

# **eScholarship**

## **California Italian Studies**

### **Title**

Sicilian Mafia, Patron Saints, and Religious Processions: The Consistent Face of an Ever-Changing Criminal Organization

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8sz659dn>

### **Journal**

California Italian Studies, 5(1)

### **Author**

Merlino, Rossella

### **Publication Date**

2014

### **DOI**

10.5070/C351023579

### **Copyright Information**

Copyright 2014 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

## Sicilian Mafia, Patron Saints, and Religious Processions: The Consistent Face of an Ever-Changing Criminal Organization

Rossella Merlino

Ma una festa religiosa, che cosa è una festa religiosa in Sicilia?  
Sarebbe facile rispondere che è tutto, tranne che una festa religiosa.  
È, innanzitutto, una esplosione esistenziale.  
Poiché è soltanto nella festa che il siciliano esce dalla sua condizione di uomo solo.

A religious festival, what is a religious festival in Sicily?  
An easy answer would be that it is everything but a religious festival.  
It is, above all, an existential explosion, as it is only during religious festivals that Sicilians  
abandon their state of loneliness.

—Leonardo Sciascia<sup>1</sup>

The altars frequently found in the hideouts of mafiosi and the overt religiosity displayed by mafia bosses in both private and public occasions are but a few of the numerous examples of a relationship between the mafia and religion. These instances represent different aspects of the religious dimension of the Sicilian mafia, Cosa Nostra, facets that are as inextricably related to each other as they are profoundly diverse, thereby making it impossible for this complex phenomenon to be analyzed as one homogeneous whole or through a single disciplinary means.

Relying chiefly on socio-anthropological theories of religious rituals and performance, this article adopts an interdisciplinary approach to look at the noticeable role that the mafia plays in local religious festivals. Evidence suggests that the practice of financing, organizing and performing a central role in religious processions in honor of local patron saints has occurred throughout the history of the organization. In this study, a set of instances from different periods and geographical areas of Sicily will be taken into account. Identifying and exploring the existence of a line of continuity is important to understanding reasons why specific cultural codes and practices within the mafia have remained substantially unvaried, while its structure and economic activities have changed significantly over time. At the same time, it is also important to acknowledge the extent to which these practices have changed over the years, specifically in relation to the progressively firmer position taken by civil society and the Catholic Church against mafia-type organized crime, which culminated with the excommunication of all mafiosi by Pope Francis on June 22, 2014.

It is interesting to note that, although religion, like the code of honor, appears to have been a constant in the cultural dimension of the mafia since its inception, it is only in recent times that the phenomenon has aroused academic interest. Starting from the 1990s, the intricate relationship between the Sicilian mafia, the Church and religion has been approached from several different perspectives. These range from a descriptive chronicling of events linking mafia activities, religious practices and the Church's attitude towards the phenomenon<sup>2</sup> to specialized theological studies.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars have begun to approach the

---

<sup>1</sup> Leonardo Sciascia "Feste religiose in Sicilia," *La corda pazza: scrittori e cose della Sicilia* (Milan: Adelphi, 1991). All translations are the author's except where otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Isaia Sales, *I preti e i mafiosi: storia dei rapporti tra mafie e Chiesa cattolica* (Milan: B.C. Dalai, 2010); Enzo Mignosi, *Il Signore sia coi boss: storie di preti fedeli alla mafia e di padrini timorosi di Dio* (Palermo: Arbor, 1993); Vincenzo Ceruso, *Le sagrestie di Cosa nostra: inchiesta su preti e mafiosi* (Roma: Newton Compton, 2007).

topic from a socio-anthropological standpoint, in an attempt to identify the elements that have allowed men and women in the mafia to adopt simultaneously faith values and mafia “morals” and the reasons behind the acquiescence of the Church towards the phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> In particular, *La mafia devota* (2008) by sociologist Alessandra Dino remains to date the most comprehensive and rigorous study on the relationship between mafia, religion and the Church. Focusing on the interweaving between Cosa Nostra and the Church, between the adherence of mafiosi to religious values and the support offered by members of the clergy, Dino’s work examines different facets of this varied phenomenon. These include the numerous instances of religious festivals through which the mafia legitimizes its power and authority in the eyes of the external community.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the important contributions generated by these different approaches, several crucial points of view on the phenomenon remain largely unexplored. For example, considerable attention has been dedicated to the ambiguous position of the Church regarding the mafia association, as well as to the development of a theological interpretation of the religiosity demonstrated by mafiosi. In contrast, fewer scholarly efforts have considered language and behavior at a micro-social level of interaction as a specific context in which to analyze the role of religion for Cosa Nostra and the social identity of its affiliates.

The topical nature of mafia study places obvious limitations on the amount of accessible data and on the way these can be analyzed. For this reason, the existing data on the participation of the mafia in religious festivals provide a unique set of valuable information about the cultural sphere of a secret society that has very seldom offered opportunities for an inside view.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, ritual practices like these afford an excellent context in which to explore how far the performative religious behavior and language utilized by mafia leaders in public occasions affect their identity and authority. Drawing on performance theory, and assuming the notions of *frame*, *reflexivity*, *emergence* and *rules of conduct* as novel interpretative frames in the study of organized crime, this article looks at the influence of religion on the way the roles of mafiosi can be constructed, performed and perceived, both inside and outside the group. This approach can help explain the ability of mafia leaders to acquire the obedience and allegiance of affiliates at lower levels. Furthermore, it will contribute to understanding the role that religious ritual practices play in relation to the fundamental ability of Cosa Nostra to create social cohesion at a structural level and achieve legitimization with external society.

### **Culturalist paradigm of the mafia: myth, apology or outright denial**

On Palm Sunday 1964, the Cardinal Archbishop of Palermo, Ernesto Ruffini, issued a pastoral letter entitled *Il Vero Volto della Sicilia (The True Face of Sicily)*, in which he openly denounced a media conspiracy against Sicilians: “Recently, we have witnessed a great

---

<sup>3</sup> Augusto Cavadi, *Il Dio dei mafiosi: attualità e storia* (Cinisello Balsamo [Milan]: San Paolo, 2009); Nino Fasullo, “Una religione mafiosa,” *Segno* 179 XXII: 38-46 (1996); Cataldo Naro “L’opzione ‘culturalista’ della Chiesa siciliana” in *Per un discorso cristiano di resistenza alla mafia: le categorie teologico-morali di «struttura di peccato» e «peccato sociale»*, Atti del seminario di studio tenuto a San Cataldo il 10 dicembre 1994, ed. Salvatore Diprima (Caltanissetta-Roma: Sciascia Ed., 1995), 115-131; Francesco Michele Stabile, “Cattolicesimo siciliano e mafia,” *Synaxis* 14, no. 1 (1996): 13-55; *I Consoli di Dio: vescovi e politica in Sicilia* (Caltanissetta-Roma: Sciascia Ed., 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Alessandra Dino, *La mafia devota: chiesa, religione, Cosa Nostra*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Rome: GLF editori Laterza, 2008); Alessandra Dino, “For Christ’s Sake: Organized Crime and Religion,” in *Organized Crime and the Challenge to Democracy*, ed. Felia Allum and Renate Siebert (London: Routledge, 2003), 161-74; Teresa Principato and Alessandra Dino, *Mafia donna: le vestali del sacro e dell'onore* (Palermo: Flaccovio, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Dino, *La mafia devota*, 12-43.

<sup>6</sup> The data used in this article derive from judicial papers and primary and secondary literature on the subject.

conspiracy organized to dishonor Sicily; the three main contributing factors are the mafia, *The Leopard* and Danilo Dolci.”<sup>7</sup> According to Ruffini, the mafia was “nothing more than an insignificant minority of criminals.” When asked to define the mafia by a journalist, the archbishop replied, “As far as I know, it is a brand of detergents.”<sup>8</sup> The archbishop’s position, far from being an isolated instance, reflected the opinion of many who, even in the 1960s, denied the existence of the mafia as a secret criminal organization. Nevertheless, the hypothesis that the mafia existed in the form of a structured secret society had been formulated as early as the nineteenth century.

Even before the word “mafia” was first used,<sup>9</sup> the Bourbon official Pietro Calà Ulloa, in a 1838 report written to the minister of justice of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, noted the existence of “brotherhoods” and “sects” in Sicily, which shared many similarities with the mafia *cosche* (clans or factions) of today:

There are in many villages unions or brotherhoods, kinds of sects that are called parties, without political aim, without colors, without meetings, without any other link but the dependence on a leader, who may be here a landowner or there an archpriest.<sup>10</sup>

Another example, the 1876 *Inchiesta in Sicilia (Inquest on Sicily)* of the Tuscan senators Leopoldo Franchetti and Sidney Sonnino also illustrated important components of mafia activity that appear to have remained constant over time. The section of the inquiry entitled “Political and Administrative Conditions in Sicily” contained important insights on the monopoly of violence as a means of social control and on the responsibility attributed to the ruling class, insights that are still considered valid today.<sup>11</sup> A few years later, an extensive report written by police inspector Ermanno Sangiorgi became the first official document to describe the mafia as a hierarchical criminal group consolidated by a secret oath of affiliation and aimed at controlling territory.<sup>12</sup> These examples demonstrate that the mafia existed as a secret organization since the late nineteenth century. They show specific components of the mafia system and of the rules that governed its internal behavior already in place at an early stage and remarkably similar to those that the *pentiti* (mafia defectors) would describe almost a century later.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ernesto Ruffini, “Il vero volto della Sicilia: lettera pastorale,” *Bollettino Ecclesiastico Palermitano: pubblicazione ufficiale dell’Arcidiocesi* LIX (1964). Cardinal Ruffini blamed Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s *The Leopard* (1958) for its portrayal of the decadence of the nobility in Sicily during the Risorgimento. Similarly blameworthy, in Ruffini’s opinion, was the social activist and sociologist Danilo Dolci, who had depicted in his *Inchiesta a Palermo* (1956) the desperate conditions of the Sicilian countryside and fishing villages, and the power of the mafia. Ruffini’s epistle represented the first official public statement about the mafia issued by an ecclesiastical authority almost a century after the word “mafia” had first been used.

<sup>8</sup> Gaetano Savatteri, *I siciliani*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed, *I Robinson/Lettere* (Rome: GLF Editori Laterza, 2005), 207.

<sup>9</sup> The association of the word “mafia” with criminality was inspired by the 1863 successful play *I mafiusi di la Vicaria* (“The mafiosi of the Vicaria prison”) by Giuseppe Rizzotto and Gaetano Mosca (See Joseph Farrell, *Understanding the Mafia* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997], 13).

<sup>10</sup> Farrell, *Understanding the Mafia*, 29.

<sup>11</sup> Leopoldo Franchetti, *Condizioni politiche e amministrative della Sicilia*, ed. Paolo Pezzino (Rome: Donzelli, 1993, [1876]), 13-17.

<sup>12</sup> Salvatore Lupo, “‘Il tenebroso sodalizio’: un rapporto sulla mafia palermitana di fine Ottocento,” *Studi Storici* 29, no. 2 (1988): 463-89. The *Sangiorgi Report* is a volume comprising thirty-one individual reports written between November 1898 and February 1900, and addressed to the Chief Prosecuting Magistrate of Palermo as part of a trial documentation. It describes the mafia of the late 1800s in the area of Palermo, its organization in *cosche* (factions) coordinated by a summit of bosses and by a *capo supremo* (supreme boss). It particularly emphasizes the existence of a *tenebroso sodalizio* (dark association) between this organization and the Palermitan ruling class.

Despite evidence that the mafia operated in the form of an organized criminal society in the wake of Italian unification, the idea of the mafia as a loose ensemble of local factions with a proud sense of honor and chivalry inherent to a supposed mentality of a Sicilian subculture named “*sicilianismo*” was promoted at every level.<sup>13</sup> The idea of the mafia as a vestige of traditional Sicilian society, inextricable from its wider socio-cultural milieu, affected public and political discourses on the phenomenon and resulted in an oscillation between apologetic tones and resolute skepticism or even outright denial. Simultaneously, it influenced how mafiosi represented and perceived themselves as “men of honor and social order.” As the examples reported in the next section demonstrate, this idea had important implications for the external perception of mafiosi and on how the mafia in numerous circumstances was able to extend—and was allowed to extend—its influence over the public sphere of the “sacred” in Sicilian society. The prevalence of this idea may also contribute to explaining the delay with which not only the Church but also civil society have dealt with the apparent incompatibility between mafia ethos and religious values.

### Religious festivals and mafia infiltration

*L' ultima duminica di luglio  
 festa di San Giseppi l'artigianu  
 nesci la so statua, scinni di li scaliddi e si ferma nta' lu chianu;  
 misu di lu barcuni lu boss e cu lu so statu maggiuri,  
 di li finestri abbiuanu rosi e ciuri.  
 Sutta, la banna cu lu parrinu fannu silenziu e aspettanu  
 la basata e poi l'inchinu.  
 Lu boss passa accusi a so figghiu  
 lu strettru di lu so regnu  
 cu lu patrarca San Giseppi  
 ca ci fa di parrinu.<sup>14</sup>*

On the evening of 25 July 1937, the community of Riesi, in the province of Caltanissetta, carried the statue of its patron saint, Saint Joseph, on an annual procession through the center of the town. The procession arrived at the Di Cristina household, where the young Francesco Di Cristina stood watching. Everything went as his father, Riesi mafia boss Giuseppe Di Cristina, with the aid of religious and political officials had planned. As was the unofficial custom, the procession came to a halt in front of the house of the mafia boss. Giuseppe then

<sup>13</sup> The “Sicilianist” political and cultural propaganda was promoted by the island’s ruling class in the wake of Italian unification and aimed at contrasting what the ruling class perceived as “an indiscriminate criminalization of all Sicilians by Italian law enforcement and public opinion” (Letizia Paoli, *Mafia Brotherhoods: Organized Crime, Italian Style* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003], 25). According to sicilianisti, the mafia was the cultural product of a particularly fierce and courageous reaction to the foreign powers that had occupied the island for centuries. Giuseppe Pitrè, ethnographer and scholar of Sicilian customs and traditions, was undoubtedly the most influential leading exponent of this movement. It was only in the 1980s, following the first maxi-trial of Palermo (1986–1987), that the confessions of *pentiti*, upon which the trial hinged, helped judicial authorities acknowledge and document the whole extent and scope of the mafia, its structure, modus operandi and ritual practices.

<sup>14</sup> *The last Sunday of July/ the feast of Saint Joseph the Artisan/ his statue comes out, goes down the steps and stops on the street/ the boss stands waiting at his balcony with his officers/ roses and flowers at the windows/ Below the balcony the municipal band and the priest keep quiet and wait for the kiss and the bow/ In this way the boss passes the scepter of his reign to his son with the blessing of the patriarch Saint Joseph who acts as parish priest.*

This Sicilian storytelling describes the religious procession of San Giuseppe in Riesi in 1937, during which the local mafia boss Giuseppe di Cristina passed “the scepter of his reign” to his son Francesco.

left the crowd, approached his son and kissed him three times. Francesco bowed in turn to his father and to the statue of Saint Joseph to the applause of the devout crowd, the music of the municipal band and the ringing of church bells, which echoed through the streets. That event symbolized the abdication of Giuseppe Di Cristina from his role as local mafia boss and the solemn consecration of his son Francesco as the new head.<sup>15</sup> When Francesco di Cristina died in 1961, his funeral was well attended in the main church of Riesi. On that occasion, local inhabitants, civil, military and religious authorities walked in procession behind the hearse drawn by four horses to give a last farewell to the mafia boss. As mafia defector Antonino Calderone would reveal to judicial authorities in 1987:

In Riesi, there is the most important mafia family of the entire province of Caltanissetta. The old representative was Francesco Di Cristina, a man of honor who lived according to the traditional canons of Cosa Nostra. He was generous and kind and everyone loved him. I took part in his solemn funeral. [...] The whole town of Riesi cried for his death.<sup>16</sup>

A holy picture was distributed among the population on the day of Di Cristina's funeral.<sup>17</sup> The closing lines read: "The enemy of all injustices/ he showed with words and deeds/ that his mafia was not criminality/ but respect for the law of honor/ defense of every right/ great-heartedness/ It was love." This funeral card was couched in language similar to the elegy pinned to the entrance doors of the church of Villalba in July 1954 in commemoration of the death of mafia boss Calogero Vizzini (Fig. 1).<sup>18</sup>



Fig. 1: Elegy in commemoration of Calogero Vizzini's death in Villalba, 1954

<sup>15</sup> Giuseppe Carlo Marino, *I padrini: da Vito Cascio Ferro a Lucky Luciano, da Calogero Vizzini a Stefano Bontate, fatti, segreti e testimonianze di Cosa Nostra attraverso le sconcertanti biografie dei suoi protagonisti* (Rome: Newton Compton, 2001), 273-76.

<sup>16</sup> Tribunale Penale di Marsiglia, Corte D'Appello di Aix-en-Provence, Gabinetto del Dr. Debacq G.I., n.174/87, vol. 942/a, processo verbale di interrogatorio di prima comparazione di Antonino Calderone, udienza del 22 Giugno 1987, 813045.

<sup>17</sup> Michele Pantaleone, *Mafia e politica, 1943-1962* (Turin: Einaudi, 1962); Leonardo Sciascia and Marcelle Padovani, *La Sicilia come metafora* (Milan: Mondadori, 1979), 29.

<sup>18</sup> Photo Salvatore Lumia, <http://salvatorelumiafotografie.it/>. With permission.

Although he was the brother of two priests, cousin of the Bishop of Noto and nephew of the Bishop of Muro Lucano, Calogero Vizzini had built a curriculum vitae worthy of the arch-criminal he was, including thirty-nine murders, six attempted murders and numerous other illegal activities such as theft and extortion.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, he had been repeatedly acquitted on the grounds of insufficient evidence. In reference to the accusations raised against Vizzini throughout his life, the top right corner of the funeral picture distributed to commemorate his death carried the quote: “Vedi giudizio umano, come spesso erra!”<sup>20</sup> The closing verses were almost identical to those written on Di Cristina’s funeral card: “He showed with words and deeds that his mafia was not criminality/ but stood for respect of the law/ defense of all rights/ greatness of character/ It was love.” Politicians, policemen, churchmen and thousands of black-clad peasants followed the funeral procession to show their respect.<sup>21</sup> Vizzini “died in the arms of the Church and of the political party in charge, exactly as his uncle, the bishop and his brothers, the priests, had requested.”<sup>22</sup>

The deferential attitude of the attendees demonstrates the significant public role that Vizzini had played for a broad spectrum of the population. At the same time, it shows his close connection with other powerful “men of honor” in Sicily. For example, Giuseppe Genco Russo, mafia boss of Mussumeli, in the province of Caltanissetta, can be seen in the front line of the funeral procession (Fig. 2).<sup>23</sup> Widely considered the successor of Vizzini, Russo similarly represented the typical figure of mediator and social entrepreneur who had built up a position of power during his mafia career by infiltrating public agencies and forging privileged relationships with important individuals.<sup>24</sup>



Fig. 2: Funeral of Vizzini. Genco Russo in attendance (center-right, wearing a black tie)

<sup>19</sup> Farrell, *Understanding the Mafia*, 105.

<sup>20</sup> This quote is derived and adapted from Ludovico Ariosto’s *L’Orlando Furioso* (1532, 7:2): “Ecco il giudizio uman come spesso erra” (How often human judgement wanders wide!).

<sup>21</sup> Sales, *I preti e i mafiosi*, 77

<sup>22</sup> Farrell, *Understanding the Mafia*, 105.

<sup>23</sup> Photo Salvatore Lumia, <http://salvatorelumiafotografie.it/>. With permission.

<sup>24</sup> Raimondo Catanzaro, *Men of Respect: A Social History of the Sicilian Mafia* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 159.

The influential role that Russo played in the religious life of his town is particularly noteworthy. Not only was a church bench reserved for him during the liturgies, but he was also given the respectable role of collecting money for the church to fund the festival of Madonna Maria Santissima dei Miracoli.<sup>25</sup> In light of his honorable services and commitment as a devout member of the religious community, Russo was nominated *Superiore della Confraternita del Santissimo Sacramento* of Mussomeli (Superior of the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament), a prestigious title that gave him the right to lead the religious procession in front of the statue of the patron saint.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Russo habitually carried a book of prayers full of sacred pictures that he would kiss at the end of each prayer. The book lay on a bedside table “constellated with religious images” and went with him into his cell at the Ucciardone prison.<sup>27</sup> Throughout his mafia career, Russo was arrested repeatedly on such charges as murder, extortion and theft; yet, he was regularly acquitted on grounds of insufficient evidence. This continued until 1969 when the Court of Assize of Salerno sentenced him to eight years in prison for criminal conspiracy.<sup>28</sup> On that occasion, prominent Christian Democrat politicians, members of the local clergy and mafiosi collected twenty thousand signatures in support of a petition that declared Giuseppe Genco Russo “a man of moral principles, whose life was an example of probity and rectitude.”<sup>29</sup>

Carrying the statue of the saint celebrated during the local procession, as well as playing prominent characters in religious performances, are privileges that mafiosi have always appeared to retain. This was the case of, for example, Momo Grasso, mafia boss of Misilmeri, who routinely played the role of Jesus in the annual performance of *The Passion* during Easter celebrations.<sup>30</sup>

With society’s growing secularization, rising antimafia sentiment and hardening of the Church’s stand against the mafia, one might expect that the acquisition of prominent roles taken by mafia members in public religious ceremonies would decline. Attendance at public ceremonies or Sunday mass considerably increases the risk of arrest for *latitanti* (mafia members in hiding). But as in the proverbial “Mohammed and the Mountain,” mafiosi unable to attend church quite literally brought the church to their secret locations. Indeed, the police have frequently found altars and religious settings in mafia hideouts. This phenomenon is exemplified in the case of Catania mafia boss Benedetto “Nitto” Santapaola. Accused of having committed hundreds of homicides and of ordering many more, including the assassination of journalist Giuseppe Fava in 1984 and that of General Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa in 1982, Santapaola spent eleven years hiding in a farmhouse outside Catania until his arrest in May 1993.<sup>31</sup> In the square opposite his hideout, he commissioned the building of a small chapel with an altar, a statue of the Virgin Mary and a number of benches in a structure made of red bricks. Outside the chapel, a bell tower was erected. A copy of the Bible lay by

<sup>25</sup> Danilo Dolci, *Spreco: documenti e inchieste su alcuni aspetti dello spreco nella Sicilia occidentale* (Turin: Einaudi, 2003 [1960]), 60.

<sup>26</sup> Michele Pantaleone, *Mafia e droga* (Turin: Einaudi, 1966), 118; Dino, *La mafia devota*, 23.

<sup>27</sup> Fasullo, “Una religione mafiosa,” 1997.

<sup>28</sup> Commissione Parlamentare d’Inchiesta sul Fenomeno della Mafia in Sicilia, Legge 20 Dicembre 1962, n. 1720, V Legislatura, Doc. XXIII n. 2-quater, “Relazione sull’indagine riguardante casi di singoli mafiosi,” 25.

<sup>29</sup> Giorgio Frasca Polara, “Intimidazioni contro i giudici di Genco Russo: mafia, notabili e dirigenti della DC sono scatenati,” *L’Unità*, February 12, 1964.

<sup>30</sup> Pino Arlacchi, *Mafia, Peasants and Great Estates: Society in Traditional Calabria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 115; Andrea Camilleri, *Voi non sapete: gli amici, i nemici, la mafia, il mondo nei pizzini di Bernardo Provenzano* (Milan: Mondadori, 2007), 151.

<sup>31</sup> Corte di Assise di Palermo, Sezione II, Proc. nr. 25/99 R.G., Corte di Assise nr. 07/02, Reg. ins. sent. n. 2867/96, R.mod. 21 D.D.A., sentenza contro Madonia Antonio + altri.



his bedside table. On the day of his arrest, before leaving the house and being handcuffed, Santapaola embraced this Bible and kissed it in front of the police.<sup>32</sup>

The police found a similar altar in the hideout of mafia boss Pietro Aglieri. Aglieri, originally from the Guadagna area of Palermo, had become, by the late 1980s, the head of the powerful Santa Maria di Gesù mafia faction. Confessions of mafia defectors and judicial enquiries underline the direct and indirect role of Aglieri in the murder of a large number of high-profile victims, including prosecuting magistrate Antonio Scopelliti in 1991, as well as Christian Democrat politician Salvo Lima and antimafia magistrate Paolo Borsellino in 1992.<sup>33</sup> When the police forced entry into his hideout in June 1997, they were surprised to find a chapel completed with altar, benches and a large wooden crucifix (Fig. 3). Next to the altar, the police found a holy water stoup, a thurible, green and purple vestments, a statue of the Virgin Mary, a picture representing the Last Supper, a Bible and a wide variety of holy pictures and the Acts of the Second Vatican Council (Figs. 4a, 4b).<sup>34</sup>

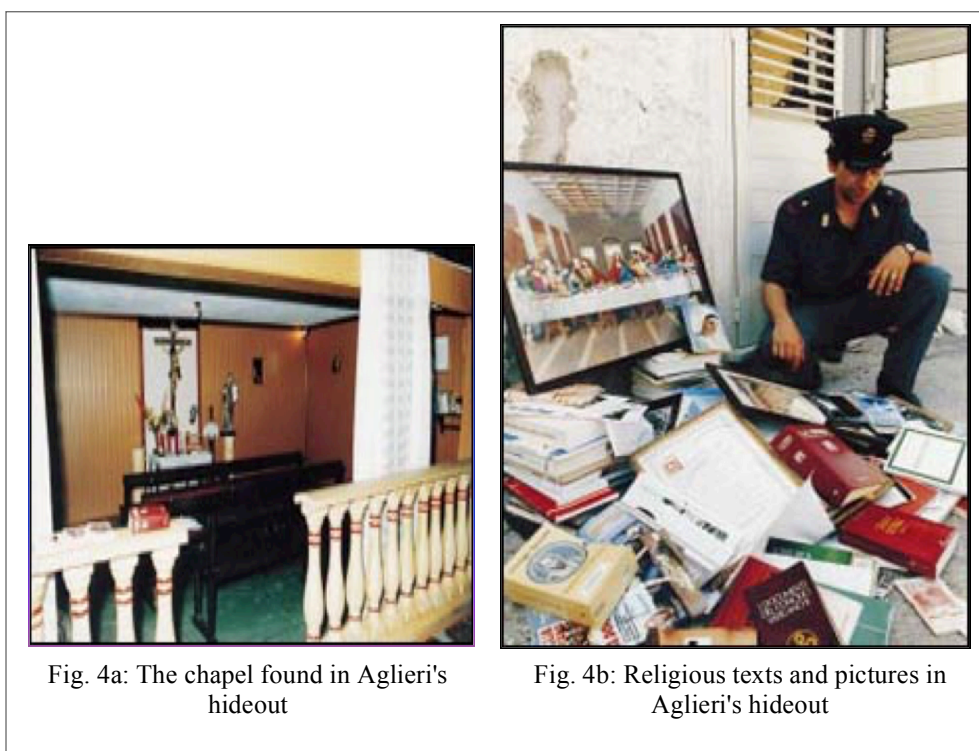


Fig. 4a: The chapel found in Aglieri's hideout

Fig. 4b: Religious texts and pictures in Aglieri's hideout

Approximately two hundred religious and philosophical texts completed the religious setting.<sup>35</sup> Although this plethora of religious paraphernalia was present, no weapons were found at the scene. Subsequently, Father Mario Frittitta, a Discalced Carmelite priest, confessed to having said mass at the hideout for Aglieri and other mafiosi on Christmas and Easter. A few years later, other priests, including Father Giacomo Ribaudo and Father Lillo Tubolino, admitted meeting with Aglieri at his hideout to offer spiritual support and celebrate

<sup>32</sup> Mignosi, *Il Signore sia coi boss*, 38.

<sup>33</sup> Corte Suprema di Cassazione, Quinta Sezione Penale, Udienza Pubblica del 3/7/03, Sentenza n. 948/2003, R.G.13489/03 contro Riina Salvatore + 14 (Borsellino bis). See also Corte di Appello di Catania Sez. II, Udienza del 20–21/04/2006, n. 24/06 R. Sent, n. 8/03 + 20/03 + 29/03 R.G., sentenza nel procedimento contro Agate Mariano +16.

<sup>34</sup> Photo M. Palazzotto/@Periodici San Paolo. With permission of the publisher.

<sup>35</sup> Enzo Mignosi, "I latitanti con il Crocefisso: anche Santapaola aveva un altare," *Il Corriere della Sera*, June 7, 1997.

liturgies.<sup>36</sup> The identity of the priest who used to celebrate the *Settimana Santa* (Holy Week) in the residence belonging to mafia boss Francesco Paolino Bontade, known as Don Paolino Bontà, on the other hand, has never been identified. Bontà was among the notable mafiosi leading the funeral procession of Calogero Vizzini in 1954. During the Easter celebrations, he would arrange the assembly of religious structures on his land representing the fifteen Stations of the Cross in the *Via Crucis*, with flowers and candles completing the scene.<sup>37</sup>

As these examples demonstrate, in the history of Cosa Nostra there have been numerous cases of proximity to, and even of involvement in, mafia activities on the part of the clergy. However, it is important to specify that within the same ecclesiastical institution, the spiritual support provided to mafia members by priests like Father Frittitta or Father Coppola strikingly contrasts with the antimafia commitment of numerous members of the clergy, who were—and some still are—involved on a daily basis in the fight against organized crime of mafia type.<sup>38</sup> Even at higher hierarchical levels, the stand taken by representatives of the Catholic Church has been inconsistent. In the 1960s, the previously mentioned Cardinal of Palermo, Ernesto Ruffini, publicly declared that the “mafia existed only in the minds of those who wished Sicily ill” and only as a “slander spread around by communists” to dishonor Sicily.<sup>39</sup> An altogether different position was taken by Ruffini’s successor, Archbishop of Palermo Salvatore Pappalardo. At the funeral mass of General Dalla Chiesa on September 5, 1982, Pappalardo gave a powerful eulogy charged with important political implications.<sup>40</sup>

In general, contemporary theologians and priests have openly condemned the decades of Church indifference towards, and even tolerance of, the mafia.<sup>41</sup> With the exception of isolated figures in the clergy who took a clear position against organized crime, however, it was only after the deaths of magistrates, politicians and police officers in the 1980s and 1990s that the Church broke its silence. A clear stand against the mafia was finally taken after the killing of magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, with the sermon of Pope

---

<sup>36</sup> Salvo Palazzolo, “Mafia, fede e pentimento: se i boss si convertono,” *Jesus I* (January 2004). Father Frittitta was arrested in 1997 on charges of “aggravated aiding and abetting of the mafia,” not only for saying mass for Aglieri, but also for presiding at the secret wedding of another mafioso on the run. However, the Corte d’Appello (CdA – Court of Appeal) and the Corte di Cassazione (CdC – The Cassation Court) acquitted him on the grounds of insufficient evidence in 1999 and in 2001, respectively.

<sup>37</sup> Nino Alongi, *Il Dio di Padre Puglisi e il Dio di Provenzano: i "pizzini" della legalità* (Trapani: Coppola Editore, 2006), 67.

<sup>38</sup> Prominent examples include Father Pino Puglisi, the priest of the Palermo area of Brancaccio, who was killed by the mafia in 1993. On May 25, 2013, Father Puglisi was beatified as a martyr. Father Luigi Ciotti and the Jesuit priests of the Pedro Arrupe Center in Palermo are but few of the many clergymen regularly involved in antimafia activity.

<sup>39</sup> Letter sent in 1963 by Cardinal Ruffini to Mons. Angelo Dell’Acqua, Sostituto della Segreteria di stato Città del Vaticano. Ernesto Ruffini, “In nessun caso la mafia frequenta la chiesa,” *Segno XV* (101-102) (1989): 34-35. Jane Schneider and Peter Schneider, “The Anti-Mafia movement in Palermo,” in *Between History and Histories: The Making of Silences and Commemorations*, ed. Gerald Sider and Gavin A. Smith (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 252.

<sup>40</sup> In his sermon, Pappalardo compared Palermo to Saguntum, the ancient city of the Roman Empire that fell under the siege of Hannibal’s Carthaginians while the Romans opted for non-intervention. The reference in Pappalardo’s eulogy was to what the escalating violence of the Second Mafia War (1980-1983) was doing to the city of Palermo and to what the state was allowing to occur. However, by February 1986, on the eve of the maxi-trial of Palermo, Cardinal Pappalardo had already withdrawn his previous statement. Saverio Lodato, review of Enzo Mignosi, “Il Signore sia coi boss: storie di preti fedeli alla mafia e padrini timorosi di Dio,” *L’Unità*, October 11, 1993.

<sup>41</sup> Cavadi, *Il Dio dei mafiosi: attualità e storia*; Augusto Cavadi, *Il Vangelo e la lupara: materiali su chiese e mafia*, 2 vols., Collana Fede e Annuncio (Bologna: EDB, 1993); Augusto Cavadi and Cosimo Scordato, *Fare teologia a Palermo: intervista a don Cosimo Scordato sulla “teologia del risanamento” e sull’esperienza del centro sociale “San Francesco Saverio” all’ Albergheria*, (Palermo-Rocca: Augustinus, 1990); Stabile, “Cattolicesimo siciliano e mafia.”

John Paul II from the Valley of the Temples in Agrigento on May 5, 1993, in which he openly condemned the mafia and urged mafiosi to change their ways. Several months later, the mafia responded with bomb attacks against several churches in Rome. An even stronger condemnation of the mafia by the papacy was issued on June 22, 2014, when Pope Francis excommunicated all *mafiosi*, accusing them of practicing “the adoration of evil”:

Those who in their lives follow this path of evil, as mafiosi do, are not in communion with God. They are excommunicated. This evil must be fought against, it must be pushed aside. We must say no to it. [...] Our children are asking for it, our young people are asking for it. They are in need of hope and faith can help respond to this need.

A few weeks later, Bishop Francesco Milito of Oppido Mamertina in Calabria ordered an end to all religious processions in his diocese after the statue of Our Lady of Grace, during a traditional ceremony, stopped in front of the house of Peppe Mazzagatti, a mafia boss serving a life sentence under house arrest, seemingly as a mark of respect. The bow, the Bishop stressed, was a “gesture of blasphemous devotion that is the opposite of what is due to the mother of God.” During that same occasion, the Carabinieri who had been accompanying the ceremony left the procession in sign of protest against the evident detour and its significance.

If, from one perspective, this episode highlights how important the Church’s clearer position against the mafia has been, on the other it also shows that the mafia infiltration of local religious festivals has not been discontinued. Developments in the fight against organized crime, which coincided with the rapidly growing phenomenon of *pentitismo* (mafiosi turning state’s evidence) in the early 1980s and the subsequent maxi-trial of Palermo (1986-1987), have undoubtedly contributed to limiting the participation and influence of mafiosi in religious ceremonies and processions. Numerous examples, however, demonstrate that the mafia habit of financing, organizing and playing central roles in religious festivals has not disappeared. For example, Leonardo Messina, a mafia member of the San Cataldo faction who turned state’s evidence in 1992, described his role in the procession of Madonna dell’Annunziata (Our Lady of the Annunciation) in 1996:

I was responsible for the religious procession of Cosa Nostra’s patron saint, Our Lady of the Annunciation. I walked in the procession next to the saint. You will understand it if you want to. [...] These ritual occasions have a very important role for us. [...] The priest? Do you think the priest did not know who organized the processions of the saint?<sup>42</sup>

Additionally, when mafia “soldier”<sup>43</sup> Vincenzo Scarantino was arrested in 1992 on suspicion of having prepared the car bomb that killed magistrate Paolo Borsellino and his police escort in July of that year, a large section of the Palermo *borgata* (suburb) of Guadagna, where he had grown up, took to the streets to defend his innocence. According to the local inhabitants, the religiosity that Scarantino had demonstrated throughout his membership in the *Confraternita di Sant’Anna* (Brotherhood of Saint Anne) was unquestionable proof of his innocence. For example, they described how he was always

---

<sup>42</sup> Dino, *La mafia devota*, 24. Mafiosi refer to Madonna dell’Annunziata, or dell’Annunciazione (Our Lady of the Annunciation), as the sacred figure chosen by Cosa Nostra as its patron saint.

<sup>43</sup> In the mafia hierarchy, as detailed by defector Tommaso Buscetta in 1984, a soldier is an affiliated member at the lower echelons of the organization. Buscetta’s confessions are reported in *Procedimento Penale contro Greco Michele e altri – voll. 124–124 bis–124 ter.*, Tribunale Civile e Penale di Palermo, n. 2015/82 R.G.P.R.; n. 2289/82 R.G.U.I.; n.139/82 Reg. Sez. VI, 27–41.

among “those strong, lucky ones who held the tons of weight of the statue on their shoulders and carried the saint in procession through the streets of the town” during the annual celebration of the patron saint.<sup>44</sup>

The practice of bringing the statue to pay homage in front of the house of local mafia bosses continues to be carried out today. A police report describes, step by step, the itinerary of the *fercolo* (the platform upon which the statue of the saint is brought in procession) in the religious procession of the *Santissimo Crocifisso* (Holy Crucifix) in Campobello di Mazara near Trapani in September 2006.<sup>45</sup> On this occasion, the *fercolo* stopped once for fifteen minutes in front of the church of the Madonna di Fatima, and again for approximately the same length of time in front of the house of local mafia boss Francesco Luppino, a high-ranking criminal under house arrest with high security surveillance.<sup>46</sup> The report details:

The procession of the Crucifix stopped, as a sign of deference, in front of the house of a subject who has been sentenced for double murder and mafia association. That day, although not being able to leave the house, Luppino left the entrance door open so that he was visible from the outside. As the Crucifix stood in front of Luppino’s door, all the members of the municipal band entered the house, along with other participants in the procession, including a number of local mafiosi.<sup>47</sup>

These instances highlight the regularity of mafia participation in religious processions. Additionally, they demonstrate the important role of the Church in guaranteeing continuity of these ritual practices. Despite the recent strengthening of the Church’s official stance against the mafia, which may contribute to making the mafia infiltration of religious processions harder, mafia participation in the annual festivals is still evident today.

As sociologist Alessandra Dino observes, by participating in these events the mafia shows its support for the traditional social order and its embodiment of community values. At the same time, these events display the mafia’s tacit agreement with clerical authorities that allows mafiosi to take part or even play prominent roles in religious processions. One important consequence of this, Dino notes, is that on numerous occasions the celebration of saints subtly becomes the celebration of the boss financing the event and marching behind the statues:

Exploiting the evangelical message and the prophetic role of the Church for its own purposes, the mafia organization has created a useful representation of an anthropomorphized God; [a God] without transcendence, who remains constrained within the utilitarian scheme of the mafia group. In the name of this God, the illicit becomes licit, oppression becomes justice, and intimidation becomes respect. [...] If all this is true, then it should not be surprising if religious processions and the organization of feasts in honor of patron saints become the occasion for the cult of the personality of *mafiosi*, following a mechanism of mirroring that projects the religious devotion upon the persona of the “man of respect,” of the mafia boss.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Mignosi, *Il Signore sia coi boss*, 43.

<sup>45</sup> Regione Carabinieri Sicilia, Stazione di Campobello di Mazara, Relazione di servizio effettuato in occasione della manifestazione religiosa in onore del SS. Crocifisso, Settembre 17, 2006.

<sup>46</sup> Regione Carabinieri Sicilia, Stazione di Campobello di Mazara, police report dated September 17, 2006.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Dino, *La mafia devota*, 35.

In light of these considerations, it is important to explore the exact micro-social dynamics through which the extension of the mafia power into the public sphere of the sacred affects the individual and collective identity of the group. Socio-anthropological theories of ritual performance provide useful models of analysis to interpret mafia participation in ritual festivals and analyze the effects of these rituals on the audience, the devout community at large.

### **Religious festivals as ritual performances**

In Sicily, festivities in honor of the patron saints often last several days and involve the entire community. For example, the feast of Saint Agatha in Catania is among the most famous religious festivals in the world because of the size of the celebrations and the number of people participating. Saint Agatha is a Christian saint and a virgin martyr who was tortured for her steadfast profession of faith in Christianity in the third century. Although it is impossible to estimate the exact beginning of the celebrations, in 1126 the Saint's relics were brought back to Catania after eighty-six years in Constantinople, inciting spontaneous celebrations that filled the town's streets. Every year since then, a religious procession with the relics of St. Agatha takes place in the presence of the archbishop of Catania, the mayor, the knightly orders and devout individuals and pilgrims from all over the world. For the occasion, many devotees wear the *sacco*, an ankle-length white tunic, a velvet black hat and white gloves to recreate the same manner of dress that the inhabitants of Catania would have been wearing when receiving back the Saint's relics in 1126. With crowds of up to one million people, there are few mass expressions of devotion as popular as the Festival of Saint Agatha, considered the world's third largest and one of the biggest events in Italy.

One of the main characteristics of these annual festivals is the evident ability to generate what sociologist Emile Durkheim defines as "collective effervescence," emotions and social energy—fundamental elements that strengthen the social bonds between ritual participants and create cohesion at a structural level.<sup>49</sup> Seeing religion as "something eminently social," Durkheim argued that, through its rites, religion acts as a source of solidarity, identification and cohesion and provides occasions for people to gather and reaffirm their social norms.<sup>50</sup> It is precisely during rituals that men who feel "united in part by blood ties but even more by a community of interests and traditions" gather and become conscious of their moral unity.<sup>51</sup> In particular, during ritual actions dominant symbols (e.g. the statue or the effigy of the patron saint) bring the ethical norms and values of the social group "into close contact with strong emotional stimuli."<sup>52</sup> From this perspective, the celebrations to honor local patron saints throughout Sicily can be interpreted as an occasion for the community to maintain and reaffirm its collective life, historical narrative, shared emotions and dominant ideas at periodic intervals. Similarly, the statue of the patron saint carried in procession through the streets of town represents the "sacred" object for the extended community, its "totem," for it is set apart and different from all the other "profane" things.<sup>53</sup> This ceremonial object may be inherently sacred, but it acquires its status mainly through ritual activities. Since this "totem" represents the community, its values and norms, the worship of the sacred becomes in reality the worship of the social group itself. In other words, religious symbols represent the group,

---

<sup>49</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman, new ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1912]), 164.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>52</sup> Victor W Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 30.

<sup>53</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 96.

and the worship of these symbols by the group reproduces its existence. This has important implications for the stability and the social structure of society.

Numerous scholars have recognized and explored the relationship between religion and group solidarity stressing, in particular, the importance of studying religious rituals “in action” and “as a mode of communication.”<sup>54</sup> For example, anthropologist Victor Turner departed from the structural-functionalist tradition that interpreted rituals as static sequences of repeated symbolic behavior and instead focused on their active role in the maintenance of group solidarity. Hypothesizing the concept of ritual as a “process,” he interpreted rituals and religious thought as representations and dramatizations of social relationships or, in a word, as performances:

I like to think of ritual essentially as performance, enactment, not primarily as rules or rubrics. The rules “frame” the ritual process. But the ritual process transcends its frame. [...] To perform is thus to bring something about, to consummate something, or “to carry out” a play, order, project. But, in the “carrying out,” I hold, something new may be generated. The performance transforms itself.<sup>55</sup>

The ability of ritual performances to actualize a transformation, as well as the grounding of a ritual in the everyday dimension, finds its clearest expression in theories of performance developed by Richard Schechner and, more recently, Jeffrey Alexander:

Rituals are episodes of repeated and simplified cultural communication in which the direct partners to a social interaction, and those observing it, share a mutual belief in the descriptive and prescriptive validity of the communications’ symbolic contents and accept the authenticity of one another’s intentions.<sup>56</sup>

Alexander, in particular, suggests that it is precisely because of this shared understanding of intention and content, and the intrinsic validity of the interaction, that rituals have a profound effect on the participants. Their effectiveness “energizes” the individuals involved and binds them together, while at the same time intensifying the connection of the participants and of the symbolic objects with the observing audience, “the relevant community at large.”<sup>57</sup> As a result, the potential of a ritual performance to strengthen the social bonds between individuals—and between individuals and the symbolic content of ritual itself—may also have important implications for the authority and power of the leaders conducting it. In order to preserve their social power and the ability to exercise control, leaders of social groups (or elites) need to “develop effective forms of expressive

---

<sup>54</sup> Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (London: Cohen and West, 1952); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969); Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>55</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 79.

<sup>56</sup> Jeffrey Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, and Jason L. Mast, *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 29; Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theater and Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002); Turner, *From Ritual to Theater*; Turner, *The Ritual Process*.

<sup>57</sup> Alexander, Giesen, and Mast, *Social Performance*, 20-30.

communication” and transform their “interest conflicts” into widely available performances that project persuasive symbolic forms. Therefore, in Alexander’s view, the goal of rituals as performances, whether on stage or in society, remains the same as the ambition of sacred ritual:

They stand or fall on their ability to produce psychological identification and cultural extension. The aim is to create, via skillful and affecting performance, the emotional connection of audience with actor and text and thereby to create the conditions for projecting cultural meaning from performance to audience.<sup>58</sup>

This is exemplified in the role that mafiosi play in religious festivals. Apart from being one of the largest religious feasts, the festival of Saint Agatha is also the only one in the world to have been at the center of a trial for mafia infiltration. In 2004, for example, as unauthorized public fireworks illuminated the sky above Catania, the *fercolo* stopped in front of the house of Giuseppe Mangion, the prominent mafia boss of Catania, who had recently been released from prison.<sup>59</sup> Undercover police officers wearing the white gown of “penitents” took photos of mafia bosses Mangion and Santapaola at the event. These notable mafiosi were photographed on the *fercolo* next to the statue, carrying the reliquary casket of the saint on their shoulders into the cathedral and occupying the front seats during the mass.<sup>60</sup> According to Carmelo Petralia, deputy public prosecutor of Direzione Nazionale Antimafia (DNA), and Antonino Fanara, district prosecutor, for six years—from 1999 until 2005—the mafia clans led by Santapaola and Mangion “infiltrated the major religious event of the devout Catanese community in order to significantly increase the criminal prestige and authority of the mafia as a fundamental power center in the city.”<sup>61</sup> The testimony of Santo La Causa, a mafia defector belonging to the Santapaola clan, further confirms this point. During the interrogations, La Causa detailed the exact role that each *mafioso* occupied during the religious festival of Saint Agatha. He revealed, for example, how the reliquary casket of the saint could not be carried by anyone else but Santapaola members (Figs. 5, 6).<sup>62</sup> La Causa was not aware of the economic reasons behind the mafia participation in Catania’s most important popular event. Instead, he was convinced that:

The participation of numerous members of Cosa Nostra in the festival mainly derived from reasons of social prestige. Affiliates of the Santapaola faction participate in this procession in the most crucial moments in order to demonstrate openly the power of the mafia family. In other words, they participate in order to increase their social and mafia prestige.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 54-55.

<sup>59</sup> Concetto Vecchio, “Catania, 850 milioni di euro sprecati per opere mai finite,” *La Repubblica*, March 16, 2009. Also in Dino, *La mafia devota*, 29.

<sup>60</sup> “Le mani dei boss su Sant’Agata: per gli inquirenti ‘controllavano’ la festa patronale del capoluogo etneo più per potere che per profitto,” *Il Corriere della Sera*, February 1, 2008.

<sup>61</sup> Michele Giuffrida, “La Piovra sulla festa di S. Agata: il business gestito dalle cosche,” *La Repubblica*, February 1, 2008.

<sup>62</sup> Antonio Condorelli, “La Procura contesta l’assoluzione: ‘Provate infiltrazioni mafiose,’” *Live Sicilia*, September 10, 2013; also in “I verbali di Santo La Causa: ‘Vincenzo Ercolano portò la varetta,’” *Live Sicilia*, September 13, 2013.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.





Fig. 5: Members of the Santapaola family



Fig. 6: Enzo Mangion on the *fercolo* carrying the reliquary casket

What effects does the role played by *mafiosi* in religious ceremonies have on the social structure of the community? Social structure refers to the hierarchical arrangement of statuses and ranks. It consists of the whole system of social relations that keeps a community balanced. These relationships are represented in the structure of a ritual: the selection of participants, the allocation of their roles in the performance and the identity of those directing it are all modelled on the structure of wider society. Ritual occasions, including religious festivals, “mobilize this structure in action; in some cases rituals are even the only times when this happens.”<sup>64</sup> Rituals often offer a temporary levelling of social hierarchy in which participants share a spirit of unity and comradeship, reflecting characteristics of what Victor Turner defined as *communitas*. *Communitas* can be contrasted to social structure. While social structure refers to the hierarchical arrangement of roles and statuses within a social group, *communitas* refers instead to feelings of egalitarianism and comradeship, frequently associated with conditions of marginality and inferiority.<sup>65</sup> It is important to note, however, that *communitas* represents only a momentary phase, as “those living in community seem to require, sooner or later, an absolute authority, whether this be a religious commandment, a divinely inspired leader or a dictator.”<sup>66</sup> Although in *communitas* the structural differences tend to be levelled out, the authority of the leaders over other members of the community is not only maintained but also reinforced:

The authority of the elders is not based on legal sanctions; it is in a sense the personification of the self-evident authority of tradition. The authority of the elders is absolute, because it represents the absolute, the axiomatic values of society in which are expressed the common good and the common interest.<sup>67</sup>

In relation to the mafia’s role in religious processions, the ritual performance enables mafia leaders to project their roles in ways that create psychological and cultural identification between them and their audience and help establish or maintain authority. Furthermore, the performance of members of Cosa Nostra in local festivals presents specific characteristics—*frame*, *reflexivity* and *emergence*—which are crucial in establishing

<sup>64</sup> J.S. La Fontaine, *Initiation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 11.

<sup>65</sup> Victor Turner, *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1975), 231–252; also in Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 132–133.

<sup>66</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 129.

<sup>67</sup> Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 100.



authority and the mafia role within the wider social structure “in action.”<sup>68</sup> First, mafia performance is *framed*, highlighted and separated from the surrounding setting, whilst remaining keyed into conventions specific to the broader cultural setting. Second, this performance is *reflexive* because the mafia members are both “spectators” to their own experience and, at the same time, performers of this experience in front of an audience. Third, their ritual performance is *emergent* in that it has distinctive potential for modifying and creating social structure. Specifically, *emergence* refers to the ability of social actors to enhance their performance in order to gain control and authority over their audience and “to interpret both traditions and social settings, actively transforming both in the course of their performances.”<sup>69</sup>

For example, in July 2012 Alessandro D’Ambrogio, mafia boss of the Porta Nuova mafia faction of Palermo, was seen playing a prominent role during the annual festival of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Ballarò, the famous Palermitan street market. A home video recorded on that occasion shows not only how D’Ambrogio was given the honored task of carrying the statue in the procession while wearing the confraternity vest but how he was also the object of deference and attention by members of the local devout community.<sup>70</sup> The footage shows a child being passed reverentially to D’Ambrogio as an intermediary figure between the crowd and the religious icon. This suggests his involvement in the collective celebration and his key symbolic role in the ritual. It further represents the recognition of an authority that stretches beyond the sphere of the “profane” and into the “sacred” dimension of public life.

Having asserted that the *emergent* quality of a ritual performance depends on the enhancement of the experience and on the goals of the participants, one can see how mafia bosses have the possibility of enhancing their performance in religious festivals in order to gain control and authority over their audience and “to interpret both traditions and social settings, actively transforming both in the course of their performances.”<sup>71</sup> By means of symbolic behavior and religious language with reference to the deeply entrenched Catholic tradition, mafia bosses ratify their belief in an existential dimension that provides unity and continuity to the “morality” of the mafia social order. At the same time, they confer sacred and authoritative value to their general-order conceptions, thereby acquiring legitimization with, and power over, the external community at large. Thus religious processions become means for the organization to reaffirm itself periodically and for mafia leaders to assert their authority. The more social actors are able to “bind” the audience to themselves, the more prestige and authority they will gain over it: prestige for effectively displaying their competence, authority and control for holding the flow of the interaction in their hands. When mafiosi at top echelons assert control in this way, they have the potential to transform relations, statuses and roles that make up the social structure of the community to which they belong.<sup>72</sup>

Two years after D’Ambrogio’s participation in the festival of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in 2012, with D’Ambrogio now imprisoned in Novara under the 41bis maximum security regime, the procession of the Madonna del Carmine reached the heart of the Ballarò area and came to a halt in front of the funeral home belonging to the D’Ambrogio family. The order to stop was given by a man wearing the coat of the brotherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary of

---

<sup>68</sup> Richard Bauman and Barbara A. Babcock, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1984), 59.

<sup>69</sup> Charles L. Briggs, *Competence in Performance: The Creativity of Tradition in Mexican Verbal Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 7.

<sup>70</sup> Riccardo Lo Verso, “Tutti dietro la bara per omaggiare il boss,” *LiveSicilia*, August 3, 2012. The video is available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=QWnJUtmxol4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=QWnJUtmxol4) (accessed 12/07/2014).

<sup>71</sup> Briggs, *Competence in Performance*, 7.

<sup>72</sup> Bauman and Babcock, *Verbal Art as Performance*, 43-44.

Mount Carmel and shouting, “Fermatevi” (“stop!”). The statue of the Madonna stood and remained there for almost five minutes. Alessandro’s family members can be seen standing in front of the funeral home, visibly pleased by the continuance of this traditional gesture of deference despite clear sanctions against this practice by the Vatican.<sup>73</sup>

The interactions between mafia bosses in religious processions and the members of the community represent a clear example of rules of conduct, specifically rules of *deference* and *demeanor*. Erving Goffman described *deference* as a “mark of devotion” that represents the ways in which an actor “celebrates and confirms his relation to a recipient.”<sup>74</sup> The more mafia members and members of the external community acknowledge the leader’s competence and authority, the more the boss’s identity is “allotted a kind of sacredness displayed and confirmed by symbolic acts.” Indeed, through practices of deference and demeanor, which become progressively *institutionalized* in the course of ritual interactions, the identity of mafiosi becomes part of a ceremonial ritual, a “sacred object which has to be treated with proper ritual care and in turn has to be presented in a proper light to others.”<sup>75</sup> In order to establish and project this sacred *self* on a regular basis, the mafia leader needs to act consistently with an appropriate demeanor, displaying deference to, and being treated with deference by, his interlocutors. In D’Ambrogio’s case, the *deference* that other participants demonstrated towards him is apparent, for example, in those frequent “interpersonal rituals” (e.g. salutations, thanks and kisses) occurring with other members of the community. The passing of the children to the mafia leader as a means of intercession with the religious figure being celebrated is further testimony to a deferential attitude that emphasizes and consolidates social hierarchies.

Where deference represents a code of conduct when interacting with others, *demeanor* encompasses instead all forms of “ceremonial behavior typically conveyed through deportment, dress and bearing, and which serves to express to those in his immediate presence that he is a person of certain desirable or undesirable qualities.”<sup>76</sup> The actions and reactions of mafiosi playing a specific role in religious processions and the feedback to their demeanor through the deference expressed by others bind mafia and external society together. Through the observance of rules of conduct in these ritual interactions, the identity of mafia bosses is shaped.

The implication is that in one sense this secular world is not so irreligious as we think. Many gods have been done away with, but the individual himself might stubbornly remain as a deity of considerable importance. [...] Perhaps the individual is so viable a god because he can actually understand the ceremonial significance of the way he is treated, and quite on his own can respond dramatically to what is proffered him. In contacts between such deities there is no need for middlemen; each of these gods is able to serve as his own priest.<sup>77</sup>

In conclusion, this article has explored how the Sicilian mafia utilizes religious values and practices belonging to a shared cultural patrimony to legitimize its authority and

---

<sup>73</sup> The video is available at [http://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2014/07/29/news/la\\_madonna\\_si\\_inchina\\_al\\_covo\\_del\\_padrino\\_processione\\_shock\\_tra\\_i\\_vicoli\\_di\\_ballar-92633490/?refresh\\_ce](http://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2014/07/29/news/la_madonna_si_inchina_al_covo_del_padrino_processione_shock_tra_i_vicoli_di_ballar-92633490/?refresh_ce) (accessed 02/08/2014).

<sup>74</sup> Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction, 2005 [1967]), 56; Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1971 [1959]), 56.

<sup>75</sup> Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 91.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

existence in the eyes of external society. Specifically, it has examined the role played by mafia leaders in religious festivals to establish and reinforce a long-term tradition of unquestioned authority through their proximity to prevailing potent religious symbols and ritual practices derived from the Catholic tradition. Although this tendency has been apparent throughout the organization's history, it may never have represented such an important means of garnering authority as in recent times, when the mafia's authority has been challenged and diminished by the public and by religious hierarchies.

Drawing chiefly on the notions of *deference* and *demeanor*, *frame*, *emergence* and *reflexivity*, this article positioned its theoretical framework between ritual and performance studies, utilizing two concepts that are semantically extensive, yet overlap on different levels. This analytic perspective not only facilitates the interpretation of social interactions within Cosa Nostra and between the organization and the external community in terms of ritual performances, but also provides an analytical model to study the effect on the devout community and the structure of Cosa Nostra as a single group. Exploring the dynamics through which mafia identity is performatively constructed in these public occasions, and the crucial role that cultural values shared with external society play in the process, helps explain the ability of the mafia to combine tradition with innovation and survive changing circumstances by maintaining consistent "moral" codes and practices. In particular, the novel application of performance theories to organized crime may contribute to the delineation of an interpretative model for future analyses of various criminal organizations whose sources of social legitimization are similarly rooted in religious values and other cultural codes.

## **Bibliography**

### **Judicial documents and parliamentary reports**

- Commissione Parlamentare d'Inchiesta sul Fenomeno della Mafia in Sicilia, Legge 20 Dicembre 1962, n. 1720, V Legislatura, Doc. XXIII n.2-quater, "Relazione sull'indagine riguardante casi di singoli mafiosi," 25.
- Corte di Assise di Palermo, Sezione II, Proc. nr. 25/99 R.G., Corte di Assise nr. 07/02, Reg. ins. sent. n. 2867/96, R.mod. 21 D.D.A., sentenza contro Madonia Antonio + altri.
- Corte Suprema di Cassazione, Quinta Sezione Penale, Udienza Pubblica del 3/7/03, Sentenza n. 948/2003, R.G.13489/03 contro Riina Salvatore + 14 (Borsellino bis). See also Corte di Appello di Catania Sez. II, Udienza del 20–21/04/2006, n. 24/06 R. Sent, n. 8/03 + 20/03 + 29/03 R.G., sentenza nel procedimento contro Agate Mariano +16.
- Tribunale Penale di Marsiglia, Corte D'Appello di Aix-en-Provence, Gabinetto del Dr Debacq G.I., n.174/87, vol. 942/a, processo verbale di interrogatorio di prima comparazione di Antonino Calderone, udienza del 22 Giugno 1987, 813045.
- Tribunale Civile e Penale di Palermo, Procedimento Penale contro Greco Michele e altri – voll. 124–124 bis–124 ter., , n. 2015/82 R.G.P.R.; n. 2289/82 R.G.U.I.; n.139/82 Reg. Sez. VI, 27–41.
- Regione Carabinieri Sicilia, Stazione di Campobello di Mazara, Relazione di servizio effettuato in occasione della manifestazione religiosa in onore del SS. Crocifisso, Settembre 17, 2006.

### **Secondary Sources**

- Alexander, Jeffrey C., Bernhard Giesen, and Jason L. Mast. *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

- Alongi, Nino. *Il Dio di Padre Puglisi e il Dio di Provenzano: i "pizzini" della legalità*. Trapani: Coppola Editore, 2006.
- Arlacchi, Pino. *Mafia, contadini e latifondo nella Calabria tradizionale*. Bologna: il Mulino, 1980.
- . *Mafia, Peasants and Great Estates: Society in Traditional Calabria*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Bauman, Richard, and Barbara A. Babcock. *Verbal Art as Performance*. Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1984.
- Briggs, Charles L. *Competence in Performance: The Creativity of Tradition in Mexican Verbal Art*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988.
- Camilleri, Andrea. *Voi non sapete: gli amici, i nemici, la mafia, il mondo nei pizzini di Bernardo Provenzano*. Milan: Mondadori, 2007.
- Catanzaro, Raimondo. *Men of Respect: A Social History of the Sicilian Mafia*. New York: The Free Press, 1992.
- Cavadi, Augusto. *Il Vangelo e la lupara: materiali su chiese e mafia*. 2 vols., Collana Fede e Annuncio. Bologna: EDB, 1993.
- . *Il Dio dei mafiosi: attualità e storia*. Cinisello Balsamo (Milan): San Paolo, 2009.
- Cavadi, Augusto, and Cosimo Scordato. *Fare teologia a Palermo: intervista a don Cosimo Scordato sulla "teologia del risanamento" e sull'esperienza del centro sociale "San Francesco Saverio" all'Albergheria*. Palermo-Rocca: Augustinus, 1990.
- Ceruso, Vincenzo. *Le sagrestie di Cosa nostra: inchiesta su preti e mafiosi*. Roma: Newton Compton, 2007.
- Condorelli, Antonio. "La Procura contesta l'assoluzione: 'Provate infiltrazioni mafiose'." *Live Sicilia*. September 10, 2013. [http://catania.livesicilia.it/2013/09/10/processo-s-agata-la-procura-contesta-l-assoluzione-provate-infiltrazioni-mafiose-nella-festa\\_258213/](http://catania.livesicilia.it/2013/09/10/processo-s-agata-la-procura-contesta-l-assoluzione-provate-infiltrazioni-mafiose-nella-festa_258213/)
- Dino, Alessandra. *La mafia devota: chiesa, religione, Cosa Nostra*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Rome: GLF editori Laterza, 2008.
- . "For Christ's Sake: Organized Crime and Religion." In *Organized Crime and the Challenge to Democracy*, edited by Felia Allum and Renate Siebert, 143-155. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Dolci, Danilo. *Spreco: documenti e inchieste su alcuni aspetti dello spreco nella Sicilia occidentale*. Turin: Einaudi, 2003 [1960].
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.
- Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Translated by Carol Cosman. New edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1912].
- Farrell, Joseph. *Understanding the Mafia*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997.
- Fasullo, Nino. "Una religione mafiosa." *Segno* 179 (XXII) (1996): 38-46.
- Franchetti, Leopoldo. *Condizioni politiche e amministrative della Sicilia*. Edited by Paolo Pezzino. Rome: Donzelli, 1993 (1876).
- Frasca Polara, Giorgio. "Intimidazioni contro i giudici di Genco Russo: mafia, notabili e dirigenti della DC sono scatenati." *L'Unità* (February 12, 1964).
- Giuffrida, Michele. "La Piovra sulla festa di S. Agata: il business gestito dalle cosche," *La Repubblica* (February 1, 2008).
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books. 1971 [1959].
- . *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction, 2005 [1967].
- La Fontaine, J. S. *Initiation*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.

- Lodato, Saverio. "Il Signore sia coi boss: storie di preti fedeli alla mafia e padrini timorosi di Dio," review of Enzo Mignosi. *L'Unità* (October 11, 1993).
- Lo Verso, Riccardo. "Tutti dietro la bara per omaggiare il boss," *LiveSicilia*, August 3, 2012. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=QWnJUtmxol4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=QWnJUtmxol4) (accessed 12/07/2014).
- Lupo, Salvatore. "Il tenebroso sodalizio': un rapporto sulla mafia palermitana di fine Ottocento." *Studi Storici* 29, no. 2 (1988): 463-89.
- Marino, Giuseppe Carlo. *I padrini: da Vito Cascio Ferro a Lucky Luciano, da Calogero Vizzini a Stefano Bontate, fatti, segreti e testimonianze di Cosa Nostra attraverso le sconcertanti biografie dei suoi protagonisti*. Rome: Newton Compton, 2001.
- Mignosi, Enzo. *Il Signore sia coi boss: storie di preti fedeli alla mafia e di padrini timorosi di Dio*. Palermo: Arbor, 1993.
- . "I latitanti con il Crocefisso: anche Santapaola aveva un altare." *Il Corriere della Sera*, June 7, 1997.
- Naro, Cataldo. "L'opzione 'culturalista' della Chiesa siciliana." In *Per un discorso cristiano di resistenza alla mafia: le categorie teologico-morali di «struttura di peccato» e «peccato sociale»*, Atti del seminario di studio tenuto a San Cataldo il 10 dicembre 1994, edited by Salvatore Diprima, 115-131. Sciascia Ed.: Caltanissetta-Roma, 1995.
- Palazzolo, Salvo. "Mafia, fede e pentimento: se i boss si convertono." *Jesus I* (January 2004), <http://www.stpauls.it/jesus06/0401je/0401je38.htm>.
- Pantaleone, Michele. *Mafia e politica, 1943-1962*. Turin: Einaudi, 1962.
- . *Mafia e droga*. Turin: Einaudi, 1966.
- Paoli, Letizia. *Mafia Brotherhoods: Organized Crime, Italian Style*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Principato, Teresa, and Alessandra Dino. *Mafia donna: le vestali del sacro e dell'onore*. Palermo: Flaccovio, 1997.
- Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. London: Cohen and West, 1952.
- Rappaport, Roy. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Ruffini, Ernesto. "Il vero volto della Sicilia: lettera Pastorale." *Bollettino Ecclesiastico Palermitano: pubblicazione ufficiale dell'Arcidiocesi* LIX (1964).
- . "In nessun caso la mafia frequenta la chiesa." *Segno* XV, no. 101-102 (1989): 34-35.
- Sales, Isaia. *I preti e i mafiosi: storia dei rapporti tra mafie e Chiesa cattolica*. Milan: B.C. Dalai, 2010.
- Savatteri, Gaetano. *I siciliani*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed., *I Robinson/Lettere*. Rome: GLF Editori Laterza, 2005.
- Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Schechner, Richard, and Willa Appel. *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theater and Ritual*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Schneider, Jane, and Peter Schneider. "'From Peasant Wars to Urban Wars': The Anti-Mafia Movement in Palermo." In *Between History and Histories: The Making of Silences and Commemorations*, edited by Gerald Sider and Gavin A. Smith, 230-263. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997.
- Sciascia, Leonardo. *La corda pazzo: scrittori e cose della Sicilia*. Milan: Adelphi, 1991.
- Sciascia, Leonardo, and Marcelle Padovani. *La Sicilia come metafora*. Milan: Mondadori, 1979.
- Stabile, Francesco Michele. "Cattolicesimo siciliano e mafia." *Synaxis* 14, no. 1 (1996): 13-55.
- . *I consoli di Dio: vescovi e politica in Sicilia (1953-1963)*. Caltanissetta-Roma: Sciascia Ed., 1999.

- Turner, Bryan S. *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Turner, Victor W. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1967.
- . *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969.
- . *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1975 [1974].
- . *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982.
- Vecchio, Concetto. "Catania, 850 milioni di euro sprecati per opere mai finite." *La Repubblica* (March 16, 2009).