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GLOBALIZATION AS A DISTINCTIVELY MEDITERRANEAN
CULTURAL PROJECT

• MINNA RUCKENSTEIN •

In his address to the Europe and the Mediterranean Seminar in Helsinki (03.11.08), reproduced in this Forum, Henk Driessen describes the Mediterranean as an area that should be “part of a truly global anthropology”. But how are people in the Mediterranean drawn into processes of cultural change that they see as being part of the making of the global? This question, I think, is highly relevant for attempts to make ethnographic projects conducted in the Mediterranean matter for a truly global anthropology and in the following I try to answer the question with some thoughts on my research on religion in Southern Italy and particularly in Naples.

This discussion is inspired by a paper recently presented by Joel Robbins, titled *Hierarchy and Hybridity: Toward a Dumontian Approach to Globalization*¹. In this thought-provoking work he discussed how Louis Dumont’s theoretical contributions can be used for advancing contemporary debates about globalization; one part of the argument resonates beautifully with what I have understood about religion in Naples. Robbins argues that people everywhere are drawn into the processes of globalization by becoming aware of the globally distributed hierarchy of values that cherishes individualism and, along with it, orientations to life that are understood as ‘modern’. In this global ranking, people in places that are seen as ‘traditional’ or worse, ‘backward’, tend to direct themselves towards cultural change that moves them up in the hierarchy of values. In the Mediterranean area common strategies used for strengthening this movement towards the globally-valued include, for instance, tourism and attempts to incorporate local economies into global networks. But Robbins reminds us that there are also other kinds of processes of change that seek to advance globalization; processes that are more obviously culturally driven and that do not follow the usual political and economic agendas to make places matter in global economic competition.

In Naples, one of these cultural processes of change has evolved around the blood miracle of San Gennaro (St. Januarius) that takes place in the Naples Duomo (the cathedral) every year on September 19th. In 2006 I revisited the miracle and was again reminded that it is not a small-scale religious event. It brings together thousands of Neapolitans and during the last decade it has been increasingly celebrated as a notable media event. Various websites on the internet describe it as one of the main tourist attractions in Naples and video clips of the event are circulated on You Tube. At the Duomo a big crowd of journalists and photographers witness the miracle along with local politicians and celebrities.

In 2006 I was accompanied by a professional photographer, and we were unexpectedly invited to observe the ritual from a gated platform specifically built for the press. We found a place to stand in the crowded platform directly in front of the main altar of the Duomo, where the archbishop was holding the reliquary that is said to contain the dried blood of the martyred saint. Legend and history have it that San Gennaro was a bishop, who was beheaded during the persecution of Christians in the town of Pozzuoli nearby Naples. According to a widely circulated story the bishop's wet-nurse, Eusebia, collected some of the bishop's blood in two glass phials; some time later the blood began to miraculously liquefy on certain occasions, particularly the saint's feast in September thereby providing a good augur for the coming year. While the archbishop was talking from the altar to the expectant crowd of people, some of whom were praying, about the miraculous liquefaction of blood that was soon to take place, journalists were whispering about a young woman accompanied by a film crew, supposedly the famous host of an American travel program. Then a white handkerchief was waved from the altar as a sign that the liquefaction of the blood had occurred and the photographers started to eagerly document the archbishop, who was holding up the glass phial. The blood miracle had taken place in the midst of prayer and celebrity gossip.

An impressive amount of scholarly and non-scholarly literature has been written about the miracle, and the books and articles confirm that the miracle of San Gennaro is greatly appreciated by Neapolitans. It is said to affirm the well-being of the community in that it confirms that the patron saint of Naples will continue to favour and protect the city and its inhabitants. Yet, though it takes place in one of the most important churches of Naples, it cannot be interpreted merely as a Catholic ritual. Even those who do not value the Catholic faith as a framework for the miracle emphasize that it is very good for Naples; it is seen as a positive resource that offers hope and encouragement for a city that is infamous for serious social and structural problems: chronic unemployment, poverty, and organized crime.

The affirmation of the community is not simply some kind of a boost for a local identity; the blood miracle is existentially much more powerful. It orientates Neapolitans towards the idea that lives go beyond the physical and the rational in the strict sense; miracles are not only possible, but they regularly confirm the miraculous quality of everyday life. In other words, the miracle addresses Neapolitans as people whose lives are not constrained by what is seen; not by the unemployment, nor the poverty, nor the local mafia. Instead, the supernatural continues to play a tangible and a rational role in people's lives in all possible domains of everyday life. For instance, any tensions or problems facing Neapolitans, whether in the fields of politics, the economy or sport, can be discussed in the framework of past or future blood miracles.

Blood miracles comprise a very specific type of religious phenomenon in the Catholic world. Virtually all blood miracle cults are located in or around Naples. The blood miracle of San Gennaro obviously satisfies a quest for cultural difference. Yet when tourists and journalists come to Naples to witness the miracle, they are not only expected to appreciate the ritual; they are expected to value the manner in which Neapolitans continue to combat grim everyday realities. From this perspective, the celebration of Neapolitan particularity through the blood miracle works as a powerful counter-discourse. It reminds people in the Duomo that things should never be taken for granted, because they might not be what they appear. Neapolitans like to emphasize to visitors that creativity and imagination are valued in Naples. And the places and uses of creativity are not limited: everyday playfulness or cleverness in the domains of bureaucracy or politics can be considered as imaginative as art. The locals repeatedly tell stories of how activities in Naples take place in the blurred domain between the so-called formal and informal, sometimes in defiance of the law. The formal rules of social practice are not only bent, but they might be made to follow an alternative logic. Consequently, Neapolitans are eager and proud to display, sometimes even brag about, the ambiguity and flexibility in their uses of formal rules: operating in this domain of improvisation confirms the resourcefulness, innovation and imaginative range of their everyday world.

Significantly, the blood miracle of San Gennaro simultaneously works at local and global levels. Undeniably, it is a characteristically local phenomenon; it confirms the Neapolitan community. Yet, through the media, it also attempts to speak to a global audience. This aspect of the ritual as a facilitator of global connections is seen as so important that when the locals saw my friend with her professional digital camera, we were immediately invited to the press platform where she was sure to be able to take the best possible pictures of the ritual. Her photographs, locals assumed, would become part of a discourse that not only tells the world about the miracle of San Gennaro, but also moves Naples up in the global hierarchy of places in a remarkably Neapolitan way. Thus, I argue, the media display of the miracle is at the heart of a cultural project of globalization that aims at strengthening the community of Neapolitans in the global arena.

Celebrating recalcitrance

For decades, if not centuries, Neapolitans have eagerly resisted development projects that would draw them into a prominent hierarchy of values; a hierarchy that has been enforced on the city and its people by the Catholic Church, the Italian state and more recently, the European Union. Neapolitans are familiar with assumptions and narratives about their city that originate from governing bodies; they may colonize these stories to personally criticise their chaotic, anarchic and environmentally disastrous city, doomed to deprivation, marginality and ruin. Yet, these representations are also discursively used for portraying the contradictory, ambiguous and paradoxical qualities of Naples. In their stories Neapolitans can refer to their city as a part of the 'Southern Question' (see Tapaninen, this forum), while describing proudly the richly imaginative forms of art and politics that their marginalized city has inspired. As long as Neapolitans cherish their recalcitrant spirit, anti-globalization movements continue to have a fertile ground in Naples.

The desire to communicate the centrality of recalcitrance to Neapolitan identity is a

driving force behind the efforts to make the blood miracle into a tourist attraction and a media event. However, Neapolitans would like outsiders to not only to value the miracle, but to learn from it; to become a bit Neapolitan themselves. The presence of a Finnish photographer or the celebrated host of an American travel program in the ritual becomes an opportunity to transmit to a global audience the value, persistence and superiority of the Neapolitan view on life. The blood miracle has traditionally been at the heart of what it means to be part of the community of Neapolitans, but it also opens the possibility to transmit this recognizably Neapolitan message to people all over the world.

What Neapolitans attempt to transmit through the blood miracle is its orientation to the world; the miracle speaks for an alternative logic. Neapolitans are eager to show the global audience that their way of life is not only truly Neapolitan, but it could shape life within any given culture and perhaps even make it more human. The only prerequisite for this goal is that people question the assumptions commonly made, particularly in Europe and the United States. Neapolitans attempt to transmit a message that devalues linear notions of development by offering an outlook on a world where mundane people and supernatural beings are interdependent rather than separate. When talking about the miracle Neapolitans repeatedly detach themselves from a protestant world view, where the approach to the social and natural world is first and foremost practical and non-magical. Instead, Neapolitans emphasize the transformative power of San Gennaro and bring to the fore that 'magical' elements are present in everyday lives; threads of this world and those of the world beyond are woven together into a single fabric of perception and experience.

The miracle of San Gennaro is not a unique event in the Mediterranean area; other rituals have also been transformed into media events and tourist attractions. Yet each ritual communicates a particular message to the global audience. Naples cannot compete successfully in a global economy that values predominantly individualistic and modern orientations to life; in light of these goals Naples is bound to lose. The blood miracle is unapologetically traditional; the stories about the miracle emphasize that San Gennaro materialized as one of the most powerful figures of the sacred hierarchy of Neapolitan cosmology centuries ago. The essence of the blood miracle is non-individualistic and non-modern; the whole point of the ritual is its insistence that things continue to take place through centuries irrespective of individuals. Each new generation of Neapolitans becomes part of a collective tradition that ties them to the history of their city, but also secures its future.

Thus the media narratives of the blood miracle are important for a Neapolitan project of cultural change that attempts to convince the world of the vitality of Neapolitan culture in the face of global pressure; the message is that Neapolitan culture is not modern, but it is not backward either. Instead, Neapolitans try to transmit, through the media and the internet to a global audience, a cultural logic that urges us to question and consider prominent ideas about the direction of cultural change and globalization. The city of Naples might appear to an outsider as if on its way towards deprivation and ruin, but the blood miracle urges us to look again, below the surface of the obvious.

The very unique and distinctive process of cultural change that evolves around the Neapolitan blood miracle reminds us of the importance of searching for the particular and remaining open-minded in our accounts of globalization. A truly global anthropology means that we need to critically weigh the globally cherished imaginary of the global and

continue to appreciate the many ways in which globalization becomes interpreted as a local cultural project for change, in the Mediterranean area and elsewhere.

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¹ Joel Robbins' paper was presented at the University of Helsinki, 9.10.08, in a workshop entitled "Dumont and the Global Order" held by the Finnish Academy-funded Centre of Excellence in Global Governance Research.