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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to investigate beliefs and practices relating to vitality, illness and death in traditional Southern Italy. My prime argument is that many of these beliefs and practices relate to just a few interconnected sets of notions. A basic presumption for the analysis of the material is that vital force is construed as a quality or substance which can be lost as well as gained. A first set of notions concerns losses leading to weakness, illness or death, caused by another person's appropriation of vitality. A second set includes ideas of how force of life might be gained from external sources, thereby reinvigorating the body. A third set concerns the inevitable situation in which physical life can no longer be sustained and death occurs. Transcendence beyond the carnal realm is symbolically achieved; a new and incorruptible body is created, or death is construed as giving new life. The study covers such topics as the occult transfer of mother's milk, the evil eye, beliefs about menstruation and witches, the cult of saints, Easter celebrations, death rituals, burial customs and the celebration of All Souls Day.

Location

Southern Italy is here intended as the area usually referred to in Italy as *il mezzogiorno* ('the South'), that is, the regions of Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria and Sicily. This area is commonly considered — by Italians themselves as well as by social scientists — to be relatively socially and culturally homogenous, making it apposite to speak of the South as distinct from Central and Northern

Italy. Sardinia, which is sometimes included in the *mezzogiorno*, is excluded from this study since the social organisation and cultural traditions of this island are markedly different from the rest of the South.[1]

The main body of written ethnographic information on which this essay is built describes states of affairs at various points in time in the period approximately between the unification of Italy (1861) and World War II. For want of a better term, the Italy of the south of this time will be referred to as 'traditional', to distinguish it from post-war and present-day Italy. Certainly, this period was characterised by a gradual modernisation, in which the impact of demographic changes, agricultural reforms and market economy slowly eroded older patterns of living and thinking. Compared to the post-war era with its radical changes, however, this period appears as quite 'traditional', characterised by a way of life which today has to a great extent disappeared. Anthony Galt writes in his study of a community in Puglia (1991c: 44f):

> '... a process of radically changing reality had formed most Locorotondesi. As in the countryside, the lines of demarcation in that experience of change stand out clearly as the Second World War, and the passage from the 1950s to the 1960s, which many experienced as a time of discontinuity between the last decade of a locally felt traditional way of life, and integration into a modernity which became more national in character.'

In discussing ethnographic data that are not contemporary, the past tense will be used. The reader is asked to keep in mind that this does not necessarily imply that the matters discussed are something of the past. The past tense is simply used for convenience as I have no intention, in this work, to assert whether a particular custom or belief, documented in the past, also exists today in a similar fashion.

When quoting verbal expressions in South Italian dialects, I will simply retain the phonetic transcriptions used in the source documents.

Sources

The study of the societies of Europe offers unique possibilities for the social anthropologist. Few other parts of the world are so well documented, in many cases offering the anthropologist access to an immense amount of historical and other kinds of information on econ-

omy, demographic conditions and 'folk customs'. This information can facilitate thematic investigations that transcend the horizon of the local community and the confines of the present and allow the anthropologist to venture into the study of societies of the past and of long-term cultural processes.

This study makes use of some of the contents of this huge storehouse of information. It is principally based on ethnographic information extracted from two bodies of texts. The condensed picture of the traditional Italian society of the South is derived from the works of historians, sociologists and social anthropologists. The main body of information on beliefs and practices relating to vitality and death has been obtained from Italian folkloristic texts, complemented with data extracted from a variety of other sources, such as anthropological essays and articles, travel books and religious publications. Some of this material concerns more recent times, and I have included information from these sources when the ethnography describes conditions or ways of thinking and acting that were essentially the same in 'traditional' society.

Between 1989 and the present, I have spent several months travelling in Southern Italy. During these field trips I participated in a number of saints' feasts[2] and the Easter celebrations, events that have an extraordinary atmosphere, dense with intense emotion. I also visited numerous places of interest with regard to this work, such as sanctuaries and cemeteries, and had the opportunity to converse with informants about traditional and contemporary ways of life. These field experiences, complementing the information from written sources, have been of great value in my interpretation of South Italian society and culture.

The extensive use of folkloristic material is both advantageous and a source of problems. The greater part of this body of data consists of texts written in the decades around the turn of the century. The information found in these texts is both extensive and detailed. Italian folklorists and ethnographers collected information on 'popular traditions', and they put on record the various sides of life among people in a certain community or region. In some works there is an ambition to render a more comprehensive picture of that life, while others simply list items of information. The ethnographers aimed to document for generations to come the Italian folk life of their own time, a

documentation which could serve as a source for future comparative or other types of secondary studies — such as this one.

Basically, these sources are reliable. The ethnographers were usually well educated men of humanistic interests and with a local patriotic zeal. Most of them had thorough knowledge of their field of interest, gained through decades of interaction with informants, with whom they conversed in the local dialects. Pure misunderstandings of facts should be rare in their reports. Whenever these scholars ventured into analysis and interpretation of their material, they relied on theories of cultural diffusion, survivalism and current brands of social psychology which to present day anthropologists appear as old-fashioned. In the light of modern anthropology, their explications appear to be, if not directly misleading, rather irrelevant. However, it is not the folkloristic explanations that are of interest to this work; my concern is rather the data that these texts provide. By a careful sifting of these sources, basic information on what people thought and did have been extracted and put to analytical use.

In traditional times, especially before the turn of the century, most South Italians had little contact with the world beyond their own community.[3] There was a strong sense of local patriotism in the towns and villages that counteracted the adoption of practices of other places and enforced adherence to local custom. Furthermore, in certain spheres of activity, such as folk medicine and techniques for dealing with occult powers, knowledge was typically transmitted in a pragmatic fashion between individuals in the local community. When knowledge is circulated in such an informal way, without the aid of written text, it is liable to modification in accordance with various accidental circumstances and local contexts; new beliefs and practices can easily emerge as a *bricolage* of elements already employed. For these reasons, local communities tended to develop a version of the South Italian cultural tradition that showed a significant amount of unique variation in both beliefs and practices.[4] John Davis (1973: 89) reports on a community in Basilicata in the 1960s: 'Pisticci is still in many ways an isolated, idiosyncratic society with its own dialect, its own marriage customs, religious cults, myths and traditions.'

For this study, which is topical in character rather than based on the investigation of a particular South Italian community, the easy access to ethnographic information from hundreds of communities has been of great advantage. The themes in focus are investigated with

regard to their many and varying manifestations in different communities. The study of the beliefs and symbolic practices of a multitude of local communities can be likened to a kind of anthropological laboratory work, where variations help to elucidate a common cultural base. Through this kind of study, patterns will emerge which would be difficult to discern within the scope of a single community.

The folklorists focused on issues such as 'superstitious beliefs', 'folk medicine', folktales, handicrafts, the local celebration of Christian festivals, practices concerned with marriage and death, and other spheres of interest that were taken to be part of 'folklore' and 'popular customs'. Hence these scholars paid little attention to those other realms of social life that are of crucial interest to present-day social anthropologists, such as kinship and economy. This bias would pose serious problems if we were to reconstruct, on the sole basis of such sources, everyday life and the details of the social and economic organisation of communities. This, however, is not the intention of this study. What is offered here is a thematic study of notions relating to vitality and death; most of the issues of particular interest are among those topics that the diligent folklorists have focused upon, and there is thus an abundance of documentary material relating to them. The social and economic organisation of the area will be considered only more generally, so as to provide the context without which these beliefs and practices cannot be properly understood; as was mentioned earlier, the lacunae of information regarding social organisation and economy will be filled in with data from other sources. However, a heavy emphasis on the peasantry and the uneducated strata of the population is predominant in folkloristic studies; therefore, this essay will be concerned primarily with these sectors of the population.

Another characteristic feature of the older folkloristic sources is a particular style of reporting. While much information concerns events that the scholar witnessed with his own eyes, we sometimes come upon statements of the type: 'in the village *N* it is believed that in case of *x*, *y* should be done'. Hence we do not know whether the folklorist had witnessed activity *y* as a response to *x* or otherwise could be certain of its performance; consequently, we do not know with certainty whether *y* was ever actually done. While this uncertainty would pose a serious problem to a study of social organisation, in which the discrepancy between norms and behaviour, between ideals and practice, may be of crucial importance, it poses no fundamental

dilemma for the present study. We are concerned with explicit as well as implicit notions, and the features of a notion are the same whether it sustains actual practices or exists only as a figure of thought that might be more or less clearly expressed verbally.

To conclude, there are problems inherent in the anthropological use of folkloristic sources. To this particular work, however, some of these problems are not crucial and others can be circumvented by using complementary bodies of data. The advantages of using these overwhelmingly rich sources compensate for the disadvantages. As several scholars in European anthropology have pointed out, there is a need for complements to the traditional anthropological method of participating observation in small local communities.[5] Europe is no *terra incognita*; the anthropologist is not the first scientist to investigate its countries and communities. There is already rich documentation by scholars in history, economy, sociology, demography, religion and ethnography, and the anthropologist should look at these sources as valuable repositories of information.

Assumptions

Over time people in societies produce what we may call cultural representations, symbols or collective knowledge, crucial for their organisation of social life and understanding of the world. Institutions, practices, beliefs, rituals and myths are produced collectively. Although each individual assigns his own private meanings to these, the social and cultural meanings can be re-constructed by the anthropologist interpreting the ethnography.

In anthropology there is no consensus on how this more precisely should be done or as to what are the fundamental forces in the creation of collective representations. In interpreting the present ethnography, which to a large extent consists of descriptions of beliefs and practices, I will use terms that relate to processes of thought; notions, ideas, intuitions and implicit assumptions. These elements of thought give rise to beliefs about particular phenomena in the world as well as inspire to practices used for accomplishing specific tasks. Such knowledge is not produced by empirical and experimental science, but by a 'science of the concrete' in which immediately perceptible and salient features of entities are tied into webs of associations.[6] Beliefs can be understood as answers to such questions as: why has this

mother no milk for her baby, why is this person ill and what happens to a person after death? Customary practices provide accepted ways of, for instance, increasing lactation, curing illness and assisting the deceased in their other-worldly existence.

I believe that the character of collective knowledge can be illuminated through the concept of tradition, as it has been elaborated by Edward Shils (1981). A tradition of knowledge is handed down from the past to the present, from one generation to the next, but it is also subject to constant modification. The average person might be content with receiving rather practical knowledge. If a practice is recommended by others as a relevant means to an end, if it is construed as being based on experience accumulated by a multitude of persons in the remote or near past and if its results are tolerably good — or at least if it does not bring about misfortune — the practice will be accepted, so will be the beliefs that account for its efficacy. The average person will not invent new means to a particular end if efficient adequate means are already given in the stock of collective knowledge. Similarly, new and original ideas about phenomena in the world that become accepted by others are rare. Rather, ideas and beliefs already given tend to be accepted. The potential for acceptance is greater if a practice or belief is held by persons in positions of authority or those who are regarded as having expertise. Acceptance also relies upon a sense of piety towards the past — a notion that past generations had access to greater knowledge than people have now, and that they lived a life that was better in significant aspects. Discussing beliefs in sorcery, witches and spirits in a Sicilian community, Charlotte Gower Chapman (1973: 207) writes:

> ... [people] emphasize the past and its traditions. It is generally recognized that in former times witches were more powerful, and spirits more numerous and beneficial to mankind. Old books and things said to be part of the knowledge of the ancients are believed to contain wisdom beyond the scope of modern men. Like all other learning and custom, these beliefs make the present dependent on the past and bind men to their traditions.

Knowledge as a body of tradition is therefore to a large extent accepted and handed down to others in original or close to original form without being actively and critically considered. In a society like the 'traditional' South Italian one, numerous customary beliefs and practices belong to the stock of knowledge for many generations. General presumptions about man and the world, which may be

implicit or explicit and on which more specific notions rely, usually remain unaltered for long time. When such paradigms of thought change, radically new views on man and his place in the universe are implied. Examples of basic presumptions that are going to be discussed in this study are the idea of health as dependent on the balance between different types of bodily humours and beliefs in divine and demonic beings.

Nevertheless, tradition also changes. Some knowledge is lost or ceases to be transmitted, since the potential recipients do not wish to learn it or because the teaching of it for some reason is restricted. An amount of new knowledge is created, but seldom is it truly new; typically it builds upon previous knowledge. Other knowledge is more or less modified over time. The process of modification is complex and can be studied from two principal perspectives.

The details of transmission, modification and creation of knowledge can be elucidated in a micro-perspective. Here, the varying powers of the mind and imagination among individuals, and cognitive abilities involving symbolization, categorization, association and subconscious information processing, are relevant. A macro-perspective captures changes in a society's stock of knowledge over a long stretch of time, and endogenous and exogenous factors influencing change can be studied.[7]

In this essay, however, I am not concerned with the properties of the transmission and modification of knowledge but rather with the stock of knowledge itself — beliefs, customary practices and legends, and the notions and presumptions on which they rely. This knowledge does not form a logically coherent system; it is permeated with obscurities, ambiguities and logical contradictions.[8] Beliefs and practices were brought to the fore contextually, and therefore the sometimes apparent incongruities among them were not very problematic. As it has already been pointed out, the informal way of transmitting knowledge in the communities worked towards diversity. Through the intuitions, imagination, hunches and creative thinking of individuals, new versions of old beliefs and practices were developed and new expressions of old notions and basic presumptions were created. Differences in the way of life — social organisation and subsistence economy — among the communities of the South provided different and local 'diets' in 'food for thought', nurturing the process of changing received knowledge. Of this material — constantly produced

by the intellectual and imaginative powers of the human mind — some parts 'caught on' among the people in the community. It appeared to others, through their experience, reason or intuition, as useful, interesting or good in some other way. It became part of local tradition and sometimes spread over a larger area. As Shils (1981: 205) puts it:

> Most of what exists at any moment and which is given from the past has not been arbitrarily accumulated. It is not the outcome of a long series of arbitrary or accidental acts of selection. By acts of judgment less explicit and deliberate than the decision as to whether to retain or demolish an old building which can still be used with less cost than would be required for the construction of a new one, human beings adopt and adapt the practices and beliefs of their predecessors.

While inconsistencies and contradictions are created by the relatively independent development of collective thoughts on certain subjects, webs of associations bind together diverse parts of the tradition, not in the form of a logical argument, but by way of resemblances and analogies. In this way a general tone of harmony and integration is created, which as an intuitive impression in everyday life is perhaps more important in making beliefs and practices persuasive than increased logical consistence would have been. Here the world of sensory experience and bodily memory[9] creates in the individual a profound and intuitive personal involvement; it situates beliefs and practices in the unique configuration of experiences and sentiments that has been created during a person's life.

Overview

The organisation of the study is as follows: Chapter Two points out features of social organisation that connect with notions of distribution of vital force, with which we will later be concerned. Chapter Three outlines basic conceptions of the human body and vitality. Chapter Four focuses on the ideal of sharing, the voluntary offering on the part of those who have plenty to those who suffer from scarcity, in the contexts of vital force. Donations of items of food supposed to stimulate the secretion of mother's milk or to bring vital powers to those weak from illness, are discussed, as are offerings of food to members of a household that recently has suffered a death. We will also consider beliefs and practices, in which a supposed seizure of mother's milk is correlated with instances of unequal dividing of food in a shared meal.

Having thus gained insight into the importance of sharing in relation to distribution of vital force, we are ready in Chapter Five to discuss a number of beliefs and practices relying on a notion of appropriation of vital force. Those who suffer a scarcity are attributed an involuntary power of extracting what they desire from those who have plenty but fail to voluntarily share. I will argue that beliefs in 'thefts' of mother's milk, in the evil eye, in the power of nursing infants to cause the death of other children, in the harmful influence of menstruating or pregnant women, as well as of the dead in some particular contexts, all relate to this notion.

In Chapter Six we turn to a consideration of ideas of wilful seizure of vitality: the activity of evil, blood-sucking witches. This subject requires a discussion of the dualistic worldview of Roman Catholicism, which also serves as an introduction to the following argument. The topic of Chapter Seven is grace-giving saints, who are the structural opposites of evil witches: while the latter ruthlessly take, the former generously give. Notions in which grace is connected with human bodily vitality are central to the discussion. I shall argue that the common assumption, among anthropological students of Mediterranean Catholicism, of the relation between believer and saint as being one of exchange, is only partially relevant. The relation is far more complex, including ideas of the free gift and self-sacrifice.

Chapter Eight continues the exploration of the cult of saints, now with an emphasis on the relation between grace and creative forces of nature. I also consider the yearly re-enactment of the Passion of Christ in the light of that association. Hence, Chapters Four through Eight all concern notions of distribution of vital force: by means of sharing, involuntary appropriation, wilful seizure, altruistic giving and sacrifice.

In Chapters Nine and Ten, the focus of attention is shifted from notions concerning vital force to notions of life in a more existential sense. This shift from *vitalità* to *vita* implies that ideas of collective family immortality, rather than individual well-being and survival, come into focus. The first of these two chapters deals with the construction, inspired by a vision of an eternal family, of transcendent beings out of mortal, transient humans. The triad of body, soul and mourners, in death practices, is viewed from this perspective. The notion of family as an entity ideally persisting in eternity is also fundamental to the beliefs and practices discussed in the following

chapter. These, however, reveal an idea of another way of achieving family transcendence. The family renews itself cyclically; a potential for life — a 'seed' of life — is handed over from the passing to the emerging generation. Finally, in the concluding chapter, I summarise and discuss the main findings of the study.