

SOUNDS AND IMAGES
OF NOSTALGIA:
THE REVIVAL OF LUCANIAN
WHEAT FESTIVALS

4

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During the month of August, in the southern part of Basilicata, a number of events involving wheat offerings take place during religious festivals dedicated to local patronal saints or to the Madonna. Traditionally, August was the time when most of the main agricultural work would be finished, and people had time and resources to dedicate to religious festivals. Wheat, once the main staple crop of the region, would be harvested in June–July and people would set aside bundles of ears of wheat to carry in procession on saints' days. Although many people in Basilicata are no longer involved in agriculture, wheat festivals continue to be actively practised and indeed since 2010 both the number of festivals and attendance have been on the increase.

Multilayered arrays of candles are created for the purpose of making offerings to the local saints in many parts of southern Italy. In past times, however, candles were an expensive commodity that was not within everyone's means. Peasants would instead create these arrays by tying ears of wheat together using a similar wooden frame but without the candles. Thick with ears of wheat, these offerings, often called *gregne* or *scigli*, weighed several kilos and would remain the property of the church after the festival. In some places, the name used to refer to the wheat offerings continues to be *cirii*, which in the local dialect means, literally, candles.

In addition to the act of donating a substantial quantity of wheat to the church, people's religious devotion was and continues to be expressed in the act of bearing the offering on their head. In some cases, an offering is the outcome of the collective labour of a neighbourhood or a family, while at other times it is connected with a personal vow. In the latter case, individuals ask for divine favour and in exchange undertake to carry the offerings every year, sometimes barefoot, according to the particular terms established with the saint at the time of the request. Sometimes offerings originally prepared for one particular local festival may be taken on a pilgrimage to a different



festival, as happens in the case of some of the offerings made in Teana for the Madonna delle Grazie, which are also to be seen at the mountain sanctuary of the Madonna di Viggiano.

In this photo essay I start from the evident decline of agricultural ways of life for people in this part of Basilicata. Once flourishing rural settlements are now becoming depopulated, the land dedicated to farming is significantly reduced compared with the 1960s, and rural ways of life are not as central anymore to most people. Yet, since the early 2000s, we have witnessed a revival of events involving wheat, including both religious festivals and events celebrating agricultural heritage. The politics of intangible heritage play a factor in this renewed attention dedicated to wheat festivals, but we have also noticed the strong emotional power of their association with the agricultural past. These emotional reactions are not confined to the moment of the festival itself: they are also at play in the preparatory phases of the event, which often involve activities, skills and sensations that directly evoke the agricultural past.

The photographs that make up this chapter follow a realist documentary style that is rooted in the history of anthropology in Basilicata (see chapter 7). In combination with the accompanying texts and sounds, the aim of these images is to evoke the manner in which, with varying degrees of consciousness, people in contemporary Basilicata perform cultural heritage at the same time as performing acts of religious devotion.

As is evident throughout the associated sound-chapter, music is ever present at wheat festivals, and many of the offerings dance with their carriers to the sound of *tarantelle*. Dancing with the wheat offerings is a form of sonic devotion not unlike those described in the previous chapter. In Teana, in particular, the characteristic design of the offerings includes appendages that swing and open up as the dancers rotate. Here, as in Noepoli, the opportunities for dancing are limited to designated spaces and times by those who manage the procession. It is often the priests leading the procession who determine these limited moments, on the basis of the 'profane' character of the music and of the dancing. In Noepoli the presence of ears of wheat is limited to a small bundle on top of an offering made of candles. The inhabitants point to the difficulty in obtaining manually reaped wheat as a reason for its disappearance from the offerings to the Madonna of Constantinople, a Byzantine icon that in this case takes the role elsewhere more commonly fulfilled by a statue.

A different scenario plays out in Episcopia, where the participation of villagers of all ages in the festival of the Madonna del Piano is massive. It is especially remarkable to see the numbers in attendance among the younger generations, attracted by the party atmosphere and the careful

4.1 (*Facing*)

Teana, 2016. Wheat offerings on the day of the Madonna delle Grazie.

4.2 (*Overleaf*)

Teana, 2016. Wheat offerings dance on the day of the Madonna delle Grazie.





4.3 Noepoli, 2017. Candle offerings on the day of the Madonna of Constantinople.

4.4 (Facing) Episcopia, 2017. The wheat offering of Contrada Demanio, including a pair of caged dormice.

management of sound by the priest (see previous chapter). Here the wheat offerings, put together by village districts and hamlets, sometimes dance along the whole procession, which due to its sheer size allows the various different components – and forms of devotion – not to get in each other's way sonically. The medieval statue of the Madonna del Piano is showered with wheat as it exits the rural sanctuary that marks the beginning of the procession. She carries in one hand a bundle of ears of wheat, which demonstrates very clearly that these festivals were as much ceremonies to mark the end of the harvest and the success of people's efforts in the fields as they are Catholic festivals dedicated to the saints. Indeed, older people will often say that the saint or Madonna whom they honour with wheat will ensure a good harvest.

Yet, the analysis made by De Martino of a wheat harvest ritual in San Giorgio Lucano, called 'game of the sickle', did not relate it to the cult of St Roch of Montpellier. In this ritual, a harvester dressed up in an animal skin steals the last sheaf of wheat and is 'hunted' around



COMUNIDAD FORESTAL



the field by the reapers. Once the harvest was complete, the workers would then ritually humiliate the landowner by undressing him using their sickles. Significantly, since in San Giorgio the property of the land was concentrated in the hands of few, most of these labourers did not own the wheat they were harvesting.

This custom had already been abandoned by 1959, when De Martino was in San Giorgio, whereas still today people carry wheat offerings in a procession with the statue on the day of St Roch. Perhaps because of the brevity of his stay and because he had been informed of this tradition by his contacts in the Workers Union, De Martino did not seem to be aware of this. Even while noting its enactment of class struggle, he called the ‘game of the sickle’ a survival of a pagan era, that Christianity had disconnected from the cult of the agrarian gods (De Martino 1962: 163). In the discourses surrounding wheat festivals today, it is still possible to witness the mobilisation of an imaginary ‘cereal civilisation’ of the Mediterranean, whose legacy should still pervade elements of folk religiosity across the Italian South.

Sixty years after De Martino, wheat festivals have assumed an important role in San Giorgio Lucano’s strategy to attract regional funding in support of intangible heritage. Much of the case for support is based on De Martino’s interpretation of the game of the sickle. Traces of this ritual are visible in San Giorgio in the form of posters, theatre pieces, re-enactments and other forms of public art that include mural paintings along the streets. Franco Pinna’s black and white images are an important part of this process of appropriation of a practice that disappeared during the 1950s, and are seen in most of these occasions (see chapter 7). In San Giorgio the folklorisation of wheat festivals is perhaps most evident during the procession of the day of St Roch, when children are dressed up in generic ‘peasant’ costumes that can be seen in a variety of festivals across the region, and are made to parade with small bundles of wheat or miniature versions of the larger offerings.

The legacy of research on San Giorgio’s wheat ritual has inspired a production of cultural interpretations, sometimes based on the authority of scholars appointed to validate and provide an aura of authenticity. The simultaneous presence in San Giorgio, for example, of conferences of scholars that trace the histories of the interpretations of wheat rituals from a historical and anthropological point of view, and of theatre pieces that imaginatively connect wheat rituals and pre-Christian cults, can be read in this way. Another example is the visual quotations from the film *La passione del grano* (*The Passion of the Wheat*), shot in San Giorgio by Lino Del Fra and with voiceover by De Martino (Del Fra 1960), in the music video for the song *La bestia nel grano* (*The Beast in the Wheat*) by folk-rock artist Vinicio Capossela.

4.5 (Facing)
Episcopia, 2019. The Madonna del Piano is showered with wheat at the exit of the sanctuary.



At the same time as these institutional and artistic attentions concentrate on the game of the sickle, though, the existence of wheat festivals is always in danger due to the loss of specialised knowledge connected with agricultural practices of the past. One of the paradoxes of heritagisation is that, while it generally attracts attention and resources on a cultural phenomenon, it often severs the last remaining links with its original social functions, and in doing so puts at risk the transmission of those forms of knowledge necessary to ensure its continuity: for example how to prepare the frames for the offerings, how to bend, weave and tie the wheat, which varieties to use and how to source them.

A few kilometres from San Giorgio is San Paolo Albanese, a small village heavily impacted by depopulation with about 250 permanent residents. Here, in the middle of August on the day of St Roch, a large wheat offering is carried in a procession with the statue of the saint, and two dancers with sickles face each other in a dance around a sheaf, occasionally running behind a third man who steals the wheat. This pantomime, which they call ‘dancing the sickle’, shares some elements with San Giorgio’s game of the sickle, but would take place in a context in which most farmers were small landowners. In San Paolo the large communal offering, called *himunea* in Arbëresh, was made with wheat collected as a form of alms. As far as we know, the wheat festival of San Paolo has known no interruption comparable to that of the game of the sickle of San Giorgio. Yet, despite the proximity of the two, scholars found out about this ritual only during the 1970s and to date no comparable processes of spectacularisation have taken place.

In part, this is due to a certain resistance to change by the older generations. ‘The game of the sickle is not a *tarantella*’, points out Pietro Ragone, who took up the role of dancer from his father, when he settled back in San Paolo after years working in Switzerland as a cement factory worker. In remarking the distinctiveness of dancing the sickle from the generic *tarantella* dance that is heard throughout these festivals, Ragone also told us of his rejection of proposals to introduce ‘folkloric’ costumes and dancing women into the event. The reference here is to sounds, moves and costumes that have spread with a certain uniformity throughout southern Italy, and have contributed to turning the revival of *tarantella* from a counter-cultural phenomenon to an institutionalised and globalised trend (Inserra 2017).

During the early 2010s, however, the tradition of dancing the sickle was hanging from a thread, as the two dancers I photographed in 2005 experienced health problems. Due to the small size of the village and its demographic decline – also evident in the number of abandoned and cracked buildings – today outsiders play an important role in continuing this tradition. Returning emigrants who live in northern Italy

4.6 (Facing)

San Giorgio Lucano, 2017.
Children in the procession on
St Roch’s day.

4.7 (Facing)

San Giorgio Lucano, 2018.
Painter Vincenzo Blumetti
at work on a mural based
on one of Franco Pinna’s
photographs.



are taking up the dancing, learning from the older generation, while the musicians come from nearby San Costantino Albanese (see chapter 6) and some of the participants belong to families originating from nearby villages that the council has invited to resettle in San Paolo.

Procuring wheat with long stalks that can be tied to the frames that make up the offerings used in wheat festivals is a constant problem for people involved in their organisation, since the mechanisation of agriculture produces an unsuitable harvest. The wheat has to be reaped manually, and the preferred variety – called *Senatore Cappelli* – has widely been replaced by more modern hybrid seeds with a higher yield per hectare. The ears of Cappelli wheat have a different shade of gold to them, with darker streaks. Most of the makers of offerings we spoke to said that they prefer Cappelli wheat because its visual appearance is more mindful of the days of old, thus confirming that they are enacting a vision of tradition that is based on precise details from the past.

In Terranova di Pollino a holiday farm, with the support of the local tourist office, has devised a way to provide the right type of wheat and promote local produce and ways of life by setting up a manual reaping competition. The format of the event was imported from neighbouring region Campania: teams of reapers are assigned a strip of wheat field each and compete in speed, so that those who complete the harvest first receive a prize. At 1500m above sea level the wheat is ready for harvest much later than at lower altitudes, so the event can take place in early August, when the presence of tourists is at its peak.

The participants come from villages surrounding the area, and have different agendas. For the organisers, there is clear desire to spectacularise the event, turning a practice of the old rural lifeworld into a show that includes live commentary, traditional music, and branded aprons and banners, plus an audience confined to a designated area. Some of the participants have not necessarily experienced manual reaping in their lifetime, while others, visibly older, clearly take part as an opportunity to experience again the actions that they associate with their past. In 2018 it was striking to see teams made up of older men and women go about their work in a way that was not competitive at all – in fact they would not even try to catch up with the faster teams. The impression was that for them the competition was a moment to be savoured, dense in affective significance, and a way to experience actions, sounds and other perceptions that connect directly with the past. Behind one of these teams was an old lady who gleaned stray ears of wheat, saving them for an upcoming religious festival.

On the day of the competition in Terranova di Pollino we followed one of the musicians, who took a carload of the wheat from the harvest to his home in Pedali – a hamlet that is part of the municipality

4.8 (*Facing*)
San Paolo Albanese, 2005.
Dancing the sickles at the
sound of a *zampogna*.

4.9 (*Facing*)
San Paolo Albanese, 2005.

4.10 (*Overleaf*)
San Paolo Albanese, 2017.
Dances in front of the church
on St Roch's day.





4.11 Piano delle Mandrie, near Terranova di Pollino, 2018. Reaping competition.

of Viggianello. Here a group of women were renovating the large, cone-shaped offering that was to be taken on a procession on the day of the Madonna del Carmine later that month. Viggianello is located in a fertile valley which produces large quantities of wheat, yet the opportunity to get manually reaped wheat with long stalks could not be missed, since the agriculture of the area has been mostly mechanised. This was a domestic setting, a simple courtyard in which communal work on a devotional artefact reinforced the ties within the community. The spectacularisation taking place in Terranova di Pollino seemed not to have reached the Madonna del Carmine festival in Pedali, which revolves around a small procession of wheat offerings during which live animals are donated for an auction that takes place in the square in front of the church.

The role of communal work was clear in another context in which wheat offerings are created as a common effort of a district or hamlet. In 2019 in Manca di Sopra, in the territory of Episcopia, the wheat of the



offering was renovated in a public park, which became the centre of a real feast in which each participant contributed food and drinks. Though only a minority took part in the actual process of tying the bundles of ears of wheat to the frame of the offering, many of the inhabitants of the small hamlet showed up for the occasion. The commensality added to the community-making character of the event, which also saw the presence of many returning emigrants from northern Europe or northern Italy. It is also an opportunity to transmit specialised knowledge across generations, such as that for the making of the offerings.

That wheat festivals are going through a process of revival is also evident in a case that shares some features with processes of invention of tradition. In Chiaromonte, formerly an important agricultural centre in the valley of river Sinni, since the first half of the 2010s the patron saint's festival of St John the Baptist has included an exhibition and procession of wheat and candle offerings coming from a number of villages in the surrounding area. Held at the end of August, the festival culminates in

4.12 Pedali di Viggianello, 2018. Making bundles of ears of wheat for the communal offering to the Madonna del Carmine.



a prize-giving ceremony that awards the best offering on the basis of a popular ballot. This format was introduced by local associations and the parish as a way to reinvigorate the festival. In particular, Andrea Mobilio was instrumental in the reintroduction of wheat offerings in Chiaromonte. He learned to make them from a man in San Giorgio Lucano, and since then he has been collaborating with other villages providing support and at times making new offerings for other festivals in the time left by his job as a truck driver. He has created a network of village festivals that becomes visible during the exhibition and parade in Chiaromonte, in some cases stimulating awareness of the cultural value of the offerings beyond specific acts of individual devotion.

The festival in Chiaromonte is a striking example of heritagisation. In 2018, its structure brought together offerings made for different saints or Madonnas in different villages, mixing the religious occasion of the festival of St John with a celebration of the offerings as cultural heritage. The way in Chiaromonte the two elements of devotion and cultural performance are kept together is remarkable and especially meaningful of the broader situation of the region.

The prize-giving ceremony, sponsored by groups of emigrants settled in northern Italy, makes visible the contradictions at work in the processes of resignification of wheat festivals. If they are becoming part

4.13 (Facing, above)
San Paolo Albanese, 2017.
Making bundles of ears of wheat for the communal offering to St Roch.

4.14 (Facing, below)
Manca di Sopra, Episcopia, 2019. A feast on occasion of the renovation of the communal offering to the Madonna del Piano.

4.15 Chiaromonte, 2018.
Preparing a wheat offering for the festival of St John the Baptist.





4.16 Chiaromonte, 2018. Blessing of the wheat and candle offerings at the festival of St John the Baptist.

of the image of themselves that the inhabitants display to visitors, it is also because of the opportunity that they offer to celebrate a largely imagined authentic agricultural past, which takes strongly nostalgic tints in the light of the current transformations of the area. Agriculture is less and less relevant economically and in people's daily lives, and the surface dedicated to the fields has been shrinking for the past fifty years. The same period has seen the emergence of new forms of extraction from the territory, which have reconfigured people's understandings of the land. Rich in waterways, Basilicata has become the location of several dam projects that have taken away land from some communities. It also hosts the main oil and natural gas reserves in Italy, and is a site of production of wind energy, both of which have given rise to protests revolving around the polluting impact of the former and the impact on the landscape of the latter.

If the pastoral and agricultural world where wheat festivals have their origins is all but gone, people's attachment finds in these rituals



an expression that goes beyond the politics of heritage involved. This juncture of affect, devotion, reuse of anthropological knowledge and touristic promotion makes wheat festivals emblematic of the condition of much of Basilicata's cultural heritage at the time of our writing. They precariously walk a line between the celebration of rurality and becoming a defunctionalised spectacle. By engaging stereotypes and expectations of tradition through visual displays and sound-making, the protagonists of wheat festivals enact their own visions of tradition and rurality to an external audience and to themselves. This chapter, in addition to underlining the social functions of identity- and community-making that wheat festivals still perform, suggests that their protagonists have taken up a conscious and active role in representing their heritage, often appropriating stereotypes and exoticist depictions (cf. Kalantzis 2019: 3–6). It is perhaps the simultaneous presence of these diverse levels and functions in a context such as that of contemporary Basilicata that explains the present revival of wheat festivals.

4.17 Chiaromonte, 2018.
After the prize-giving ceremony following the festival of St John the Baptist.

4.18 (*Overleaf*)
Tempa Rossa, Corleto Perticara, 2019. A field is prepared for the next season with, in the background, an oil and gas extraction site and a wind farm.



Sound-chapter 4 – *Dancing with wheat*

This sound-chapter is entirely composed of field recordings made during wheat festivals in Basilicata between 2004 and 2018, including religious processions and secular events. The music and rhythm of the *tarantella* create a common sonic thread that connects all the festivals.