

midwives, godmothers, and witches: female body and identity in the Italian south

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Madre madrina: Rituale, parentela e identità in un paese del Sannio (San Marco dei Cavoti). BERNARDINO PALUMBO. Milan: Franco Angeli, 1991. 245 pp., figures, tables, references, sources.

Itinerari delle emozioni: Corpo e identità femminile nel Sannio Campano. MARIELLA PANDOLFI. Milan: Franco Angeli, 1991. 218 pp., figures, references, indexes.

It is rare in anthropology that the same small community of less than 4000 people should be studied by two ethnographers who concentrate on sometimes interweaving, sometimes complementary aspects of the local culture while remaining in close contact with each other. It is even rarer to see two monographs about the same community appear in the same year and with the same publisher (how many times have we heard from publishers the excuse "Sorry, just published another monograph on the same place/topic/people/issue. . .?"). Bernardino Palumbo and Mariella Pandolfi, two anthropologists at the University of Rome, conducted their research in the same village in southern Italy: San Marco dei Cavoti, in the area called "Sannio" in Campania. They have both written about women's oppression and hidden, silent, or sometimes whispered rebellion. They both slowly unveil a complex social and subjective reality that each describes and understands using his or her own set of methods and theoretical tools: social and symbolic anthropology for Palumbo and medical anthropology, psychoanalysis, and interpretive anthropology for Pandolfi. The result is quite outstanding: the two books are designed to complement each other. Where one ends, the other begins.

Bernardino Palumbo sets up the socioeconomic context of his study in the first chapter, in which he gives us a historically rich account of the social organization of the area, where three social classes were formed in the 18th century after the collapse of the traditional nobility and the church: the nobles (*nobili*), the artisans (*artisti*; literally, "artists"), and the peasants (*contadini*). Within the first (the nobles) and the last (the peasants), further distinctions were at work. The peasants, for instance, were traditionally divided among those who owned land and animals (*massari*), those who had a "contract" with a landowner (a relationship known as *parsenale*), and those who had to find an occupation on a daily basis (and for this reason were called *giomalieri*). Each class had and still has a particular (negative) view of the others, with the exception of the positive stereotype of the traditional *signore*, or nobleman, who deserves respect (*rispetto*) not only because he is more "civilized" (*civile*) than others and knows how to enjoy life, but also because he returns respect, by greeting and engaging in conversation with everyone, regardless of his or her social status, and by protecting those under him. As

summarized by one of Palumbo's informants: "it's not money that makes a nobleman" ("*non sono i soldi che fanno il signore*") (p. 23). To be recognized as high in the hierarchy, to receive the title of *Don* or *Donna*, a noble person must conform to strict local expectations about personal dignity and the "social use" of wealth.

In the 1950s the traditional hierarchy entered an irreversible decline. With the support of the peasants, who needed them to make and maintain contacts with the outside market, the "artisans" emerged as the politically ascendant middle class. They quickly adapted to the new postwar economic situation by transforming themselves from producers into commercial and political mediators. They came not only to accept the superiority of imported goods and to profit from them but also to control the new funds provided by the Italian state for the underdeveloped south.

Despite these changes in the socioeconomic situation, one aspect of the society has remained basically unchanged: the condition of the women, who are traditionally excluded from inheritance of the land (reserved for males) and are materially and symbolically isolated—that is, alienated from their fathers, brothers, husbands, and ultimately from one another. The only apparent exception to the domination over women across the social spectrum is their exclusive right to play a central role in a child's baptism—that is, to be godmothers (*madrine*), a privilege that women throughout the region have shared over the centuries, with the frequent identification of godmother and midwife (Delille 1988). In his monograph, Palumbo tries to explain this apparent inconsistency of the social system. Why are women given this special status?

Chapter 2 develops the theme of the exclusion of women from public life with a discussion of kinship and social identity. Palumbo gives us a clear picture of how, in this agnatically organized society, women were and still are left out of the political scene. Women do not have their own organizations (*confraternite*), and despite the socioeconomic changes of the last 30 to 40 years, during which time some women have gone to work in factories or become professionals, their position in the local ideologies has remained unchanged. The gender separation is interactionally captured in a scene in which the ethnographer is in a room with the women of the extended family listening to stories about relatives and ancestors, while in the next room the men of the family are negotiating with cousins and uncles over the candidate to support in the forthcoming local elections.

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss how patrilineal, patrilocal power is manifested in this society through the ability to control women even in those moments in which they exert what is recognized by the men themselves as the women's most fundamental biological power: to procreate, to be mothers. This unique power, which men cannot physically match, is not publicly recognized in a mother and is replaced with a symbolic power distributed among other social actors in the community, throughout the life cycle: the power of the midwife at the moment of birth, the ceremonial power of the godmother at the baptism, the power of the healers (always a couple) who treat a child affected by hernia. The socially mediated relationship between a mother and her child is also recognized in the ritual called *ensita n'santo*, in which, 40 days after giving birth, the woman presents her child in church to the priest and to the community. Signorini (1987) has analyzed this ritual as a moment for reestablishing the union between the parents' two families and reasserting the patrilocal and patrilineal foundation of the family (for example, through the presence of the husband's mother, who carries the baby up to the door of the church, where she gives it back to the mother).

As in other Mediterranean areas (cf. Denich 1974), in the Sannio region a woman moves from her father's to her husband's household and her sphere of action is limited to domestic duties and the reproduction of heirs (especially male heirs) for her husband's family. The woman is *una zingara* (a gypsy) because she is first a stranger in her father's family (where she is not given equal rights with her brothers) and later in her husband's family (where she must deal with her often hostile mother-in-law and sisters-in-law). A woman has a "negative identity"

because she does not belong to the *razza* (the agnatic line) and does not assure its continuity (a sister must leave and procreate for another agnatic line).

In chapter 5 Palumbo discusses birth as a moment of extreme danger in which there is contact with "another world" and in which women, and women only, are in charge. Even on this occasion, however, the ritual attention is not on the mother but on the midwife. During the baptism as well, the center of attention will be the godmother rather than the mother. The woman as mother is left silent, silent with her own emotions, which cannot be made public, which cannot find any decent or acceptable manifestation. It is with this silence of the emotions that the book thematically ends (the last chapter provides a few rapid connections to relevant contemporary studies of ritual and gender, including the works of Maurice Bloch on the Merina, of Fitz John Porter Poole on the Bimin-Kuskusmin, and of Michael Herzfeld on the poetics of manhood in Greece).

Pandolfi's monograph starts where Palumbo's ends, with the social and ritual silence in which women are left in San Marco. This is the same silence that provoked the cases of female "possession" described by the Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino (1959, 1961) in his work on magic in the south of Italy (Lucania, in particular). De Martino analyzed such episodes of possession as a response to what he called the "crisis of the presence" (*crisi della presenza*): "In its most acute form, the crisis manifests the typical polarity of the absence of the convulsive discharge: the individual presence disappears, and the psychic energy degrades to the point of pure and simple mechanic energy [found] in the convulsion" (de Martino 1959:70).

It is the same "crisis," the same negative images and negative social action reserved for women, that Pandolfi describes and analyzes in her monograph. As she explains in the first chapter ("*I confini della memoria*," or "The boundaries of memory"), however, by the time Pandolfi began her research, in the early 1980s, the "possessions" described by de Martino had disappeared—she connects their disappearance to the arrival of a new "foreign" priest (from Rome), who replaced the former local exorcist-priest. Pandolfi's questions from the beginning are, then, What happened to the women of San Marco? How have they come to express or repress what used to be manifested through public displays of spirit possession?

Pandolfi points to two responses women make to their marginal status: the destructive, violent reaction of the witch (*strega*); and the inscription on one's own body of the collective and individual memory. It is in the contexts of these two "solutions" that we can read the contradictions of a social system that appears unitary and coherent on the surface but is instead divided and chaotic in its more obscure dimensions.

Such a tension between order and chaos, social action and emotions, is captured by Pandolfi through an analysis of female discourse; such a discourse is usually narrated not with words but with a body crossed and literally marked by signs of a hostile world (p. 26). In listening to and empathizing with the stories of the women of San Marco, Pandolfi takes a different path from de Martino's. Whereas de Martino emphasized the need for magic as a metahistorical plane in which negative experiences are suspended and neutralized while they are recognized as cultural and thus as predictable, Pandolfi sees the women's stories of illness and malaise—typically connected with the symbolically loaded "blood" (*sangue*)—as individual and collective memories, as alternative historiographies to be contraposed to the official records of the town, including its stories of earthquakes and emigration.

Pandolfi's interest in the "discourse" of women's resistance to male hegemony develops in a style of research and writing that is radically different from Palumbo's. As she follows the women of San Marco in their renditions of personal suffering, she moves in and out of fluid metaphors and allusions to an array of authors and cultural traditions that she successfully forces to interact: we find, then, Freudian psychoanalysis and medical anthropology, phenomenology and existentialism (especially that of Merleau-Ponty, for his interest in the body), Foucault and Geertzian interpretive anthropology. The anthropology of emotions is here an exegesis of female

discourse set against the events of the community and the ritual rhythms of a life cycle that each gender interprets in a different way. "Men act, women feel" ("*Gli uomini fanno, le donne sentono*"), Pandolfi's informants and friends tell her. The book is a journey through the lives of and metaphors used by the women of the Sannio region to discover the meaning of this apparently simple but in fact extremely complex metaphorical opposition: feelings and actions. The feelings of those who cannot publicly act (the women) and the actions of those who cannot show their feelings (the men): "but men act; women instead, women feel. Men don't feel because if you act you put strength on the outside. If your body receives, it doesn't act. When you decide to act, your body shuts down and external forces cannot come in. Men always have their body shut" (p. 29).

Even natural and social disasters (earthquakes, emigration) are said to be perceived differently by men and women. The woman is ultimately alone. It is then not by accident that the discourse of such solitude takes the form of a discourse around and through the human body. The biological, individual body is transformed, through a discourse of lament, rage, sufferance, and discovery, into a cultural body that carries in it the sorrows, though not the answers, of these women, who find in Pandolfi an unusual listener: someone who, as a woman, can or should understand their quest but is also a professional and perhaps a healer in her own terms. The ambiguity of Pandolfi's role is played in the book at two different but continually intersecting levels: the participation in the women's discourse of suffering, in which the researcher is accepted and at times almost wooed into the mysterious and private world of the women of the Sannio, and the description-discussion of that suffering for the reader, in which emotional participation is transformed into analytical wisdom.

In a succession of chapters that thematically exploit a series of corporeal oppositions (inside and outside, veiled and revealed emotions), Pandolfi shows why and how in this oppressive cultural and social climate the only thing left to a woman is her body. And it is the body that is used to transform those same affects and emotional states that are not recognized by a male-dominated world. It is in body parts, corporeal metaphors, and corporeal feelings that ideas and values are relocated.

If the woman "feels more" then she is more fragile, as shown by the loss of blood (in menstruation, in giving birth). The discourse of the body takes shape through different transformations, each of which represents a different problem: the difficulty of reconciling social change and continuity with the past is actualized in symptoms that affect external body parts like the back, the legs, and the arms; deep personal emotions are accompanied by a change in the state of bodily liquids, namely, blood, sweat, and tears; tensions produced by male violence or female envy (*l'invidia*, another recurrent theme of de Martino's work) are met by a change in the space occupied by the female body—the organs grow or shrink.

These transformations must be seen, for Pandolfi, not as "symptoms" but as "traces" (*tracce*, a term that implies a sense of linear continuity as well as the material aspect of "footprints"). And in these traces, the stories that are being told belong not to only one woman but to all women. From this perspective, Pandolfi reminds us, society is not something outside the individual (*sui generis*) or inside her (cognitive), but a socially constructed practice, which we can find inscribed in the women's bodies, not necessarily as containers of pathological symptoms but as social agents whose voices continue to articulate an alternative, temporally and spatially diverse history of their community.

Reading this new generation of Italian ethnographers, one gets the impression that Italian sociocultural anthropology is alive and well. After a moment of uncertainty about the direction to take, being attracted by British social anthropology on the one side and by a more local Marxist tradition tied to the work of de Martino on the other, Italian ethnographers seem now at ease incorporating ideas and models from the outside without renouncing the best insights from their own cultural and academic heritage. The growing tradition of gender studies offers

them a new opportunity to assess a range of themes and perspectives that have always been of interest to Italian folklorists and anthropologists but can now be connected to a wider dialogue with other traditions.

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