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ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE BALKAN CULTS IN ABRUZZI AND MOLISE (ITALY): TWO CASE-STUDIES

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Abstract: This article reveals the mechanisms of rooting the rituals of migrants in new places. We present two case-studies and from there we develop a wider scenario of cultural dynamics. The arrival of the Slavs and Albanians from the other side of the Adriatic toward the coasts of the Abruzzi (from which Molise separated in 1963) has been documented as early as the 14th century. It continues until the 20th century, and it is continually remembered by local historians and ethnographers to underline that the history of resettlement is a preserved component of culture which is reproduced in texts and ritual actions. Along with the memory of the migration process itself, religion often becomes the symbolical centre of the migrant's life. Therefore, religious rituals are often more preserved than others.

Keywords: religious cults, Abruzzi, Molise, Balkans, migrations, cultural adaptations

INTRODUCTION

The topic of this article is important and relevant as it reveals the mechanisms of rooting the rituals of migrants in new places[1]. We present two case-studies and from there we develop a wider scenario of cultural dynamics. We have taken several points into account. The arrival of the Slavs and Albanians from the other side of the Adriatic to the coasts of the Abruzzi (from which Molise separated in 1963) has been documented as early as the 14th century and is continually remembered by local historians. At the end of the 19th century, historian Gennaro Finamore wrote:

"Near the centre of the country, our people have had ancient relations with Puglia, with Naples, with Rome; and the main maritime municipalities, with the Dalmatian coast, with Venice and the Marca di Ancona, as well as with Slavonian and Albanian colonies. Thus, we can understand how our popular lyrics give clear indications of having been affected by peripheral and distant influences, which manifest themselves no less in the modalities of some spoken words" (Finamore 1886: 4–7).

There were five large waves of Albanian migration to the Italian territory. They began in the 14th century before the birth of the national Albanian hero Giorgio Castrioto Skanderbeg, who died in 1468. The reason for the resettlement in Italy was the Ottoman invasion of the Balkans. A significant number of Albanians moved from Albanian lands, first to Morea (the modern Peloponnese), and, after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, from Morea to Italy. In order to better understand the migration process, it is necessary to consider not only the Greek resettlement after the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans, but also the long-time Byzantine domination over the entire south of Italy. The Greeks of Italy (in many settlements) preserved the old Greek word *hydra* as the name for water in their language (whereas in Modern Greek it is *nero*). There are many similar examples. This is the evidence that the language in these Italian settlements has existed since the Byzantine period (i.e. before 1453), and that the people speaking this language are not new settlers who appeared here after the conquest of the Balkans by the Turks. The same processes could take place with the rituals.

So, the first Balkan settlers to arrive in Italy were Greeks and Albanians. They constituted, in the southern territories of the Adriatic coast of Italy, the ethno-linguistic minority of the Arbëreshë, the Albanians of Italy. Coming from Albania, from the historic Albanian region of Epirus and from the numerous Albanian communities of Attica and Morea in today's Greece, they settled in Italy between the 14th and 18th centuries, following the death of the national hero Giorgio Castriota Skanderbeg and the progressive conquest of the territories of the Byzantine Empire by the Ottomans. Many villages and districts in the Abruzzi have been populated by Albanians[2].

Then the Croats also arrived, and they settled mainly in the territory between the Biferno and Trigno rivers, in the towns of Acquaviva Collecroce, Montemitro and San Felice del Molise, Palata, Tavenna, Mafalda, Montelongo, Petacciato, San Biase and San Giacomo degli Schiavoni, reaching inland up to Schiavi d'Abruzzo, and in the north of the Abruzzi up to Cappelle sul Tavo[3].

The most consistent migratory waves occurred after the conquest of Constantinople, which took place in 1453, when the Turks began their expansion toward the northern territories. The Republic of Venice and the Kingdom of Naples

facilitated the settlements along the Adriatic coast of Italy to repopulate the lands that, in those years, had remained abandoned following the earthquake of 1456 and the plague of 1495.

The Albanian, Serbian, and Croatian minorities almost always found themselves rebuilding and repopulating ancient villages abandoned due to earthquakes and plagues. This is, for instance, the case of Acquaviva Collecroce which – although it already existed in the same place at the end of the 13th century – would have been depopulated following different dramatic events and then would have been repopulated by Croatian refugees coming directly from Dalmatia between the 15th and 16th centuries[4].

First, religion helped the exiles to settle on Italian territories because, for having fought against the Ottomans, they had been welcomed as heroes of Christianity. Second, migrant families found it advantageous to move to lands known as fertile. Third, the isolation of the hill and mountain villages also favoured the adaptation of the migrants and the maintenance of their linguistic and cultural identity.

The Italo-Albanians formed the Italo-Albanian Catholic Church of Byzantine tradition, made up of three ecclesiastical districts and two eparchies. The Albanian ethno-linguistic group has managed to maintain its identity by having in the clergy the strongest tutor and the fulcrum of ethnic identification and of the Arbëreshë idiom. More specifically, the Arbërëshë minority preserved the Byzantine rite under the formal leadership of the Pope, without any official union with him. Therefore, the Arbërëshë of Italy have not one idiom but several. After all, they are the descendants of immigrants from different regions of the Albanian lands – there are Tosks and Ghegs, but the latter are fewer. It is estimated that the Albanians of Italy are about 100,000 and constitute one of the largest among the historical ethno-linguistic minorities of Italy. The Serbo-Croatians are fewer in number.

In this article we focus on two sorts of rituals which have been brought to Italy by the Slavic settlers of the last centuries. First, the ritual of the *Verde Giorgio* (eng. Green George) will be examined. Second, we will describe the Orthodox cult of the Madonna Odigitria, which is of Byzantine descent. These two examples will enable us to make a series of remarks concerning the adaptation of eastern European rituals in the western parts of Europe.

1. THE RITUAL OF THE *VERDE GIORGIO*

Among the remains of the Slavic culture in Abruzzi and Molise, the ritual of the *Verde Giorgio* should be mentioned first. It conveys the spirit of vegetation in its phase of rebirth during the spring. In addition to the ancient diffusion of certain European cults, it signals the ambiguous transience of current culture, which is adapting to industrial and post-industrial rhythms while maintaining some profound peasant and pastoral symbols; these are an evident expression of the need to maintain a link with the rhythms of nature.

The cultural theme of *Verde Giorgio*, present throughout eastern Europe, has its centre in Russia, Romania, and Slovenia, where on April 23rd, for the eve of St. George's Day, a young boy was covered with branches and, walking around the village, he wished and announced the arrival of spring (metaphorically, the victory of light-cosmos over darkness-chaos). He usually received some food in exchange. The ritual is widespread on the Adriatic coast of Italy in various forms. Some are more evident and have moved to May 1st, such as the *May Tree* festivals. In these festivals, a tree is carried in procession; the people perform propitiatory dances (in Accettura village, in Lucania), and propitiatory customs surround the tree (as in the *Cuccagna tree* of many countries and the love ties of Penna S. Andrea). Some other forms are more discrete, such as pilgrimages to rural sanctuaries or circumambulatory journeys in the fields, requesting shelter from local families in exchange for a prayer of good wishes, all happening from the end of April to the beginning of May.

Until a few years ago, the Slavic custom of the itinerant youth covered with branches was active only in the Slavic communities of Molise. This aroused the interest of Alberto Mario Cirese who, in 1954, conducted a survey in Acquaviva Collecroce, Montemitro and San Felice Slavo, and suggested a strong relationship between the Saint George rituals (April 23rd) and the May Day rituals. The ritual studied by Cirese, called "*strawra*" or "*majo*", marked May 1st with the procession of a young man who, wearing a "hut mask" made of reeds, twigs, and leaves, went dancing and singing a rhyme in the Slavic dialect through the streets of the town. The rhyme went like this: "Whoever said May wouldn't come / go out and find him dressed". In San Felice Slavo, the song "*Maja, kata maja, oteja maja*" (May, here is May that is back) was performed by boys who, hopping, accompanied a young man wearing a wicker cone like a tunic, on which were hung cherry tree branches, broad bean plants and flowering branches. In the 1980s, this festival was reintroduced in some towns by the Pro Loco, who surrounded it with typical folk elements and tourist attractions, such as a music band, accordion playing, and costume dances[5].

This ritual is also active around Schiavi d'Abruzzo, an ancient eastern colony on the border with Molise. In San Giovanni Lipioni, which overlooks the Trigno Valley, the five hundred people of the village continue to give life, every May 1st, to a ceremony which is at once religious and pagan. The feast survived without the need for external interventions because it was grafted onto the local religious celebrations, typical of the Latin liturgy, in honour of S. Liberata and S. Giovanni. The statues of these saints are transferred on this occasion to a chapel outside the town, where they stay for the whole summer. The protective aura of the religious symbol is therefore extended to the whole community, as the statues move from the local church to the outside chapel. Together with the statues, the *majo* also goes in procession. The *majo* is a large and auspicious garland of flowers, broad beans, and branches, through which protection is requested from the saints for the coming season. The *majo* party, preceded by the band, stops in front of each of the houses in the village, where they sing a begging song, receive eggs and other food as gifts and seal the wish by donating a bunch of flowers from the garland, which will bring luck to the village families all year round[6].

North of Schiavi d'Abruzzo, however, the ethnographic data collected since the 19th century did not indicate the active presence of this cult, even in the villages of the Chieti area which were certainly born from Slavic immigration at the end of the 15th century, namely the so-called *Villae* of Cupello degli Schiavoni, Mozzagrogna and Villa Stanazzo. According to some informants, the villages of Villalfonsina, Santa Maria Imbaro, Villa Scorciosa, Schiavoni, Sant'Apollinare, Caldari and Treglio are claimed to be of Dalmatian origin. In Treglio, for instance, the parish church is dedicated to St. George, which is used as a clue for claiming this origin. Indeed, historians, including Antinori (1781–1783), underlined the visible presence of foreign populations who settled "*inter Senellum et Sarum*", who communicated with each other with "*obscura vocabula*" and who soon mingled with the local population. Moreover, according to testimonies related to the Atessa area, not far from the colonies of the Chieti area, the ritual of *Verde Giorgio* did not survive beyond the first decades of the 19th century.

Here, we cannot give a detailed analysis with the description of all the different rituals which are performed in Italy. However, we can refer to the important descriptive studies made by Emiliano Giancristofaro (1972: 37–42; 2016). In a comparative perspective, we can also point out the respective rituals in the Slavic territory and the strong presence of the cultural theme of *Verde Giorgio* throughout eastern Europe.

In other places, as we have already said, the ritual was performed on May 1st. In Acquaviva Collecroce, Montemitro and S. Felice Slavo, it was customary to

make a kind of puppet with reeds, into which different sorts of food were placed (wheat, barley, oats, pears, apples and whatever could be found at the beginning of May, as well as remains from the winter stocks). A man went around the village with this puppet on his shoulders, dancing and singing in the Slavic dialect: "Who said May wouldn't come? Come out from your houses and find him dressed". It was a propitiatory ritual for the abundance of crops in the fields, still performed in 1990, as Giancristofaro testifies in his long survey in Abruzzi and Molise (Giancristofaro 1972: 40; 2016: 27). Another typical ritual of this area, for example, is the Atess pilgrimage, in the Maiella Mountain, where pilgrims carry flowering branches (*'ndorce*) and are dressed in green cloth. This is still performed nowadays on the 23rd of April (Giancristofaro 2016: 27).

Of course, the comparison with other Slavic rituals, which plays the key role in our analysis, requires additional argumentation, looking for the sources related to comparable rituals in Russia and Romania. Of course, St. George's Day is usually considered as a great holiday, but it is not always a "Green George", which is very restricted to some specific geographical areas. *Verde Giorgio* is usually documented as Slovenian and Croatian. Alberto M. Cirese found out that this tradition was strongly connected with the Adriatic region and has parallels in Croatia and Slovenia, but not in all of eastern Europe (Cirese 1995/1996: 47–48)[7]. The same conclusions (about the location of Zeleni Juraj/ Green George festivities in Croatia and Slovenia) can be found in an article summarizing different versions of St. George's festivities throughout all Slavic lands (Tolstoi 1995).

Of course, the May tree, the pilgrimages and the Green George are not the same rituals even if they occur around the same season, between April 23rd and May 1st. Some fragments are similar, and the same is true of other European spring customs using greenery. But we cannot draw general conclusions from the observation of such different ritual actions. So, before postulating that the transformation of the rituals is the result of ethnic contacts, it is important to understand the areal distribution of the different versions of the St. George's Day celebrations on both sides of the Adriatic and, possibly, in a wider perspective. However, St. George's Day has a special meaning in Balkan traditions since it marks the boundary between two seasons and two halves of the year (the winter and the summer), and therefore it accumulates different symbolic meanings and forms of ritual expression. In this respect, we suggest that it has more chances to be maintained by migrant populations than other festivals.

2. THE ORTHODOX CULT OF THE *MADONNA ODIGITRIA*

In Abruzzi, it is interesting to compare the *Verde Giorgio* celebrations with the other rituals which were historically imported from eastern Europe. For instance, the most relevant Greek-Albanian survivals are connected to the Orthodox cult of the *Madonna Odigitria* (also known as the Black Madonna and Hodegetria). The refugee communities coming from the eastern coasts invaded by the Turks believed they were enlightened by the *Madonna Odigitria* on their journey in search of places to stop. Under this aegis, in the Valpescara area, there is the village of Villa Badessa which, included in the municipality of Rosciano, is currently the northernmost Albanian Orthodox community in Italy[8]. As such, its traditionalism, which is generally typical of more isolated and southern areas, would seem unusual, but it is easily explained by the fact that the colony is of recent emigration (1743). On the feast of the patron saint S. Maria Kìmisis (Assumption into heaven), on September 8th, after the ceremonial in the Greek language, an ancient icon, object of great veneration, is carried in procession around the streets of Villa Badessa. It is believed to have been brought to Italy by the Albanian refugees, founders of the community, who fled from Epirus in 1743 due to Ottoman persecutions. In the same village, an icon of the Madonna Hodegetria is also placed in the hands of the deceased along with a penny and bread, which would be used to pay Charon, according to Greek custom. Among the local funerary uses, there are also the so-called *colivi*, a sort of sweet wafer, which bear imprinted figures of saints. These are of the same family as the Greek *colivi*, home-made to celebrate the funerals. However, these are usually cooked grains, not in the form of wafers.

In this village, the Greek-style costume, noticed by English travellers and worn until the 20th century, has now become an emblem of folklore and education. The media, mixed marriages and working in the cities of the coast have accelerated the processes of change among the 30 families who, in 1964, were registered as speaking Albanian Tosk (the Tosks are one of two major dialectal subgroups of Albanians). The most recent surveys (Piccoli & Sammartino 2000) show that today, only elderly speakers remain, with the younger persons abandoning what they reduce to an "old dialect".

Another oriental ritual in honour of the Madonna Odigitria survives in the Valle del Foro, where every year, the night before the second Sunday in May, a Byzantine image (traced from the original which, according to oral tradition, depicted a black Madonna), surrounded by a wreath, is led on a nocturnal pilgrimage through country paths from Vacri to Francavilla. The icon, led by non-engaged girls, is preceded by men in candlelight. The married women close the procession. According to the hypotheses of some scholars, the devotion of

the village of Vacri is explained by the fact that the small church of *S. Maria della Croce* on the outskirts of Francavilla, already closed and semi-destroyed in the 19th century, had been built in 1466 by a group of Albanians, encamped on the hill. Later they went up the valley, reached Vacri and the countryside between the villages of Ari and Semivicoli where they settled, but continued every year to go on pilgrimage to *S. Maria della Croce*, a centre of Orthodox worship, until the ceremony was absorbed by the Latin cult. Then the pilgrimage of Albanian descendants was diverted to the new church of the *Madonna delle Grazie* in Francavilla.

The model of the allocation of refugees through the intercession of the Madonna Odigitria also recurs in the Biferno Valley, where the community of Portocannone still uses, to remember the Albanian diaspora, the motto "*ghjaku i shprijshur*" (shed blood) as an expression of greeting. According to the collective memory, supported by historical sources, from Albania the fugitives landed in Campomarino, in the Piana del Saccione (San Martino in Pensilis) and then, stopping in the Ramitelli wood, they entrusted themselves to the Madonna of Constantinople for the choice of the place where they should build their settlement. The icon of the protector, the patroness of refugees and pilgrims, was placed on a cart pulled by oxen that stopped in a clearing where the chapel was then built, a symbol of the group's religious identity, which was surrounded by the 38 "fires" (families) that made up the community. Even today, in Portocannone, which has about two thousand inhabitants, on the days of the observance of the celebration of the Madonna of Constantinople, tradition requires recalling these mythical origins of the settlement. This observance is common to all the settlements we are considering in this article, where an animal is used as a good omen for the foundation of a *civitas*, concluding a wandering quest steeped in pain, poverty and the risk of cultural dispersion.

We already indicated that this icon is also known as the "Black Madonna", but our further argumentation concerning ethnic interaction does not rely only on this assumption. Hodegetria, or Virgin Hodegetria, is an iconographic depiction of the Virgin Mary holding the Child Jesus at her side while pointing at him as the source of salvation for humankind. On the icons the Virgin's head usually inclines toward the child, who raises his hand in a gesture of blessing. In the western church this type of icon is sometimes called *Our Lady of the Way*. In western Christendom, the term Black Madonna (or Black Virgin) tends to refer to statues or paintings of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Infant Jesus, where both figures are depicted as black. Some of the images of Black Madonnas belong to the iconographic type Hodegetria, but not all Hodegetrias are Black Madonnas.

3. ADAPTATIONS AND LOSSES

Therefore, upon a brief evaluation of the two cults taken into consideration (the Green George and the Madonna Odigitria), it is evident that although the language was preserved in the Greek Orthodox communities of Molise, the Orthodox liturgy was lost due to the greater coercive force that the Latin church exerted in the 16th and 17th centuries. This is confirmed by the fact that the Albanians of Campomarino, Ururi, Santa Croce di Magliano, Montecilfone and Portocannone practiced the Greek rite only until the first twenty years of the 19th century. These villages are located on the spurs of mountains and thus experience a radical difficulty in communicating with the outside. Despite the prohibitions and ordinances of the Catholic Church, due to the isolation of the region, the communities have retained other rituals, for instance the *carrese* (ox cart racing) in honour of the Black Madonna, or the Greek life-cycle custom of mourning the dead with threnodies by hired mourners, which is unpopular within the Roman church.

The proverbial indifference of the Albanians toward religious issues is also contradicted by the exceptional case of Villa Badessa, near Pescara, where the Orthodox rite has survived for three centuries, becoming the main symbol of the cultural identity of the group, and confirming the fact that even Villa Badessa, located in the fertile and busy Valpescara, has remained isolated from the socio-anthropological boundary. Moreover, the thrust for linguistic autonomy, still present both in the Serbo-Croatian communities of Molise and in the Albanian communities of both regions, confirms how the distinctive features were internalized as an identity and individualistic resource. This was already cryptically suggested by the English traveller Lear, citing the words of his Italian guide in the village of Montenerodomo, and documenting how, in 1846, the dominant culture demonized the multilingualism and cultural self-defence of the Badessani: "When they want to make themselves understood, they speak as Christians; but among themselves, like devils!" (1988: 121).

At the same time, other factors that may influence the processes of adaptation of traditions to a new cultural context should be considered. In the Orthodox Church, there is an elaborated tradition of processions of the Cross, timed to patron saint celebrations and other great festivals. The icons of the saints are indispensable participants in such processions. The popularity of this type of procession in the homeland may influence the degree of its preservation at the new dwelling place[9].

Since the 1980s, globalization and cultural homogenization have begun to show their effects on the younger generations. In this context, the need to enhance specific cultures has resulted in various initiatives for the defence of

cultural diversity, each group claiming the right to externalize its own cultural history. This externalization, which was sometimes translated into socio-anthropological research and museum projects, today leads the eastern communities in Italy to value their identity as migrants in a way that is different from other, more visible communities, such as Africans. In the current context of the migration crisis, it is important to underline the integration of populations from the other side of the Adriatic (Albania, ex-Yugoslavia, ex-Republic of Macedonia), corresponding to an ancient process.

First, it would be interesting to investigate the reported cases of wealthy Albanian young people who, due to their linguistic affinity with the eastern communities of Abruzzi and Molise, moved to Italy to study medicine at the D'Annunzio University in Chieti. Second, it would be interesting to document what are the effective possibilities of communication between young foreign males who, with medium-low educational qualifications, dazzled by the glittering image of Italy conveyed by the mass media, got into trouble and were rescued by charities and assistance. Third, it would be useful to compare the difficult situation of the "new" Albanian migrants with the claims of the "old" Albanians from Italy who, despite having been naturalized for centuries, still proudly emphasize that they belong to an "other" identity. Today, Italian populist politicians stigmatize the "hordes of Albanians" who seek their fortune in the West, but they do not remember that, four hundred years ago, the Italian people who today bear the surnames Jubatti, Iurisci, Staniscia, Radoccia, Schiavoni, Di Spalatro or Albanese were already refugees looking for some chance of survival on the Italian coasts.

The history of adaptations of Eastern rituals in Italy ultimately teaches us much about the need to understand current migration issues. And to guarantee social and human justice, a great scholar, Alfonso Di Nola, already affirmed in the 1990s: "we must be ready to pay for ourselves" (Di Nola 2001). In fact, we are all immigrants: no one is born and stays in the same place, and it is precisely this continuous shift of territories and cultures that is the basis of the development of humanity.

4. DYNAMICS OF CULTURAL DISSEMINATION

What is interesting in the examples reported above is not that they retain archaic Slavic features as mere "survivals" in the host country. If the preservation of certain linguistic aspects suggests that there are many survivals, the situation of the rituals examined does not necessarily verify this situation. Rather, the rituals that followed the Slavic populations in Italy managed to blend into the

ritual landscape of the host country. There was syncretism, or hybridization of forms, which is insufficiently accounted for by the notion of survival. In the same way, to speak of Slavic "islands" is misleading, because it seems difficult to speak of insularity in the cases observed, and such a vocabulary seems to reinforce the idea according to which the immigrant populations would have developed in a completely autonomous way with respect to the natives who welcomed them.

However, the historical situation was quite different, with early contacts that lasted for several centuries. In such a situation of interculturality, the rituals that survived are those whose formal characteristics made them easily understandable in the new context. The ritual of the "*Verde Giorgio*", as we have already stated, is a typical rite of Slavic and Orthodox Europe, but it is immediately understandable in the context of a seasonal bipartition which is universal in popular folklore, as it comes from concrete observations of natural cycles. It is therefore not surprising that the rite can continue to function by accompanying the displacement of populations. Thus, the "*Verde Giorgio*" had all the more force in the new context as it could be identified with other rituals dedicated to maypoles or other processions of the fields typical of the European spring ritual cycle. In a way, this rite was in line with the old European cultural fund, which gave it advantages to be transferred to the Italian context.

In the same way, the Orthodox cults of the Madonna Odigitria were even more accepted, no doubt because they echoed Italian Catholic cults devoted to local Black Madonnas. What is interesting here is the way in which, over the long term, the maintenance of community social structures has contributed to the transmission of these cults. Despite the separation and "insularity" of the Slavic communities, the latter obviously represented the "near other" for the Italians of the region, who themselves were not yet "Italianized" in the modern sense of the term. In early modern times, Italy being divided into various influences, it is likely that close strangers from the other side of the Adriatic were easier to assimilate than the representatives of power who came from faraway Naples, Sicily, or overseas Spain.

Until the 19th century the local populations of Abruzzi were administered by a distant power; they constituted a peripheral region at the extreme north of the Kingdom of Naples. There could thus be a certain proximity between them and the Christian populations of the East, which did not exist between the two shores of the Italian peninsula. This hypothesis is consistent with the theories of Van Gennep (1998) and other folklorists who indicate, for early modern times, that trade by sea was often more successful than trade by land. Modern ferries at the narrowest point between Durres and Bari take 7 hours. To cross the Adriatic in the 17th century it would be a longer journey, around

12–14 hours, but it took several days to cross the Apennines and to reach Naples, the capital of the kingdom on which Abruzzi depended. In winter, the journey to Naples was even longer when the mountains were snow-capped. For the ethnography of this region, it is therefore probably advisable to pay attention to Slavic influences more than to Italian and Spanish influences. Beyond the well-identified Slavic "islands", it would be useful to list all the diffuse cultural traits shared by the populations of Abruzzi and those of eastern Europe, on the other side of the Adriatic and in the Balkans.

After all, in many migrant communities, the history of resettlement is preserved with a lot of care as an essential component of culture and, as such, it is reproduced in texts and ritual actions. Along with the memory of the migration process itself, religion often becomes the symbolical centre of the migrant's life. Therefore, religious rituals are often more preserved than other kinds of rituals (see, e.g. Mihaylova 2017).

5. CONSEQUENCES FOR THE STUDY OF CULTURAL IDENTITIES IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE

These case-studies of rituals of Slavic origin in Italy remind us of the need, in the European context, to always keep in mind historical depth, which is a necessity to interpret the various concrete modalities of cultural contacts in the past. An ethnographer too centred on the present might be surprised by the cultural similarities that exist between one shore of the Adriatic and the other. Yet, before the invention of railways and highways, this proximity was evident. The same observations have been made about the English Channel, the Strait of Gibraltar, the Greek islands, and the Baltic Sea. The Mediterranean civilization was first a maritime civilization because the effort of displacement by boats was much less important than the effort of displacement by land.

To this historical reality must be added the conclusions of specialists in interethnic and intercultural relations. Since the works of Fredrik Barth (1998 [1969]), it has been accepted that primordialism and instrumentalist approaches to ethnicities are insufficient for the understanding of the concrete dynamics of intercultural contact. Rather, it is interactions that drive interethnic relations, so that ethnicity only makes sense from its borders. In other words, it is by being confronted with otherness that groups become aware of their specificities. It is therefore necessary, when studying the cultural characteristics of a given population, to first ask the question of how this population communicates with surrounding groups. In addition, in the cases studied here, it is necessary not to rely on the notion of "island" which is often used in common language in

the field. The insularity of the Slavic populations of Abruzzi, claimed by the populations themselves for the purposes of cultural differentiation, hides the reality of a complex adaptation of these populations over the long term. The reality of this insularity corresponds to continual cultural contacts over a long historical period, which have led to the preservation of rituals that combine Slavic origins and adaptations to the Italian Catholic context.

Thus, the example of Abruzzi recalls the importance of studying cultural identities not only for what they are, but also for what they represent and with reference to the borders that divide them. These borders can be institutional, but they are also realities experienced or perceived by the populations. In an important collective work, a team of French anthropologists has insisted on this shifting nature of cultural borders (Bromberger & Morel 2001). They recalled that, even if modernity and the established powers have taught us to think of the world in a fragmented way by valuing the mountains, the rivers and the seas as border lines, cultural realities have much more blurred limits: "Faced with spatial divisions considered intentional or the fruit of decrees and treaties, cultural behaviours draw other maps whose contours seem erratic, spontaneous, involuntary, capricious" (Ibid.: 3–4).

It is therefore quite logical, when carrying out an ethnology of the Balkan cults in Italy, not to base the analysis on the observation of a difference between the cultures of eastern Europe and the cultures of western Europe, but rather to take note of the entanglement of cultural references which is explained by a long-term historical co-presence. In other words, thinking of the two cultures as separate does not do justice to their long-term relationship; on the contrary, we should rather think of the two cultures as complementary to understand how they were brought to define each other reciprocally in an old confrontation with close otherness.

NOTES

[1] This article has been prepared during a Erasmus exchange in European ethnology between University Côte d'Azur and University Chieti-Pescara. L. Giancristofaro has written § 1-2-3 and L. S. Fournier has written § 4-5.

[2] On the emigration of Albanians in Italy, see Merkaj 2020 and http://www.diaspora.gov.al/diaspora-e-vjeter-shqiptare-ne-bote-2/, last accessed on 31 May 2022. For more information on these communities see also Di Lena 1972; Flocco 1985; Stella 2004. See also a photo depicting Albanian girls in festive clothes, made by J. V. Ivanova, in *Vajza shqiptare me kostume kombëtare festive*, Tirana, 1949, which is useful as a comparison with the Albanian communities' customs in Italy.

[3] Concerning the Croat and Serbo-Croat communities in Italy, see Genova 1990; Rešetar 1997.

[4] For an historical overview of the relations between the eastern Adriatic and Abruzzi, see Marciani 1974.

[5] In Italy, the Pro Loco are grass-roots organizations that seek to promote some particular place, almost always a little town and its immediate area; "*pro loco*" is a Latin phrase that may be roughly translated "in favour of the place". Usually, the Pro Loco represents a village with a high level of civic pride.

[6] On the Festa del Majo in San Giovanni Lipioni, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNcshJEiRjw, last accessed on 2 June 2022.

[7] Available at https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/90179, last accessed on 14 February 2025.

[8] On the case of Villa Badessa, see Bellizzi, 1994. A local film describing the religious rituals in Villa Badessa is accessible at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIyIVVWevz8 (last accessed on 14 February 2022).

[9] On Orthodox processions of the Cross, their commemorative function and the roles and meanings of religious practices in the process of settlement, see Kalkun & Kupari & Vuola 2018: 1–23; and Romanov 1997.

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