and started the actual manual ritual. Let’s now describe the ritual technique and practice.

The skull was cleaned with alcohol⁶, then placed on a handkerchief or a small white pillow. This was a collectively shared signal that meant the skull “belonged” to someone. It was then surrounded by the rosary and illuminated by candles. The believer began to pray for it, even having masses offered for it. The procedures were repeated periodically so that there was no dust, and the skulls were cleaned, preserved and looked after.

We said that the anonymous skulls adopted by the faithful represented at the same time the common and personalized level of relationship with the afterlife. In these places, however, we also find another level, represented by those souls who reached a certain degree of “reputation” for their “specialization”: people could go straight to these places, applying to a “specialist” for a specific grace.

⁶ And, in some cases, even with naphthalene. These were usual techniques for the practices of exhumation of the dead.

Let me give you two examples.

The first one is about Lucia. It is possible to find the “miraculous” skull of Lucia in several places. Lucia’s story, as reported by the faithful, is the story of a thwarted love. In some versions of the story it is narrated that her parents chose her husband and did not allow her to marry the man she loved, according to other versions it seems that, on the day of her wedding, she died before reaching the altar. This love has been outlined in several temporal levels, from the eighteenth century to World War II, so it covers the widest range of historical settings. The sentimental, troubled past attributed to Lucia is the best reference, the best certification that encourages the faithful to make requests about love to her. She helps indeed people who are having trouble with marriages and fertility. In the church of Santa Maria del Purgatorio ad Arco a real shrine has been dedicated to her. It was enriched for years with votive offerings made of brides’ bouquets, engagement rings, and infant’s shoes.

The second example is that of the Captain. Another famous character, whose story is useful to show the depth of the cult and its intertwining within the popular Mediterranean culture and mythologies. Collected stories tell of a young woman who asked the Captain for help to marry her boyfriend, a man-at-arms himself. When the wedding approaches, the woman took the groom with her to pay homage to the Captain, who made her dream come true. The groom was skeptical and, when he arrived at the Fontanelle cemetery, he started making bad jokes about the skull, teasing his girlfriend, suggesting her to invite the Captain at their wedding. The day

of the wedding a stranger appeared among the guests. When the groom asked for clarification, the stranger told him that he himself had invited him. Then the Captain uncovered himself allowing everyone to recognize him, and shook hands with the groom, a handshake which revealed to be fatal. Obviously many different variations of the episode were collected, but the story of the Captain, even if synthesized, immediately shows its kinship with the Mediterranean mythologies of *The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest*, better known as Don Giovanni.

I'd like to summarize now some of the issues we can consider central in the cult.

First of all, identification: the faithful are lost souls, just as those represented by the skulls, they are living lost souls. They share pains and difficulties of the existence, may it be personal and individual or collective. It is no coincidence that the single believer involves its own family with its choice: once the soul has been chosen, it belongs to that person and also to its family group, as an extension of participation and protection.

But not only. The soul can also be chosen to replace someone, because it represents someone who disappeared: it is no coincidence indeed we find an increase of investments and of “adoptions” in the period following the end of World War II. It is all about the missing people, those who died unknown: a father, a brother or a husband who did not return from the war, or that rests in a far cemetery. An

anonymous skull replaces this person. With this skull the person behaves as if it was the missing person, caring for it in the same way. The anonymous skulls encourage the faithful to a participation that is generically extended to the unknown Soldiers, all those cases of people missing during or after a war who did not receive a proper mourning, losing their identity.

It is important to underline these issues of pain and suffering because these feelings are at the base and strengthen the faithful's community that it is recovered (and projected) in the souls: without this, the emotional charge placed into the rite cannot be properly understood. The marginality of misery and poverty reacts on people exposing them to the same risks that had condemned souls in purgatory: the faithful feel they are living the same danger of being gone, of being erased from history in a bad way. This leads us to the second level of the ritual's action.

Once a skull has been identified, adopted and undertaken by a family, this family prays, helps and supports the soul until it reaches heaven. The certainty of the passage will be only when the skull-soul will fulfill one of the graces requested by the faithful.

What kind of requests are we talking about? People do not ask souls for miracles, because miracles belong to a higher degree in the hierarchy of the religious bureaucracy of the divine pantheon. They simply ask for graces that are part of the ordinary life and of normal existence, such as having a boyfriend, a marriage,

children or maybe a job. These graces are needed just to regulate and normalize the individual's existence, keeping away the risk and the danger of no longer being on Earth, leading the existence towards a “good” death.

When the soul fulfills the grace, people gave to the skull a little house called *scarabattola*⁷ in which the skull is placed. The person who received the grace writes her own name on it, and the sentence “*per grazia ricevuta*”, “for grace received”.

In 1968, the bishop of Naples ordered the complete ban of the cult of the anonymous skulls and the shutting down of the places where the cult was held. The reason was that these ceremonies were considered pagan and superstitious and so they were unjustifiable. The technical problem is that official Church does not allow to honor anonymous mortal remains, above all it forbids to enact upon the skulls those practices exclusively reserved to those souls who proved to be heroic in life, as for Saints and beatified people. Here begins the struggle between the faithful and Church.

Given the large flow of devotees and the strong popular participation, an immediate, urgent and final closing was unthinkable, even if attempts were made. Defense strategies on the side of the faithful were numerous: the skulls, for example, were “officially” hidden or covered, kept away from public contexts. Since the ban, the closing procedure was completed only in 1980, using the Irpinia earthquake as an

⁷ A *Scarabattola* is generally a glass cabinet containing a sacred image.

excuse to accelerate the process. Since then the requests to the authorities, made by the faithful, were not taken into consideration, even if they carried as proof of evidence dreams in which souls complained about abandonment and urged for help.

Nowadays there are only two places, San Cosma e Damiano and San Pietro ad Aram, where people have access, in a very limited way, to the cult. Skulls have been put under glass so that any manual activity is impossible. Everything has been emptied and deprived. The faithful can again enter hypogea to pray for the souls, and they do it in places where skulls once were placed. And where there is now just an empty space, the believers throw their messages, in those rooms once filled with skulls, bones, candles and votive offerings. Full of collective experiences and stories as well.

And the other places? The years at the end of the century marked their transformation. Long closing times allowed the erasing of the cult's memory, as well as the practical experience of the "work" made with the skulls, a communication system in which grandmothers and mothers educate daughters on how to take care of skulls. Sites have been cleaned and restored, sometimes turned into museums. Since the early years of the new century these places (Santa Maria del Purgatorio ad Arco and Fontanelle cemetery) began to be an attraction for the international tourist's circuit. Today they are crowded with visitors and guides, instead of devotees, who tell what the cult used to be.

Together with the students attending the Laboratory of Anthropology “Annabella Rossi” of University of Salerno, that I am currently running, I recorded many guided tours and found them interesting because they enclose the ancient cult of the souls of purgatory among those oddities of behavior of the Southern Italian people in general, and in particular among those of Neapolitans.

Moreover, the whole story I just told you is reduced to a kind of trivial exchange, a mere “*do ut des*” where believers give solace and comfort, prayers and offerings to the souls to receive back graces with interests, once the soul is in heaven.

Just as shown by an instructive reportage by Channel 4, everything that was contextual, infected, shared between souls and believers, dirty in a certain way, everything that had to do with pain, suffering, experience and emotion, has been erased. The story has been dried out and underwent a process of cultural purification which aims at normalizing every form of alterity it has been outlined so as to become meaningless, fitting the stereotypes of the already-known, offering tourist exactly what they expect.

Let's stop here and move to the male side of the family and then to the ritual of Madonna dell'Arco.

Since the middle of January, starting from the first Saturday and Sunday after the day of Saint Anthony the Great, that inaugurates the new year for agriculture, devotees of

Madonna dell'Arco start the long journey that will weekly take them into the streets, often barefooted and white-dressed, until the great final pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of Madonna dell'Arco on Easter Monday.

This ritual, even more than the previous one dedicated to the souls in purgatory, because of its mostly male management, is of exclusivity of common and “uncertain” people. Uncertain in the sense that many of its participants are “at risk”, on the edge of lawlessness and crime. Actually many of the faithful are among the unskilled labor willing to do anything, or they are little rising stars of the underworld waiting to shine.

Everything moves from alleys and streets aggregations groups gathered in the legal form of the association and recognized by the Sanctuary of Madonna dell'Arco run by Dominican monks. These groups, at the initial stage, are made up of two or three people plus some musicians (trumpet or sax, snare or bass drum) which go out in the streets every week to collect alms. They have banners with the image of the Holy Mary and they stop at every *altarino* they meet on their way to pay homage to it. The believer, moving and dancing at the sound of music, slowly walks towards the image until the banner he is holding touches the other image of the Holy Mary, as a symbol of reverence and greeting.

As months go by, with the approaching of the sacred day, the group grows in number with relatives, friends and neighbors who also take part in the ritual. In the days

before Easter and in the final pilgrimage to the Sanctuary groups fully “expose” themselves, showing all their strength and power, starting with the concrete number of members. The rituals of greeting the *altarini* are transformed into real representations, called “services” by the faithful. Let’s proceed in order.

In the weeks before Easter, groups go out at full number, on Saturdays and especially on Sundays. They show themselves, they “expose” according to a rigid division by age: the youngest child opens, others follow in order of age. Children here are both male and female, because until a certain age they have no sex, they are all considered “creatures of God”. Then there are teenagers: first “virgin” girls, then boys who perform games of skill and virtuosity with the banners, always in order of age. Then women. At the end the men, who often carry a litter on their shoulders with images, scenes or statues of the Holy Mary called *tosello*. These performances have a dominant pedagogical function: how to behave properly is shown to children and young people, they are guided and accompanied in taking these first steps. The youngest are taught on how to hold the banner, the oldest ones on how to perform skills. But the whole ritual has an imitative, repetitive, “reproductive” function: children watch, imitate, repeat and acquire.

The whole service develops according to the beat of the music, characterized by leaning steps and wavering bodies. The band has to ensure the right pace and it can use any music to do it, as long as it allows performing collective and individual movements. Official songs, as codified by the community of devotees of the

Madonna dell'Arco, are only two. All the others are adaptations of popular songs or creations of the musicians.

Ranged in a row by age, in front of an *altarino* or of an image of the Holy Mary, the group parades: each of the members moves from its departure place and, swaying on music, reaches the picture where the miraculous image of the Holy Virgin is reproduced. Once he has touched the image with his banner, he goes back and touches the banner of the following member to “open” him the way. After the exhibition of the *tosello*, everything is repeated in reverse to reassemble the group as it was at the beginning.

Therefore in case of large groups a “service” takes a lot of time, often more than an hour.

This Holy Virgin of the common people has an ancient and tragic face. Apart from the *altarini* built by the faithful in squares or streets, she can be found only and exclusively in the Sanctuary dedicated to her and placed at eighteen kilometers from Naples. We are in the Vesuvius Area, in a town called Pomigliano D'arco, where once people held the cults of Demeter and where Ceres was worshiped. From what we know of that time, we could say that a “familiar air” exudes between the cults of the past and those of today, but there is no evidence demonstrating their continuity.

One of the foundational myths narrates that a young man in the fifteenth century lost a ball game in which players had to run and jump. Because of the defeat, cursing he

threw the ball against a framework of the Holy Virgin that was under an arch of the water main: from here the name Madonna dell'Arco, where *Madonna* means Holy Mary and *arco* means arch. A hematoma appeared on the face of the Holy Virgin in the framework, meanwhile the player could not stop himself from swaying and running. He was sentenced to be hanged because of the blasphemy. That sign on the face of the Holy Virgin is present in every subsequent restoration of the painting. Nowadays leaning steps and waving bodies of the faithful still remember this myth, although the running part was totally canceled in the last thirty years.

Another foundational myth goes back to one hundred years later than the one just told. More precisely in the sixteenth century: it is about a woman who received a grace by the Holy Mary and went to pay her homage taking with her a pig on the leash. On the consecrated day the sanctuary was filled with people and because of the great crowd the pig ran away. The woman was frantic, and swore. In that moment the feet of the woman fell off, and are still nowadays exposed in the sacristy of the sanctuary.

As we can see, we are dealing with a Holy Mother that is hard to please, who demands respect and does not hesitate to impose direct and immediate payback when offended.

But at the same time a prodigious Holy Mary, because of the graces she grants: she saves people from disasters and tragedy and, above all, as the devotees' song

narrates, she keeps the “head of the house” safe, the man of the family. As a testimony of her power and her generosity we can find a great number of *ex voto* made by the faithful as a way to thank the Holy Mary for the grace received. *Ex voto* are objects used as thank-you gifts, made by the faithful or commissioned to be made by others; at the same time they are also testimony of the effectiveness and the great power of the Holy Mother, underlined by the great quantity we can find in the Sanctuary. They are images, artistic representations and drawings expressing popular art, that reproduce the scene or the event for which the grace has been asked, as well as small tools and objects from everyday life or work. Since the sixteenth and seventeenth century the sanctuary has collected a real heritage, not only for the documentation of devotion, and for the taxonomy of the cases, but, in many circumstances, for the extraordinary repertoire of popular art as well; which encouraged the Dominican monks to found, during the 2000 Jubilee, a museum of *ex voto*.

But let's go back to procedural steps of the ritual.

Starting from January until Easter the groups organize their routes for collecting alms and doing services. The routes get wider as times go by, expanding in the area of the city of Naples, intertwining the crisscross structure of the small alleys, and of the associations. The groups organize ritual exchanges and mutual representations. The most virtuous flag holders are encouraged to perform to the other groups and the activities increase. It's a ritual progression that reaches the maximum of its grandeur

the week before Easter. In this week the groups go out in the streets almost every day. The urban path they follow gets larger and larger until reaching, on the consecrated day, the most far away point which is also the far end from their own place, the place where they belong, where they usually stay at, where everybody knows them and where everybody has its own role as well as status. Once they reach this edge, they transform themselves into anonymous pilgrims when the time comes to start the Easter Monday walk.

To which follows the final *crescendo*.

On Easter night or at the dawn of Easter Monday the pilgrimage begins. For the faithful this means undergoing a transformation that consists in losing their usual social status: once they enter that liminal area of the pilgrimage, they lose their distinctive characteristics given to them by their belonging to the neighborhood. So they become anonymous, equal to any other pilgrim [see Turner, Turner 1978].

To underline and symbolize this passage the pilgrims who are exiting the city go to pay homage to the souls of purgatory that lie at the altars built for the unknown soldiers positioned in two strategic exiting places of the city (Porta Capuana and Porta Nolana).

The journey only begins once the anonymous status and the collective equality as pilgrim *communitas*⁸ has been “acquired”, heading towards the consecrated place.

⁸ See Turner 1969.

Before reaching it, devotees will have to wait for a long time in the area known as *sanctus*: the edge of the sacred, the fence, the wall that delineates the sanctuary and protects the *sacer*. This is known as the quintessential sacred spot, which is represented for the faithful by an image of the Holy Mary placed on an altar in the center of the Sanctuary⁹. The entrance to the sanctuary takes hours, usually the pilgrims stand either under the hot sun or the pouring rain.

Over and over again the groups fill up this waiting time with music. The music can only be played up to the entrance of the sanctuary: from here on the access is prohibited to the musicians and to the *toselli*.

All this waiting, together with the long progression of the day, creates an emotional increase, due as well to the distance, the exhaustion, the emotional involvement that becomes concrete once the pilgrims reach the sacred image.

Once the threshold is close by, the groups gather to walk the last part of the journey and finally reach “the mother of all mothers”, as the Holy Mother is called. The believers proceed by walking on their knees, or crawling with their forehead or tongue touching the floor. Struggling to move forward, with great effort and sufferance. Whole families are united, and hold tight. The children watch their parents astonished, standing next to them or being carried, knowing it will soon be their turn as well.

⁹ On *sanctus* and *sacer* see Benveniste, 1969.

As we said at the beginning, in this case, as it was for the souls of purgatory, there are no intermediaries, no priests nor preachers. The relation between the faithful and the sacred image is immediate and direct. Songs, suffering sobs, help requests, as well as shouts and violent words are directed to the sacred image. Some years ago a woman railed against the holy image, asking if she was really a mother since she allowed death to take her son away during a gunfight.

Here, once beyond the threshold and inside the sanctuary, the choc occurs.

The devotees are men and women who experience the impossible: that is to be admitted to the presence of the sacred, to be able to see and touch the sacred. The sacred, which is not given, allowed nor granted to mankind. They feel this concession and physically sense this emotion, and they (also for this reason) feel sick, faint, are taken away by moments of desperation and loss. They loose their presence under the pressure of life, while possibly experiencing the sacred.

Many define some of those scenes as a trance but, personally, I prefer to call them state of abandon or breakdown...

This is all governed by an order, a sequence of steps: first a pause to rest, then a moment of continuous crescendo with an increase of shouts, desperation, moments of delusion, breakdowns and then back to a moment of pause. They perform constructed emotions and mandatory representations of feelings.

Many fall down, too many, entire rows of women who move forward on their knees, collapse like bowling pins. Or they can fall down alone. There is always someone from the group – as it happens in all rituals, from vudù to candomblè – ready to take care of the others, check out the people that faint and make sure they do not get hurt: the person who is about to fall is laid on the floor, helped. For example a napkin is placed between his/her teeth so that he does not bite his tongue due to convulsions.

It's a devastating experience: when the believers exit the sanctuary they are tired, tear down, devastated by the effort, the hustle and the choc. They are miserable going back home. More parades, more services await them.

In this last moment there is that element that the Dominican monks would rather erase: that desperation, those collapses, that fainting. These are not demonstration of real faith. Real faith has a sort of grace, a set of rules agreed upon and accepted that these believers do not have and do not follow. Since the monks were not able to erase this cult or take it back to the established rules, they try restraining it, in every possible way. For example they try letting the groups proceed very quickly, or try mixing “normal” faithful and the groups in order to limit the tension. So far no results have been achieved.

Up to now I've told you about two stories that are more intertwined than parallel. They are two religious life forms, two means of self-representation and representation

of faith. They both are expressions of the same “people”. Both oppressed and condemned by the church. The first one erased, but at the same time made eternal by the creation of the “purifying” museums; while the latter continues its separate life, we do not know for how long. The realization of the *ex voto* museum did not have any implication nor has enhanced the participation and frequency of the ritual. It was a side and contemporary project, I would say “extraneous”, which did not change the reality of the rite and did not have influence on the faithful.

Why are these stories so similar but have such a different ending?

I will try answering this question using one word: *independence*.

Popular culture lives in the margins of society and conceives its own autonomy in the creation and free interpretation of encoded elements, so as it is for both cults.

The devotees of the souls of purgatory rewrite their relationships with the afterlife, with purgatory and heaven, by adopting anonymous skulls. However the ritual is developed within the logic and the configuration of the church: from the various steps on which the rite is built upon (adoption, family), to the places where it is held (hypogea or cemeteries). It's not a case that the cult is housed *inside* those places which belong to churches, confraternities, associations where one small change, like the substitution of the priest, is enough to allow a completely new set of relations, keeping the believers outside a closed door.

The ritual of Madonna dell'Arco is realized on another level of creativity that allows a completely different developing. First of all it takes place in the streets, a public place. Reaching the sanctuary means conquering eighteen kilometers of representations and creativity. It develops in time as well as in space. The streets become a stage, a free place of action and of construction of the ritual, and the spontaneous *altarini* functions as pit stops of this journey.

This is an *exclusive* cult, it belongs to those participants, faithful and hosts, to those groups who have always managed it: it totally belongs to those who perform it. A marginal and marginalized underclass, liminal in its liminality.

For the souls of purgatory, as an anthropologist, I had the chance to “dress up” as a devotee and mix up with them, but I was also able to act as a “foreigner”, and was introduced to the cult. I asked for stories to be told, I listened to their dreams, I got to know the guardian and asked for suggestions and advice. With the ritual of Madonna dell'Arco not only I, as an anthropologist, but all those people that deal with it are “foreigners”, and we all have only one option: to be spectators. Even when I enter their homes, when I interview them, when we talk... I will always be a simple spectator.

This could depend on a hidden history or maybe a lost ritual that connects this rite to the ancient rituals of Demeter and Ceres; but I cannot state this with certainty. What I can say is that this ritual represents the core of what remains of an ancient tribe that is

still trying to survive, even though it has to mix up to do it. This strong relation to religion is the only form of autonomy that represents these people, crushed as they are between consumerism models and lack of alternatives.

For this reason, maybe, no matter the marginality, and thanks to that portion of paganism and superstition (as described in the 1968 administrative order), the souls of purgatory have found their place, first in literature and in theatre and then in the cinema while a complex ritual such as Madonna dell'Arco does not have any documentary research nor quotation.

It is not by chance that another very famous ritual, known above all thanks to the great investigation done by Ernesto de Martino (1961), *tarantismo*¹⁰, is now a mere mediatic show: it has its place in the cinema and there is plenty of literature that sets its stories in the grafts of this ritual¹¹.

As we have seen, children and teenagers follow their parents in the Sanctuary, they watch their older brothers and sisters, they learn the techniques and the practices, they are scared of their breakdowns, but they practice learning what they will have to do one day, as well.

¹⁰ Used to be a popular ritual of Salento, an area in the far end of Puglia, that called for a cure to the bite of the deadly tarantula spider through music and dance.

¹¹ On the developments of *tarantismo* and its mediatic representations see: De Matteis, Stefano. "Kann man die Besessenheit historisieren?", in *Der besessene Süden. Ernesto de Martino und Das andere Europa*, edited by Ulrich Van Loyen. Wien: Sonderzahl Verlagsges, 2015.

It is through the experience of the current practice that the memory is transmitted. «The popular, though public in sense of not being private, is not public if public means official. Popular memory is popular as long as it is not collected, canonized, or promoted by institutions or political entities» (Fabian, 2007:104). The reason why it develops this way is that the popular memory «is outgoing, undisciplined, curious/strange as well curious/inquisitive; popular memory may be “long” yet its discourse and practices are ephemeral» (Fabian, 2007:105).

We are facing a cult that – despite the various efforts to shut it down – has never undergone, up until today, any radical transformations that tried to shift it towards institutionalization or regulation. It continues to exercise *its exclusivity*: the faithful of Madonna dell’Arco still speak a language that sounds cryptic and unintelligible for the majority, starting at the simple level of “spoken” language. A language that is ancient but updated at the same time, violent, not suitable or alternative for the rest of the society.

No travel agency would offer, not even to the most adventurous and daring tourists, to wear white clothes and participate barefoot to a pilgrimage to a sanctuary with the hope to enter trance. Those scenes have nothing beautiful, nothing pretty, or enjoyable, or appetizing... those are violent and ferocious scenes. Nowadays it is hard to bear pain, illness and unhappiness of other people. Above all when they are shouting and yelling it at you. These believers are not sad because of depression; they are not skinny because of anorexia or workout. They represent a different kind of

poverty: that of inappropriateness, of incapacity to adjust to those shared systems that are part of a globalized world suitable for banks only.

Inside this frame they have built and developed, as time went by, an autonomous and independent ritual language, which is used to organize, define, structure, articulate, divide and unite... made of hard work, of performance and family regulations, of night runs and crisis, breakdowns and trance.

It is probably one of the only alternative paths still alive today.

BIBLIOGRAFIA

Benveniste, Emile. *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1969.

Capra, Fritjof. *Uncommon Wisdom. Conversations with remarkable people*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988.

De Martino, Ernesto. *La terra del rimorso. Contributo a una storia religiosa del Sud*. Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1961.

De Matteis, Stefano. “Antropologia storica e simbologia religiosa. Il culto delle anime del purgatorio a Napoli”, in S. De Matteis and M. Niola, *Antropologia delle anime in pena*, pp. 13-91. Lecce: Argo, 1993.

La Madonna degli esclusi. Un'indagine su una cultura locale a partire dagli aspetti rappresentativi e performativi di un'azione rituale. Napoli: D'Auria, 2011.

Mezzogiorno di fede. Il rito tra esperienza, memoria e storia. Napoli: D'Auria, 2013.

La memoria rituale, in «Fata morgana», 25, pp. 19-35. 2015

“Kann man die Besessenheit historisieren? Eine Vorbemerkung”, in *Der besessene Süden: Ernesto de Martino und das andere Europa*, edited by Ulrich Van Loyen. Wien: Sonderzahl Verlagsges. Pp. 48-72, 2015.

Fabian, Johannes, *Memory against Culture. Arguments and Reminders*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007.

Turner, Victor W. *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969.

Turner, Victor, Turner, Edith. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture. Anthropological Perspectives*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978.