

DISASTERS IN POPULAR CULTURES

Giovanni Gugg - Elisabetta Dall'Ò - Domenica Borriello
Editors

Preface by Joël Candau



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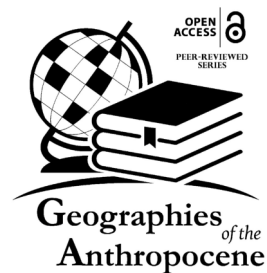
DISASTERS IN POPULAR CULTURES

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7. The Veil of Saint Agatha in Popular Narratives of Etna Risk

Salvatore Cannizzaro¹, Gian Luigi Corinto²

Abstract

Relations between Etna volcano and local culture are testified also by the huge participation in celebrating Saint Agatha as the Patron Saint of the city of Catania. In fact, the Saint is even today worshipped because she posed her sacred veil upon the city protecting it and its inhabitants against the peril of earthquake and volcanic effusions since the tremendous Etna's eruption on February 252, just one year later her supposed day of death. After this event, a crowded procession along the streets of Catania is held yearly, twice during the month of February and one time in August. This festival is capable of attracting millions of people, mainly coming from the whole Sicily and even from Italy and abroad. The survey is designed to profile the narratives regarding the worships of Saint Agatha, including the several and diverse religious events dedicated to the Saint. The chapter investigates how the sense of religion and the popular worship for Saint Agatha are linkable to local 'sense of place', 'place attachment', and 'perception' of natural risks. For this purpose, a case study has been performed, following a mix procedure for achieving data, namely mixing sources of different nature, interviewing local experts and students, and comparing findings with the authors' personal knowledge and geographical experience about the local reality.

Keywords: Natural risks, Etna volcano, Popular religiosity, Catania, Saint Agatha.

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Both the authors designed the research, chose the adopted method and procedure of data acquisition, elaborated and discussed results, accepted the final version. SC wrote 3, 4, and 6 sections; GLC wrote 1, 2, and 5 sections.

1. Introduction: popular religiosity, place attachment, and natural risks

Saint Agatha is the Saint Patron of Catania whose worship is linked to the protection of the city from natural disasters and any other threat. A religious festival dedicated to her takes place in Catania every year in February and August, calling a crowded people of devotees participating in a very popular religious rite. The city is located at the foot of Mount Etna near the northern border of the Hyblean Plateau facing the Ionian Sea, a risky seismic area where the strongest earthquakes occurred in 1169, 1542, 1693, 1818, 1908 and 1990 (Barbano *et al.*, 2001). On 26 December 2018, one of the most energetic earthquakes of ever occurred in the lower Southeastern side of Mount Etna, causing damages and some injuries among people (Istituto Nazionale di Geofisica e Vulcanologia, 2018). Mount Etna dominates the city and the whole area landscape (Fig. 1); it is the highest European active volcano, which lava flows still go randomly down its slopes. Over time, volcanic eruptions threatened humans, their lives and settlements, not always provoking massive damages and destruction of inhabited areas, yet inducing a relentlessly changing of the landscape (Bonaccorso *et al.*, 2004; Cucuzza Silvestri, 1970; Gemmellaro, 1989).



Figure 1 - Etna volcano and Catania. Source: Link2Universe.

Since the dawn of time, Sicilians showed their reverence and respect to the Etna Volcano; even today they name it with such dialectical and panegyric designations as *Mungibeddu* or *'a Muntagna*. The first term actually means 'beautiful mountain', though being a sum of Latin *mons*, and Arabic *gebel*, both words meaning 'mount'. In the second expression the definite article – *'a* – before the common name *Muntagna*, stresses the quintessential idea of mountain Sicilians attribute to Etna.

People living under the shadow of the Etna volcano, not fearing to settle their houses and urban agglomerations on its seismic slopes, manage a calm coexistence and a friendly cohabitation with a risky yet much beloved landscape. Over millennia, they intertwined stories and narratives coming even from very past time; indeed, both heathen and Christian stories are consistent with people's imagination of 'their' mountain. Roman-Greek writers reported mythological facts regarding Etna and its heavenly and chthonian deities, regarding air, earth, fire, and earthquakes. Christians tell stories about the martyrdom of Saint Agatha, the virgin popularly reputed capable to protect the city from natural damaging events, besides other kinds of threat.

A community can trace its space through stories, using both highbrow and lowbrow narratives, oral or written, capable of the bonding of a group in/to a place (Schiffrin, 2009; Zoran, 1984). A group must be close studying history or hearing a story, performing its memory, sharing practical experiences that soften the boundaries between individuals (Hayden, 1997) and entering in a sort of shared *story trance* (Sherman, 2015). Myths play a definite role in the life of societies, revealing the truth of material things, and the essence of humans' lives, saying definitively what is right and what is wrong (Claval, 1998). Thus, they are the basis for analyzing the role of purification rituals, including the ongoing religious festivals having roots in very past, and presumably heathen, times. Stories also serve the community in a broader sense: they reinforce group values and allows individual to perform negative behaviors without saying the truth (*ibidem*).

Also during the celebration of Saint Agatha's Festival in Catania, as in any other religious event, both religious objects (Eliade, 1996) and human worshipping performances (Durkheim, 1915; McNeill, 1997; Thrift, 2008) are 'enwrapped' with symbolic meanings. It is worth noting that bodily performance of humans leaves material and metaphorical traces in space, as the body is the active agent of a corporeal topo-graphy, exactly writing (*graphein*) its own cultural space. «If the image is text, then the body is space. If texts can create images, then spaces can change bodies and vice versa. If

images can change cultures, then the body can create text; it *is* and *has* the text that controls cultural spaces, and at the same time is controlled by cultural images» (Hallensleben, 2010, pp. 18-19, emphasis in original). Thus, for the sake of the present case study, religious objects and performances of devotees, due to their symbolic meanings, are an integral part of a more complex and multidimensional ‘storytelling’ of the relation between the community and the risky territory surrounding the Etna volcano.

The paper aims at reporting this complex narrative of popular worship for Saint Agatha and interpreting how it is linkable to local ‘sense of place’, and ‘place attachment’, in a locality evidently subjected to natural risks. For this purpose, the adopted method mixes analysis of a variety of sources, from scientific literature to novels, and newspapers; from writings on mythology to religious and secular narratives (Corbin, Strauss, 1990). Furthermore, the authors observed local reality using personal experience and knowledge, directly interviewing local students and experts, while attending several editions of the Religious Festival of Saint Agatha. For the sake of the present work, they had personal communications with several people during the last year, in the form of direct deep interviews (Kvale, 2006). Four of them have been selected as key informants due to their deep knowledge of the event; they are three men and one woman, aged from 50 to 90 years. The elder one is to be considered a deposit of memories of one of the guilds of arts and crafts that perform the religious procession bearing one of the *Candelora*. Of the other two men, one is a retired teacher at the University of Catania, the other one is a civil servant at the Municipality of Catania. The woman is the Director of the *Ursino Recupero* Library of Catania. In the following text some of their statements are reported, cited as personal communications.

The text is organized as follows. Next section is dedicated to a brief literature review on geography-religion relation; third section, considering the long-lasting presence of Etna in literature and narratives, reports stories and mythologies on Etna volcano and heathen goddesses, and stories on Saint Agatha’s life and martyrdom; fourth section is dedicated to relations between Saint Agatha and the city of Catania, considering both literary and popular narratives, and describing the reality of religious rituals and processions; section five reports our attempt to delve meanings of religious objects and worshipping performances and the making of sacred space by Saint Agatha’s devotees; finally last section reports concluding remarks.

2. Geography and Religion

In recent years, pilgrimages to sacred places and walking through religious routes showed an actual booming (Olsen, Trono, 2018; Reader, 2013); almost all religions have at least one pilgrimage to a sacred place that devotees make to obtain remission of sins; thus, studies on this topic increased within diverse scientific disciplines. Geographers' contribution on the relationship between religion and tourism enlightened the theoretical possibility to study how visitors-residents interactive performances contribute to producing material and psychological features of places (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Notwithstanding the importance of pilgrimages, and the subsequent attention to religious tourism in making places, geography should pay more attention to a per se religion-place relationship. Indeed, according to Kong (2004), religion is to be considered as a priori and problematized category of geographical analysis as well as other ones such as race, class, and gender, which are more usually and traditionally accepted to understand societies. Italian geographers had studied the religion-society relation adopting geopolitical, historical and territorial approaches (Battisti, 2015; Galliano, 2002).

The attention of geographers to religion is old, for early Greek geographers were thinkers attracted by cosmological models that reflected a world-view shaped by human beliefs and worshipping rites (Kong, 2004). Besides, mythology was a narrative way to produce etiological models interpreting and explaining nature and human life and death. Over time, geographers passed from a highly deterministic approach when they sought to explain the essential nature of various religions in terms of their environments to the opposite theoretical approach of Max Weber (1993) focusing on religion's influence on social and economic structures, and the environmental and landscape change. After the environmental turn in the 1960s and 1970s, interest focused on the roots of the environmental crisis, and a school of thought posed degradation was the result of the Christian belief that God gave humans dominion over the earth (Kay, 1989). In the dawn of the 2000s, geographer Kong (2004) put in light the emerging interest in the politics and poetics of sacred space, identity, and community. For her, sacred space is a contested space, just as the sacred is a contested category. Similarly, religious identity and community are subject to negotiations, embedded in relations of power, domination, and resistance, and cultural geography can understand how different constitutions of population and experiences effect on the religious place, identity and community (*ibidem*).

In past time cultures, someway and somewhere still today, it was believed that localities were inhabited by “spirits of gods who served both as their guardians and as a source of their identity. Mount Olympus was the home of Zeus, and every mountaintop, grove, and spring was the home of some lesser deity who had to be acknowledged and propitiated” (Relph, 2004, p. 909). This is the heathen origin of expressions such as ‘spirit of place’, and its Latin version *genius loci*. Thus, the earth is a set of environments and diverse sites, each protected by its guardian spirit. In secular modern societies, spirit of place refers simply to distinctive qualities that give its uniqueness to a place, as expressed by Norberg-Schulz (1984). «But the evidence is that, divine or secular, *genius loci* is elusive» (Relph, 2004, p. 910); and it must not be confused with ‘sense of place’, better explained as the “*awareness* of spirit of place, and a faculty which individuals possess rather than a property of environments” (*ibidem*, emphasis in original). So that, ‘sense of place’ descends from the use of all human senses, sight, hearing, touch and smell (Lynch, 1962); moreover, ‘place attachment’ designates the “human attachment and love of place” (Tuan, 1974, p. xii), because “*Topophilia* is the affective bond between people and place or setting. Diffuse as concept, vivid and concrete as personal experience” (*ivi*, p. 4).

Both the ideas of ‘sense of place’ and ‘place attachment’ are today reinvigorated by the emergence, over the past ten years, of non-representational approaches to embodiment, practice and performance as substantive issues for geographers (Thrift, 2008). Practices of humans, defined by movements of their bodies in space, give substance to “*geography of what happens*” (*ivi*, p. 2, emphasis in original) empowering researchers to understand the everyday life of humans while they are acting space and community. This is an encouraging starting point also to analyze a religious festival during which individual movements, crowded processions, carrying of religious objects, and practice of music and singing hymns are determinant in defining the boundaries of a group and/or a larger community’s material and symbolic emplacement. «So it is the homogeneity of these movements that gives the group consciousness of itself and consequently makes it exist. When this homogeneity is once established and these movements have once taken a stereotyped form, they serve to symbolize the corresponding representations» (Durkheim, 1915, pp. 230-231).

According to Thrift (2008, p. 5) *movement* is at the core of non-representational theory because “it would be possible to argue that human life is based on and in movement”. Thus, the physical practice of performing movements is an essential experience in producing a sense of belonging to a

group and its own possibility to exist, because it, moving as a whole, repeating and singing or chanting the same words, the same prayer, is bounded by “muscular bonding” (McNeill, 1997, p. 1). The body produces signs, movements, and choreographies being the sensorial tool among collective rituals, including religious festivals, or recreational and formal dances (*ibidem*). It is now clear that “dance is important: it engages the whole of the senses in bending time and space into new kinaesthetic shapes” (Thrift, 2008, p. 14). Religion enables movement and chanting during processions and carrying devotional objects, thus acting as a source of solidarity, identification, and cohesion and provides occasions for people to gather and reaffirm even their social norms (Durkheim, 1915), and – we can conclude – to produce a sacred space.

3. Stories and Mythologies on Etna Volcano and Heathen Goddesses

Many genres of storytelling predate written literature and include, among others, myths, religious stories, and legends, on which this paper is mainly focused, as the popular knowledge of the story of Saint Agatha and Etna is clearly a mix of those issues (Santucci, 2008). Mythological stories about Etna volcano are many, and ancient Greek poet Hesiod’s *Theogony*, written in VIII-VII century b. C., is particularly intriguing for geographers because: «Hesiod in fact shows in many occasions a sensibility for geophysical and meteorological phenomena, presented according to the rationales of myth and archaic religiosity; this interest is extended also to volcanic phenomena» (Debiasi, 2008, p. 92, our translation). Natural phenomena are manifestations of deities, and Hesiod describes the Etna’s eruptions as the results of a terrible monster, Typhon, one of the Titans, bearing a hundred serpentine heads on his shoulders spitting fire, with black tongues coming out from the slopes of the volcano. Even the scaring voices of the monster recall the typical rumbling sounds of real Etna volcano. The struggle of Zeus against Typhon, who assaulted the heaven with other Titans for dethroning him, took place in Sicily, precisely in the site where Zeus buried the monster throwing the whole Mount Etna upon him. The monster was confined in the bowels of the earth, from where he continues to breathe forth streams of fire and smoke. It is worthy that name Typhon roots in Latin *fumus* (smoke), being similar to Typhoon, which roots in Greek *tuphein*, wind. Still the workroom of Hephaestus (*Vulcan* in Latin, and *Vulcano* in Italian) is located under the Etna, where the fire melts the earth, and the blacksmith god melts iron and

other metals to make thunders and lightens for Zeus, and arms and shields for many heroic warriors.

Greek mythology tells Zeus was brother of Demeter, both generated by Kronos and Rhea. Demeter often called the Great Mother or also Good Goddess (Latin *Bona Dea*), is otherwise joined with her daughter Persephone-Kore in the myth of rebirth of nature, as Persephone lives six months beneath the earth, the realm of the dead, and six months in the world of living, from spring to falls. Hence, Demeter was worshipped as the Goddess of agriculture and the renewing forces of nature, over the period of the year when the fever of the earth warms up the farming ground for new crops. Links with Saint Agatha are the eventual outcome of Greek declination of her name as *Agathé Thea* (i.e. Good Goddess or *Bona Dea*)³. Her life is more legendarily reported rather than based on historical documents, and particulars are detectable from the story narrated by *Legenda Aurea* of Jacopo da Varazze (Maggioni, 1998). Thus, is surely intriguing noticing that her death's day in February, the month of *fever* of Earth, and of the feast of *Lupercalia* (Parodo, 2017). This latter heathen feast is related to breastfeeding she-wolf (*lupus* in Latin) and shepherds saving the herd of sheep gathering them by making a round circle, performed as a religious procession around their village. Another calendar feature is intriguing: Egyptian mythology tells the story of Isis (Kore) breastfeeding Horus, and looking for his brother-husband Osiris as a star ascended the sky. Her procession was named *Carrus navalis*, with masked people, performing unrestrained behaviors, representing the forces of chaos. Scholars interpreted the name *Carrus navalis* as the best etymological origin of Carnival, the secular feast before the Lent, occurring in the first half of February in Christian calendar (Alinei, 2013).

4. Saint Agatha and the City

According to the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacopo da Varazze (Maggioni, 1998) Agatha's story is that of a very beautiful young woman devout to Christ, who refused to worship heathen gods and bow to the sexual will of Quinziano, a brutal Roman man in charge as city proconsul. Quinziano firstly sent Agatha to a brothel, where the owner Aphrodite and her nine daughters, all

³ Also links with Goddess Athena and the ancient city of Athens are reported, as an alternative interpretation of the letter 'A' inscribed on the city emblem of Catania (R.A. Carbonaro, personal communication, December 13, 2018). This issue was considered a fancy invention from the 1600s (Gaudioso, 1929).

prostitutes, attempted in every possible way to corrupt the young virgin. Both flattering and menacing were useless, being she firm in her will, so that Quinziano stated to torture her body, finally ordering to put her in jail and cut her breasts. In jail, Saint Agatha overnight received Saint Peter who healed her wounds. Then, the proconsul ordered to put Agatha on a bed of hot coals. Legends say that the body of Agatha didn't burn, and her white veil turned to red while the Etna volcano was provoking a big earthquake. Quinziano ran away riding a horse that threw him down in the river Simeto, where he drowned. Christian devotees brought the young woman back in jail where she died on 5th February 251 a. D.; during her funeral rites, a child appeared wearing white dresses, followed by many other children in white tunics (Fig. 2).



Figure 2 - *Burial of Saint Agatha*. Source: Alessandro Abate, *Seppellimento di Sant'Agata*, oil on canvas, Santa Maria la Vetere Church, Catania.

Agatha was soon venerated as a virgin saint. After just one year, on the date of her martyrdom, a violent Etna's eruption threatened the city of Catania. Many citizens, both Christians and Heathens took Agatha's veil (*flammeum*) and exposed it against the lava flow, which miraculously stopped. After that, Saint Agatha was considered the protector against both lava flows and fires. For breast mutilation and destruction of mammary glands, she is also considered protector of women who have recently given birth, nursing mothers, and bell makers due to the melted bronze casting and the breast allusive bell shape (Ploss *et al.*, 1935). She is also the protector of weavers as reported by popular legends telling she pinned and unpinned her

wedding dress to avoid Qunziano's will like Penelope did waiting for her husband Ulysses (Santucci, 2008).

The Religious Festival of Saint Agatha in Catania is very reputed and crowded with people, as well as many others in Sicily, where the patron saints are honored with processions and festivities. Saint Agatha's Festival takes place every year from 3rd to 6th February, repeated on 12th of the same month, and then on August 17th. The first date coincides with the martyrdom of Saint Agatha date in February, the second one shows an intriguing vicinity to the carnival feast preceding the Lent, and that one on August celebrates the return to Catania of her body. During the festivity week, Catania is crowded by about one million visitors, attending diverse events and processions in the center and peripheral districts of the city (Cannizzaro *et al.*, 2017). They are mainly devotees resident in Catania and Sicily, while tourists coming from other Italian regions or abroad are the minority, though increasing in last years. Saint Agatha is venerated in many other Italian municipalities and other parts of the world, i.e. Malta, San Marino, Spain, Portugal, Germany, France, Greece, and Argentina (Di Giovanni, 2012). Italian communities in New York in the US celebrate Saint Agatha on the same date of the Catania's festival (Malpezzi, Clements, 2005).

During the Religious Festival celebrations, processions, and many of narrated events and attributes of Saint Agatha's martyrdom are recalled. Devotees wear the *sacco*, a white tunic, and a velvet black hat and white gloves, remembering the same dress of the children appeared during the funeral of the Saint, and already worn by people when receiving back the Saint's relics (Cannizzaro *et al.*, 2017). Popular participation in mass celebrations is large and especially the populace does express deep devotion and commitment to Saint Agatha. During the religious processions, two rows of thousands of people pull the *fercolo* (a sedan) of the Saint along the city itinerary in a very crowded situation (Fig. 3). The first moment of the feast is somehow frantic and dense of excited popular anxiety. Crowding devotees are waiting for the opening of the Dome's doors, and when it happens they push and flow in a disordered run to be the first to enter the threshold of the church. Though in a religious rite, they actually act rudely, exercising muscular force and voicing loud. When outside the church the *fercolo* is pulled by a multitude of devotees in a procession that is a very 'beam of light', for the thousand candles bore by surrounding people. The penitents carry burning candles weighted to the gravity of sins or the importance of received grace from Saint Agatha (Fig. 4).



Figure 3 - *Procession of the Fercolo of Saint Agatha. Source: the authors.*



Figure 4 - *Devotees carrying big candles. Source: Pellegrino F. - Vivi Catania.*

They ask graces and protection, chanting their devotion, and invoking other people to be devotees of the Saint. It is worth underlining they leave heavy and scattered material traces on the ground due to the leaking of liquid wax dropping down from thousands burning candles. According to an ethnological point of view: «this religious feast represents not only an annual

consecratory encounter with the Saint and her local community but also a kind of contemporary ordeal of young people. Hence, this event presents a double aspect: on the one hand every devotee feels he has to submit himself to this initiation rite at least once in his lifetime to confirm his belonging to the local community» (Di Giovanni, 2012, p. 167).

The itinerary of the religious procession is done also by groups of men carrying the *Candelora*, mobile monumental constructions with lights and statues, whose story is the following (Fig. 5).



Figure 5 - *Procession of the Candelora*. Source: the authors.

After two or four centuries from Saint Agatha's death, the Roman Pope – disputably Gelasio I in 492 or Sergio I in 687 – instituted Candlemas, the Christian festival on February 2nd commemorating the purification of the Virgin Mary, after childbirth according to Jewish law, and the presentation of Christ in the Temple. Candles are traditionally blessed on this devotional day. The Italian name of the day is *candelora*, which in Sicilian dialect maintains the Latin plural form and indicates the *Candelora*, or *Cerei* (big monumental candles). These actually are big wooden constructions sculptured in baroque style. Today they are 11, while in the past they were many more, namely up to 22 in 1514, and 28 in 1674. They weigh 400-700 kilograms and are carried

around on the shoulders of porters, 4, 8, 10 or 12 men, depending on weight and dimensions. Each *Candelora* pertains to a guild of arts and crafts, excluding two particular ones of them. The first one is that of Archbishop Ventimiglia, who wanted its building in 1776, after the very dangerous Etna's eruption that threatened the villages of Pedara and Nicolosi, settled on the slopes of the volcano. The second one is that of the City club of Saint Agatha (*Circolo Cittadino di Sant'Agata*) founded by Blessed Cardinal Dusmet, in 1879. "In any case, the festival of candelora is the substitution of a sacred rite to a pagan rite, symbolizing its flame the 'Light of the world' that pierces the darkness of the night" (Basilica Cattedrale Sant'Agata, n. d.).

Linkages between Saint Agatha's processions with heathen rituals were clear in past centuries when popular manifestations of religiousness called more evidently pre-Christian religions. In particular, rites of Goddess Isis and her procession of a carriage shaped like a ship, are the preceding features of both Carnival and Saint Agatha's festivity, for two main reasons: one is the symbolism of cut and healed breasts, for Isis is represented as a mother breast-nursing his son Horus; the second one is the use of a baroque *Carro Trionfale* (Triumphal Carriage) shaped like a ship, towed by six oxen, to pull the Saint Agatha's statue, which was dismissed on 1872 (G. Scuto, personal communication, November 28, 2018). Furthermore, the same Catholic Church reports: "Around the official festival there were popular practices. Two in particular: the masks worn on February 3rd, specially by the young people, which guaranteed anonymity and misconducts; and the *'ntuppateddi*, women of any social class who on February 4th and 5th, by alone, wandering around the city, in the crowd of people, with the head completely covered, and with only one visible eye, not to be recognized, can ask and gain gifts from men. Notwithstanding the hard interventions of the Church, this practice disappeared only during the 1800s" (Zito, n.d., n.p., our translation).

Relations between popular worshipping of Saint Agatha and natural disasters induced also the urban organization of the city. Indeed, according to a Catania's urban planner and eminent scholar, "history of Catania and features of its urban center are marked in a very peculiar manner mainly by two natural events, and by the answers given by the locals gave to those events. The first one is the volcano eruption and lava flow of 1669, the second one is the disastrous earthquake of 1693" (Magnano di San Lio, 2016: 3, our translation). The city economy was heavily damaged, but the lava flows did not affect the morphology of the urban core of the city, which remained within the circle of the Carlo V's walls. On the lava flow and outside along the walls the *Vittoria* road (named Victory against the flow, and today Via del

Plebiscito) “was built up to allow the passage of the Saint Agatha processions” (*ivi*, p. 4, our translation).

Even local food and recipes can be related to Saint Agatha’ devotion, especially in pastry-making tradition, which includes the *minne della Santuzza* (breast cakes) and the *aliveddi ri Sant’Àjita* (olive shaped sweet cakes). Meaning of the first one is self-evident; while the olives are linked to the legendary tale of a wild olive tree miraculously born in order to hide Agatha from soldiers of Quinziano. It did even produce olives for feeding the fugitive young girl, allowing her to preserve her virginity (G. Scuto, personal communication, November 28, 2018).

Nowadays, public institutions provide money to sustain the whole festival organization and functioning. Main funders are the Municipality, the Province of Catania and the Sicilian Region, which finance private companies for fireworks, architectural public lights, *Candelora* bearing, flowers, production of shows in streets and squares, and exhibitions in museums. They provide streets restoration and cleaning at the ending of the feast (Cannizzaro *et al.*, 2015).

Notwithstanding such religious and cultural institutions as the Diocese and the University, along with three citizen clubs (namely the *Circolo Cittadino S. Agata*, *Circolo di Santo Carcere* and *Circolo S. Agata al Borgo*) pay attention all year long to cultural activities, also obscure and illegal powers are still surrounding the popular devotion. At present, many are the manifestations of the power struggle among individuals and between social groups. Examples of these rough struggles range from rivalry among guilds of *Candelora* to pressure of mafia men on the organization of the whole festival, as a symbol of social predominance, including the control of the use of public space for private commerce during the festival. Often, national and international media report components of the local mafia families appeared in the ‘first row’ of the religious procession, often bearing the *fercolo* of the Saint (De Luca, Santangelo, 2015). Furthermore, local press has reported: “According to Carmelo Petralia, substitute of the national anti-mafia directorate, and Antonino Fanara, of the district attorney office, the Santapaola and Mangion families would have managed to «penetrate the manifestation of greater symbolic value for the Catania community, with consequent increase in the criminal prestige of the mafia organization and affirmation of the same as one of the city’s centers of power”» (Giuffrida, 2008).

Significant are some titles of newspapers such as: *Presidente cereo Villaggio Sant’Agata querela giornalisti* (President of the *Candelora* of Saint

Agatha's Village did sue journalists) or *Sant'Agata, padre Resca: Non è una festa Cristiana* (Saint Agatha, Father Resca: it is not a Christian Festival). The first one reports on the delay in the course of the procession due to roguery rivalry among guilds of *Candelora*, due to illegal betting on duration and time of the passing of ritual procession at important stops and stages. The second one reports opinions of vice parish-priest of St. Peter and Paul church in Catania about the loss of Christianity and the new heathen nature of the festival.

5. Delving in Meanings and the Making of Sacred Space

The Saint Agatha's Religious Festival has a powerful effect on local society as a whole and with respect to private and public spaces, and the making of sacred and secular ones. Its very long tradition has pervaded the culture of the whole people and has become a cultural emblem and a landmark, though in a very complex way. The leading cultural concept we would like to stress in this section is that of the relation between *cultural practices* and *power* because, according to Kong (2004) sacred space, religious identity, and community, are subject to negotiations, embedded in relations of power, domination, and resistance.

People living in Catania, under the constant threat of the volcano, found the power to resist the 'monster' also through the practice of worshiping Saint Agatha, by means of both inventing narratives and performing religious rituals. Both these practices consolidated a specific 'sense of place' and a strong identity. She, the bodily weak woman, showed a double capability of resistance against two deadly enemies: the obscure forces inhabiting the bowels of earth, and the powerful dominator coming from abroad. Her virtue is the same of the community, and her virginal veil spreads a light but invincible protection on the community of devotees.

The 'human monster' Quinziano, a heathen Roman, could possess neither her body nor mind; she singularly maintained her virginity notwithstanding the martyrdom. Furthermore, Agatha was miraculously recovered from her wounds on breasts. Her virginity is a form of fierce power, and devotees can remit their sins by pulling the heavy *fercolo* and the *Candelora*, and carrying on their shoulder big burning candles. They trace their cultural space performing devotional movements and chants in the public space, appropriating it and making it sacred.

The ‘natural monster’, the volcano with its chthonian forces, has the power to destroy the city and its inhabitants, but the veil of Saint Agatha put a limit to the devastation, posing an invisible border and a sacred space. The threatening nature of Etna was defeated in the exact moment her white veil stopped the lava flow, though turning from white to a flaming red. Her lights can break the darkness of the night, and it is remarkable the red, or better the deep yellow of the light of a candle, is the color of the bridal veil in Roman culture, attesting virginity and impossibility to divorce (Sebesta, Bonfante, 2001). After that, the city of Catania organized every year a sumptuous Religious Festival, with fireworks, lights, and processions of candles, tracing itineraries inside and around the city (Figg. 6-7).



Figure 6 - *Procession itinerary around the city*. Source: “La Sicilia” newspaper, 4/2/2018.



Figure 7 - Procession itinerary inside the city. Source: "La Sicilia" newspaper, 5/2/2018.

It is easy to recall the sacred circle made by heathen shepherds around their herd-village as the preceding performance of Saint Agatha's Catholic procession in the 'outer' itinerary around the ancient walls surrounding the historic center of the city.

Through history, protection of Saint Agatha can defeat any kind of enemies, the Romans and their political proconsuls, in past time. At present, the autonomy of Catania is claimed mainly against the Regional Capital of Sicily, the city of Palermo, within a framework of political, economic, and

cultural rivalry, also involving devotion to Saint Agatha. The story detected from a local erudite and student of Saint Agatha is most interesting. It is that some villains of Catania assisted a cultural exhibition in a public library showing an ancient book attesting Agatha was born in Palermo. They rudely demanded to destroy the book because people from Palermo are phony and dishonest and cannot say anything about Saint Agatha. The organizer promptly said they could see a bunch of other books attesting the birth of the Saint in Catania, so saving the ancient book and the exhibition itself (R.A. Carbonaro, personal communication, December 13, 2018).

The social community living in Catania uses Saint Agatha's worship to make both politics and poetics of space; the Catholic Church closed inside its buildings the political sacred space, and Municipal institutions got her name in the city emblem, but people, using even rough manners and physical power, pull out the sacred space to the public space of the city. For this, specific attention is posed to a ritual chant devotees sing all over the entire duration of the religious procession. Individual devotees stop sometimes and chant ritually the following verses:

«È ccu razia e ccu cori / pi sant'Aituzza bedda, ca stà niscennu /
cittadini! / semu tutti devoti, tutti? / cittadini, cittadini / cittadini! /
evviva sant'Agata /cittadini! / evviva sant'Agata. / Tutti devoti, tutti? /
cittadini, cittadini! / cittadini».

«It is with grace and heart / for the beautiful Saint Agatha who is
coming out / citizens! / are we all devotees, all? / citizens, citizens /
citizens! / long live Saint Agatha / citizens! All devotees, all? / citizens,
citizens! / citizens».

During a colloquial conversation with an erudite (R.A. Carbonaro, personal communication, December 13, 2018) we shared the following interpretation. It is worth stressing the importance of the interrogative form of some verses because we want to underline the 'social' role of the question mark, never deepened before as far as we know. With this chant, the individual devotee is *both* stating his/her devotion *and* asking if *all* the people are devotees to Saint Agatha. The sense is that: *only if you are a devotee you can be a citizen; and if you want to be a citizen you should feel the pain of Saint Agatha's martyrdom, carrying her fercolo or heavy candles around the city*. This is consistent with findings of ethnographers interpreting the annual feast as a rite of passage and an ordeal of young people (Di Giovanni, 2012).

We might extend this idea considering that the community as a whole and social components (including illegal organizations) are intentionally oriented to use the popular devotion to Saint Agatha to gain and stabilize their social reputation and power control on space. People with sincere devotion use their religious sentiment to bring the sacred space from the Basilica out to the city, tracing public space with material and symbolic signs, and giving a shared religious meaning to their own place. Public institutions support the popular feast in order to gain social consent and maintain political power; private entrepreneurs try to earn as much money as possible. Criminal organizations control illegal economic activities, and a fortiori maximize their social impact, showing publicly both devotion and fearless power.

In general, all the community contributes to maintaining material features of the feast, intensifying personal experience as the smells, sounds, and happenings, and emplacing experience in a sacred space. Even symbolic meanings materialize in the bodily movements of people, which make them performing protagonists of a collective ritual, empowering their own city with an identity, strong enough to contrast all kind of threats, of both natural and political nature.

6. Concluding Remarks

The study made on the Religious Festival of Saint Agatha in Catania while ‘it happens’ has been preceded by a review on the relations between geography and religion, and a delving survey on literary and popular narrations on Saint Agatha and her miraculous protection on Catania from natural risks. Relations among residents in the risky area of Etna volcano have a peculiar nature and are part of an intense ‘sense of place’, a mix of identity proudness and ‘anxious’ attention to a beloved but somehow threatening natural and social landscape. Fertility of land is high, and weather is good all year long; the social atmosphere is effervescent, and rich of multifaceted cultural tenets, though having illegal components. The present festival happening mixes both modern and very ancient features, and it is actually felt and performed by people of Catania. People’s religiosity apparently contains both Catholic and heathen features, and it has evident linkages with social power distribution and identity as citizens of a proud and politically important city. People of devotees performing an ancient rite do trace their own sacred space in material and symbolical terms, using the protection of the veil of the virgin martyr to self-giving citizenship. The urban space is sacred by

devotional acting, and all socioeconomic components of Catania must, more or less, consider it in cultural and social exchanges. In secular times, as evidently are the current days, ancient protection of Saint Agatha's veil against the Etna volcano is still vivid but in changed forms. It is a symbol of cultural identity and the emplacement of people-public institutions in making society.

Notwithstanding the Religious Festival is a real emblem of residents in Catania, and a sign of religiosity, it is becoming more and more a potent claim for tourists, from the whole Sicily and abroad. Many institutions are already working to support the tourist development of the feast. Local folklore and cultural traditions linked to a very important religious festival are immaterial assets to be surely used in territorial marketing and place branding policies. Nevertheless, results of the research allow us to maintain future interest toward the eventual evolution of the Religious Festival of Saint Agatha in the direction of a harsh folklorization or not.

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Generations pass on to each other a specific selection of memories, which is a “memory of the lived experience”. Through that narrative, the story of the present is measured day by day with forms of existential precariousness, in a vision of risk which is conceived as a perennial societal state. By investigating popular and oral literature, focus on narratives related to risk and disasters, as described in the social imaginary, from the most remote eras to the most stringent current affairs, this book is a precious element for a comprehensive reconstruction of cultural resources have allowed to face and manage material and spiritual concerns and problems arising from disasters.

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