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UNIVERSIDADE NOVA DE LISBOA

Women and religiosity in a Sicilian town:
The roles of women in holding community together through tradition and innovation in Bivona

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Dissertação de Mestrado em Antropologia - Temas Contemporâneos

Novembro 2024

Dissertação apresentada para cumprimento dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do grau de Mestre em Antropologia - Temas Contemporâneos, realizada sob a orientação científica da Professora Doutora Maria dos Anjos Maltez Cardeira da Silva

A chi mi guida da lassù

A chi mi guida da quaggiù

A casa

A quello che è diventato casa

A tutte le Donne della mia vita

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank from the bottom of my heart Professor Maria Cardeira da Silva, who has believed in this project, and in me, since I have met her in 2020. It is only thanks to the passion I witnessed in the anthropologists I have encountered at NOVA FCSH if I consider myself lucky enough to have found a subject and an area of study that deeply resonates with my personal values and my hopes to build a better future, despite the despicable global scenario we wake up to every morning. Certainly, this thesis has taken its detours: some forced time off in France, some neglect in between one of the way too many projects I have tried to handle, hoping to bring forward something meaningful in the multiple places I call home. It has taken its shape, slowly, heavily, introspectively and it has risen in unexpected times to come to what I consider a starting point, rather than an end. A piece of work that tries to narrate a story that would have otherwise gone *unheard, unspoken, unwritten,* like many of my island's stories. I hope I was able to do justice to the bravery of the women that have crossed my path, and those who, although not being mentioned in this work, have built the path itself. I would like to recognise their fight and courage, yet once again, for existing despite the contemporary threats to our freedom and rights.

This thesis is mine as much as it is of the people that have contributed to its birth. In the first place, it is of the women of Bivona, who opened their houses and hearts to share their realities and beliefs. It is of the women of Comitato Santa Rosalia 2024 who fought to cherish tradition and innovation. It is of the multitude of people I love and that support my involvement in shedding a light of cultural justice in Sicily, for whom I am deeply grateful. *Matilde* for being my never ending emotional support in the redaction of this thesis; *Kristina* for proofreading and reviewing this work patiently; *Gonçalo, Raquel, João, Inaara, Mariana, Daniel, Zofia, Mariana A., Julia,* for taking on the Bivona's cause with joy and empathy. *Veronica, Antonella, Ludovico* for showing me new lights of friendship and community. *Michele and Mirea; Raffaele and Elena*; *Gaia and Alice*, my pillars, for always being on this journey with me. *Papà, Mamma,* my *grandmothers*: the roses of my life. My *Family*, my powerful aunts, my fierce cousins, my *rebel lineage*, and my communities all across the world – UWC, SciencesPo, NOVA, Bivona, Lisbona – for giving me the examples of strength, passion, care and emotion that I find reflected in my search for beauty, culture, love and future every day.

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Abstract

The small town of Bivona, nestled in the heart of Sicily, boasts a rich tapestry of cultural traditions and religious practices that have been passed down through generations. At the center of this vibrant community exist women, whose unwavering commitment to faith and familial bonds has played a pivotal role in preserving the town's unique identity. In a society where Catholicism remains a significant part of the cultural fabric, Bivona's women have embraced their religious heritage while also navigating the complexities of contemporary life. Their ability to balance tradition and innovation has been crucial in maintaining the town's social cohesion, as they skillfully weave together the threads of the past, the present and the future. Through their active participation in religious rituals, women in Bivona have become the custodians of their community's shared values and beliefs. They organize and participate in local festivities, such as the annual feasts of the Patron Saints, ensuring that these sacred traditions are passed down to the younger generations. However, Bivona's women have not simply adhered to the traditional gender roles prescribed by their cultural and religious upbringing.

Keywords: Women, religiosity, feminisation of religion, (de)patriarchy, tradition, innovation, community, youth, Sicily

Resumo

A pequena cidade de Bivona, aninhada no coração da Sicília, possui uma rica tapeçaria de tradições culturais e práticas religiosas que foram transmitidas através de gerações. No centro desta comunidade vibrante há mulheres, cujo empenhamento inabalável na fé e nos laços familiares têm desempenhado um papel fundamental na preservação da identidade única da cidade. Numa sociedade em que o catolicismo continua a ser uma parte significativa do tecido cultural, as mulheres de Bivona abraçaram a sua herança religiosa e, ao mesmo tempo, navegaram pelas complexidades da vida contemporânea. A sua capacidade de equilibrar tradição e inovação tem sido crucial para manter a coesão social da cidade, uma vez que tecem habilmente os fios do passado, do presente e do futuro. Através da sua participação ativa nos rituais religiosos, as mulheres de Bivona tornaram-se as guardiãs dos valores e crenças partilhados pela comunidade. Organizam e participam nas festividades locais, como as festas anuais dos santos padroeiros, assegurando que estas tradições sagradas sejam transmitidas às gerações mais novas. No entanto, as mulheres de Bivona não se limitaram a aderir aos papeis tradicionais de género prescritos pela sua educação cultural e religiosa.

Palavras chaves: Mulheres, religiosidade, feminização da religião, (de)patriarcado, tradição, inovação, comunidade, juventude, Sicília

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Prosaic Prologue

The memorable Sicilian writer Luigi Pirandello once wrote "*I was born in Sicily, and there men are born as an 'island' within the island and remain as such until death*". As I approach my first statement, I already convey how my anthropological and social mind involuntarily (or maybe not) would have translated to English the word 'men' into a more inclusive 'people'. I had to correct myself to be loyal to the author's voice, but this specificity will be the first and foremost point of the exploration that will follow in the next pages. As simple as that, the 'male' imperative in romance languages – Sicilian included – introduces us to a topic that goes hand-in-hand with the second subject of Pirandello's quote, Sicily. An island that he describes as arid and jealous, splendid in the immensity of the sea surrounding it. In Sicily, people are born as 'islands' within the island because they are born in philosophical loneliness. In the middle of the Mediterranean sea, burnt by the sun, stormed by the sirocco winds, closer to Africa than to Europe, at the intersections of two continents, three regions, and innumerable civilisations. Colonized but never colonizers, the Sicilian people are known to be apathetic and resigned, accepting of all impositions, keen to assume customs of others and making them theirs. Their isolation is their strength and limitation, as they bring the desert of their own towns and sandy beaches in their heart and mindset. Well, if Pirandello, originary of the coastal city of Agrigento thought that of his countrymen – there we go again – he would possibly agree with me that more 'island within the island' of a Sicilian that sees the sea everyday, it's a Sicilian that sees the mountain. Sicilians from the hinterland are even closer to the center of the earth than any other Sicilian: they are in the middle of an island, in the middle of the Mediterranean, in the middle of two continents, in a very peculiar state of isolation. For as much as the socio-political and economic systems have advanced in Italy as in Sicily – yet at a slower pace – for as much as technology and education unites the younger generations more than ever – tearing down the walls of space and communication – the Sicilian hinterland remains a place physically distant from the coastal cities, with cranky infrastructures and unacceptables detours that pushes it even further from the poles of health and higher education. However, nature is pure and gentle, sound and air pollution are inexistent, people reach 100 years old at an exceptional rate, which turned the area of the Monti Sicani into a new blue zone. The food is genuine, the water is fresh, the human connections close-knit. Everyone knows, and ideally cares, about everyone, and people are still recognised through the family they belong to. Danger is low and the villages are a safe

place for children to grow and play freely in the streets. The tradition of each town is unique, passed down carefully from generation to generation; the acts of tradition are often ancestral, modified just lightly because of the change in times. There is not much literature and knowledge about the stories and the places of memory of this almost forgotten Sicily. Less even when it comes to its women, often overlooked by enduring patriarchal and rural traditions. And this is where I come from. As an anthropologist, you may wonder, researching on one's own place might be problematic and biased: it possibly is. And this is the reason why I am letting everything out of my system through this prosaic and very little academic introduction to my research field. I have a strong emotional connection to the place where I come from, I was born and raised in the Sicani mountains, and for 25 years I was firstly a witness, and later a thinker within this context. And this makes me certain that, possibly, there couldn't be a better expert to actually grasp this project. My approach to anthropology and my active work in the region as a cultural referee has always been transformative and attentive to social action. I see potential and curiosity towards how my society and culture unfolds, and where it is moving towards. As I mentioned, there is not much research for this area, possibly because the reality is too small, too hard to generalize to broader contexts. But I am a hinterland Sicilian, that for the past 8 years has lived and studied the question of gender, identity and indigenous knowledge: spacing from textile cultures and entrepreneurship in Mexico and Guatemala, to Middle Eastern questions of honor, to local empowerment through digitalization in Sicily. The reality of Bivona is a global reality, because I see its resonance, similarities and differences, with the other contexts I have explored. There are lessons to grasp that will benefit the world outside, and there are immense possibilities for Bivona to take advantage of letting a piece of world anthropology in. This is at the core of my research, my personal and communitarian will to understand how what happens inside reflects global patterns, structures of patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism. This is probably my own *Love Song to the Nation*, it is my love song to the women of my place, so strong and fragile, poison and antidote of their own struggles and fights; a love song to my culture and community, which shall not be forgotten in its philosophical loneliness in between the mountains.

Lisbon, 16th April 2024

Chapter One: Framework of the Research

I. Introduction

The Catholic religion in Sicily plays a central role in the identity of its people: it is transmitted through rituals and traditions and carried with devotion, especially in the most rural areas of the island. As women are historically recognized as the carriers of religious tradition in rural contexts (Christian, 1972), the intention of this investigation is to analyze the roles of women in the religious life of a rural town in Sicily, how such interacts with its contemporary settings and some of the possibilities of empowerment for women. As religion and tradition profoundly meet in rural areas, the role of women in their locality is rather one of 'community holders' than simply 'religion holders'. As women use religion to ensure familiar and communitarian union, such an example leads us to further analyze to what extent these practices empower the role of women in rural societies or instead relegate them to their predefined patriarchal roles.

The intention of this investigation is to critically analyze the role of women as the bearers of religion and the bearers of community in Bivona, the town from where I come from and from which standards of 'womanhood' I have rather personally detached in the past eight years. Most specifically, this analysis will accompany two of the main religious celebrations of the town, strictly intertwined with its social and political events, and the role that women play in them. Bivona's socio-cultural schedule is strictly related to its religious and folkloristic celebrations, which define the yearly calendar. My exploration will be focused on two of the main religious periods: the spring celebrations of St. Joseph's Day and the summer celebration of the Patroness of the town, Santa Rosalia, on the 4th of September.

My main observations are drawn by two years of research during which I have analyzed the religious behaviors, traditions, and superstitions of the community of Bivona; during which my interest was organically redirected towards the female population specifically. The interest in the active and passive role of women in Bivona's religiosity sprouted from their massive presence and contribution in the making and carrying of tradition, which went hand in hand with their high rate of attendance in religious processions and masses. As this research originally started from the study of the traditions themselves, I easily found the focus on the 'makers behind tradition' more worth mentioning for the societal and political

times we are living in. When I started my field research and observation of the preparations of San Giuseppe in 2022, I came to realize the cohesive role that women played in the making of tradition. Women are the backbone of the realization of celebrations like San Giuseppe or Santa Rosalia, yet their role seemed secluded or limited to the 'backstage' of the tradition, in the kitchens or within their family.

The private role of women carrying religious traditions immediately resonated with the question of to what extent the personal is political and whether there lies empowerment in this specific place they occupy in Bivona's society. The more I met the makers of the San Giuseppe's tables, the more I came to explore and understand the thousand of subtle connections to the other realms of private and public life that women experience in Bivona: from gossiping to magical beliefs, from their consideration of men in the public and private sphere, from their stance in politics and societal matters, from their visions as young women to the eldest components of these groups. What I opened was a Pandora's box within the four walls of a kitchen, a concept of womanhood so strong and yet so dominated in the same exact space: women seemed to be at the heart of society, the holders of traditions, families, carriers of hard jobs and crafts - yet always one step behind the men in their lives.

I could not help but wonder what role women play in a community like Bivona, in which I have always perceived them as subaltern to the male imposition and gaze. Coming together as a bigger and stronger group of women, who helped each other during the religious celebrations, I had the chance to grasp a sisterhood, an intimacy, almost similar to the reserved circles of Abu Lughod's *Veiled Sentiments*: a place where women, in a safe space of reflection, had the chance to stay together, teaching each other, observing and commenting male impositions and creating new narratives. How women interact and get together to better organize and provide a service to the community, and how they are internally and privately aware of their worth and of their husbands' shortcomings has led me to wonder not only about their relationship to religiosity, but their relationship in holding together womanhood and the community. My exploration brought me to meet more women, more of their stories and of their beliefs, more of their concrete action in Bivona's society.

I carried out my fieldwork further when in September 2022 a group of young women decided to take over the 400th celebration of Santa Rosalia, the Holy Patron of the town, which would take place in 2024. Observing this group of women coming together and

actively participating in their meetings and encounters during the past two years has helped me analyze how the role of women in Bivona is multifaceted, especially based on the different age groups and the societal expectations attached to them. I could observe different approaches to community and religion than the ones observed in older women preparing the San Giuseppe celebrations. The young women of Bivona, despite taking over a religious celebration, were committed to the idea of carrying on tradition and were primarily attached to the folkloric and emotional value that connected them with Santa Rosalia and her popular memory, rather than to the religious connotations of the Saint and of her religious celebrations. These different understandings and scenarios opened multiple fields of interpretation about the role of women in Bivona's religious society and community as a whole. As multifaceted were the circumstances, so were the results, which opened a door to the concept of 'statuses of intergenerational and intersectional womanhood' in Sicily and across the Mediterranean: the value attributed to community and religion and their shifting trends, the new approaches to tradition and innovation, as well as defining with complexity the roles and the duties of diverse women, confronting or fomenting the patriarchy.

II. Research Question

The latter reasoning provoked my willingness to research:

What are the roles of women in the religious life of a town, in which ways do they interact with the social and collective life of the place, how are they intersected by age and social structure and stratification, and to what extent do they enhance the perpetuation of traditional and patriarchal narratives or rather the development of new actions that change and innovate both tradition and the feminine status quo?

III. Objectives

The objectives of this investigation are multifaceted. First and foremost, stands the need of understanding women's participation and representation in a rural context like Bivona and the role that religion and religiosity play in their identity as women and as community stakeholders. Although the condition of women in Bivona could be defined as rather 'elevated' compared to the 20th century, patriarchal structures stand vigorously and imperatively in the town. Bivona still verges on a particularly male-led society, where women are oppressed in terms of expression, presence in the political organs, and access to

education. Even in the religious traditions of Bivona, where they participate extensively, the role of women has been critically overshadowed and underrated.

When I crossed the Doctoral Research of Guadalupe Jiménez-Esquinas *Del Paisaje al Cuerpo* (2018), I started wondering what could be the forgotten role of women in Bivona's traditions. More specifically, in traditions like the *San Giuseppe* votive table, women are considered as subaltern figures who lay in the 'background', in the 'kitchens'. Even if they are the most central actors in the realization of the *San Giuseppe* tables, the celebration is extensively men-led and women's merits are taken for granted. The gender-specific connotation of these traditions is one of the main topics I would like to further analyze in this research, starting from its historical roots up to its most recent anthropological perspective. I believe that my research could highlight, as Jiménez-Esquinas, a 'forgotten', more active role of women in Bivonese society, having the potential and the moral imperative of highlighting the gender discrepancies and understanding how to move forward from them .

I hope my work will open access to culture and tradition to those who, although being the backbone of their existence, end up being subalternated by dominant groups. To implement and analyze the realm of tradition with an outlook into the *matrimoine* of heritage and culture, the female-led patrimony shall earn back its ancestral belonging. My main objective will be to analyze and narrate the new possibilities of tradition in rural areas: a renewed attention to emotion, affection, and feminism. Finally, I would like to shed essential light on the roles that women play in culture, and advocate for their greater involvement within religious rituals and performances in particular, in the panorama of heritage, as well as in culture and politics in general.

IV. Literary Review

Very little academic work has been done in the Sicilian hinterland, especially in the Sicani Mountains, where Bivona is situated. To better position my work in the region, I will interpret core anthropological theories developed in Southern Europe and the Mediterranean, such as in *Religiosidad popular - Person and God in a Spanish Valley* (1972) by William Christian, *Anthropology of the Mediterranean Area* by David D. Gilmore (1982) along with its critics, and Michael Herzfeld's theories of *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics and The Real Life of States, Societies, and Institutions* (2016).

To set the theoretical basis of this investigation, I would like to introduce the topic of womanhood and religiosity by analyzing structural work on popular religion carried out by Bourdieu, Durkheim, and Geertz. Filling the gap between classic texts and the most modern intersectional analysis of women and religion may be an interesting challenge. As Sicilian academic literature lacks a contemporary overview of womanhood and religiosity, as well as women and community making, I will further support my analysis with contemporary academic research on the topic. The investigations and Doctoral research of fellow colleagues will be essential to consider and fill this gap: the work of Lena Gemzöe *Feminine Matters: Women's Religious Practices in a Portuguese Town* (2000) provides a means of comparison concerning rituals and gendered religiosity in small towns that may share similar systems of knowledge, mentality, and traditions.

Understanding Sicily means understanding the melting pot of cultures and dynamics that cohabit on the island, as well as the colonizations that have shaped our mentality and traditions (Arabs, Normans, Greeks, Spanish, Catalans). It may be relevant to analyze and draw similarities and differences with Arab and Spanish researches, such as Abu Lughod's *Veiled Sentiment* (1986), Mahmood's *Feminist Theory, Agency, and the Liberatory Subject* (2006), Jiménez-Esquinas' *Del Paisaje al Cuerpo: una crítica feminista de la patrimonialización del encaje en la Costa da Morte* (2018) and Antunes, P. *Depois da morte: o restauro imaterial da encomendação das almas* (2015), to grasp a Southern European and Mediterranean essence of womanhood, religion, and community.

I will ensure my research is backed by structural anthropological handbooks and texts regarding religion and feminism. Once the most close-knit relations between these main subjects are analyzed and observed through field investigation, it will be essential to discuss what transformative roles women have, analyzing their active and agential role in maintaining tradition alive and community together. How do we transform and shape tradition, religion, and culture to move forward with them whilst creating new narratives? A whole series of essential literature will need to be considered: including the collection *Emotion, Affective Practices, and the Past in the Present* by L. Smith, M. Wetherell and G. Campbell (2018), B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's *Intangible heritage as metacultural production* (1998), and E. Hobsbawm's *The invention of tradition* (1982).

Finally, in order to give life to a transformative project, centered on concrete innovation for

the local community, and finding sustainable solutions towards women and communitarian empowerment, I will introduce the concept of the *Anthropology of Emotions*, and its practical realization in works like Elisa Bonacini's *Engaging Participative Communities in Cultural Heritage* (2019), Elena Settimini's *Women's representation and participation in UNESCO heritage discourse* (2020), and Marzia Varutti's *The affective turn in museums and the rise of affective curatorship* (2023), that will be essential to assess the new possibilities and strategies to ensure women's presence and agency in the carrying and making of tradition and heritage.

V. Methodology

The lack of access to information when it comes to these traditions will require a meticulous review of existing literature and local knowledge, enhanced by participant observations and semi-structured interviews of the makers of tradition. The approach to this research is qualitative and will rely on a close relationship with local stakeholders, an approach that allows women to feel comfortable and empowered, rather than simply as objects of analysis. In a close-knit community like Bivona, it would be counterproductive to observe the religious celebrations without participating firsthand in their preparation and enactment: for the latter, I will participate in the seasonal events, mirroring and helping the families that will prepare the votive tables of San Giuseppe and the celebrations of Santa Rosalia. Only by sharing the same rooms and experiences with the main actors of the religious celebrations will I be able to get a better insight into the religious and gendered dynamics that take place in the private sphere of the houses and in the public sphere when the celebrations occur and the religious momentum is shared with the whole community.

As the first participant observation in 2022 has shown, acts of service and presence – visiting the families who prepare the feast, chatting and discussing, sipping coffee together, helping them cook and prepare, playing with their kids – create a bond of trust and safety, thanks to which people feel more comfortable sharing honestly and openly to a fellow 'Bivonese', rather than to a researcher. I strongly believe that building an environment of trust and comfort during my investigation can have a productive and holistic impact on the data collected and on its trustworthiness. Of course, every person was and will be informed and debriefed about my position as a researcher and the purpose of this investigation. The people I had discussed the purpose of this research with so far have been happy and motivated to share with me, especially 'so that tradition does not fade'. Participant observation, in the

public sphere of processions and masses, will help me observe and analyze the interactions between women and their community.

As previously mentioned, it will be essential to gather as much information as possible from the local stakeholders: the makers of tradition, especially women who carried the religious traditions of the town for decades, will be interviewed. To grasp as many nuances as possible from these conversations, I envision scheduling unstructured and semi-structured interviews where the stakeholders feel free to narrate their own stories. The unstructured interviews will allow me to gather as much diverse and personal data as possible; a path to disclose unique parts of the tradition, religion, and cultural system in Bivona. I will use unstructured interviews with the main stakeholders of the town: people like Mrs. Lina and Nonna Pina, women who have been carrying on the seasonal religious celebrations for over 50 years. At the same time, I will interview the young committee of Santa Rosalia, a rather secular and modern group of women. By diversifying my groups, especially in age and education, and gathering as many perspectives as possible, I hope to draw a comprehensive panorama of the feelings that these women have towards religion and tradition, and how we can embrace such views to add yet another piece to the puzzle of understanding complex identities and their interactions with gender.

Through my research, I hope to create focus groups and gather women to install a transformative process of sisterhood. The dynamics of womanhood in Bivona are peculiar and reflect a strongly patriarchal society where a number of women are often delegated exclusively to the domestic environments. This creates a sense of strong belonging between the women of the same family, but a high level of unresponsiveness and mistrust when it comes to other women. The fear of being observed, judged, and talked about by other women is a threat to their honor and integrity. Similarly, recording audio-visual material for my research, especially in the privacy of their own homes, was tricky and triggered ethical concerns. The majority of older women did not want to be filmed when at home, as they were not ‘properly’ dressed and made-up as they would be if seen in public. During the first exploratory observation, they were more than happy for me to take pictures of the foods and procedures, but they did not want to appear in pictures. Hence, as the production of audio-video material for my research would be problematic, I would like to experiment with alternative strategies such as open-hearted conversations, interviews, and images in perspective – narrating through pictures of the hands preparing and their final results – in

order to give women the chance to choose their preferred angle and narrate more freely their opinions on the celebrations and their womanhood in them.

On the contrary, when observing and working with the 2024 Santa Rosalia Committee, personal portrait and video evidence seemed to be key to their interactions, especially those they had with the public via social media, a tool they used abundantly. Collecting pictures and recordings, along with participant observations and focus groups will be some of the methodologies used to explore their presence and work in the religious festivities. As the generational gap may demonstrate, new instruments could be used to study the group and individual dynamics of younger women, and an analysis of their social media presence could be beneficial.

a. Cultural Intimacy

The concept of cultural intimacy, as developed by Michael Herzfeld in *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics and The Real Life of States, Societies, and Institutions* (2016), offers a profound framework to understand the approach I used to observe and interact with women in Bivona during my research from March 2022 to September 2024. Herzfeld defines cultural intimacy as the bond that forms through a shared sense of social identity, often expressed through behaviors or beliefs that are both a source of pride and embarrassment among community members (Herzfeld, 1997; 2016, p. 7). This concept enables researchers to understand the delicate balance communities maintain between what they show to the outside world and what remains intimate and protected within. My interactions with the women preparing for the San Giuseppe celebration and the Santa Rosalia Committee revealed layers of such intimacy, as well as the tensions between public and private cultural practices, generational shifts, and gendered spaces of expression. These aspects illuminated the subtle yet profound ways cultural intimacy shapes collective identity and community cohesion.

Ethnographers gain valuable insights when they build trust, a necessary step for engaging with what Herzfeld calls ‘intimate social spaces’ (*Ibid.*, p. 16). Long-term relationships in the field offer researchers access to relations of intimacy that reveal the very aspects of the larger worlds. This approach not only brings out the subtleties of *social poetics* and shared narratives but it also places researchers as perceived participants within the communities they study, allowing for a “shared intimacy and common experience essential for uncovering and

analyzing deeply ingrained cultural beliefs" (*Ibid*., p.8). Cultural intimacy also presents methodological challenges, particularly in ethical considerations. Researchers' access to sensitive cultural expressions may evoke resentment from locals defending official ideologies, as well as pressures to censor or omit revealing details from published accounts. Similarly, people may create self-promoting or introspective stereotypes (*Ibid*., p. 21) that may derail the authenticity of research. Despite this, Herzfeld emphasizes the importance of observing and reporting these intimate truths, arguing that such revelations provide fodder for its reproduction in new contexts and help refine ethnographic methodologies to reveal the overlooked, localized aspects of culture (*Ibid*., p. 57).

These elements often reveal community's contradictions and reactions that may underscore how cultural intimacy manifests in gendered spaces, the maintenance of tradition, and evolving expressions of local identity. For instance, the women of the 2024 Santa Rosalia Committee were highly discouraged to take over the 400th Anniversary celebrations, as those had been historically led mostly by men. Herzfeld's concept of *cultural intimacy* may help explain these gendered reactions, as it reveals how gender roles in Bivona are part of the unspoken social fabric, quietly enforced even within intimate, local spaces. Just as the women I observed in the San Giuseppe households were expected to take on traditional roles in food preparation, the young women in the Santa Rosalia Committee faced similar expectations about their "appropriate" roles. The comments they received illustrated a collective discomfort at the sight of women challenging these entrenched norms, showing that Bivona's cultural intimacy includes the reinforcement of patriarchal structures. Nevertheless, the Santa Rosalia committee's efforts to embrace their role and gradually reshape expectations reflect an awareness of these constraints, as well as a subtle defiance within the bounds of their cultural and religious context.

Herzfeld's theories allow us to appreciate these complex dynamics, as cultural intimacy reveals both the community's protective tendencies and its potential for subtle transformation. In Bivona, cultural intimacy serves as the foundation upon which communities negotiate their expected social roles, as well as between public performance and private belief. By entering these spaces, I was not only a researcher but a witness to the intimate expressions of pride and conservatism, resilience and bliss, that bind Bivona's people to their heritage, embodying Herzfeld's idea of cultural intimacy as both a mirror and a shield for communities seeking to preserve their identity amidst a changing world.

VI. Context

a. Anthropology of the Mediterranean

In *Anthropology of the Mediterranean Area* (1982), David D. Gilmore introduces the affinities between Southern European people and those of North Africa and the Levant, Christians and Muslims. “These resemblances start with the environment but include many ‘core issues of life’: male-female relations, community orientations, patron-client dependencies, and, more recently, a supposedly similar peripheral relationship to the core of industrial Europe” (Gilmore, 1982, p. 175). Gilmore describes the historical ties of this region connected by coasts and waters, where the Mediterranean has often functioned as a "bridge" rather than a barrier, fostering trade and social connections among bordering nations, despite geopolitical and ecological divides:

> *Historically the Mediterranean Sea has acted more as a bridge than a barrier, encouraging trade and social contact between the countries bordering it. Goitein speaks of the "humdrum" quality of ancient and medieval voyages between Sicily and Tunisia, Marseilles and the Levant (87, 1:42). Braudel remarks that even the tempestuous Straits of Gibraltar united Europeans and Africans over the centuries more than it divided them (28, p. 117). Perhaps then we should start with the fact of this landlocked Middle Sea as a unifier, a historical bridge. Then we could think about trading, seafaring, and common experiences.*
>
> (Gilmore, 1982, p. 177)

Gilmore digs into the controversies and similarities of the sociocultural traits associated with the Mediterranean entity: amongst others, “political instability and a history of weak states; atomistic community life; rigid sexual segregation; an honor and shame syndrome which defines both sexuality and personal reputation” (*Ibid.*, p. 178-179). The dynamics of community life also bear many affinities. Most villagers share an intense parochialism or *campanilismo*, and intervillage rivalries are common (*Ibid*., 179) Communities are marked off by local cults of patron saints who are identified with the territorial unit. Some puritanical elements in Maghrebi Islam bear comparison to puritanical traditions in Spanish mysticism

(*Ibid*.). The North African local saint bears much in common with 'southern European' patron saints, according to Geertz. The pattern of religious orthodoxy in the states in the northern littoral is paralleled in the states on the southern shore (*Ibid.*).

Beyond religion, Gilmore analyzes marriage and highlights similarities in concepts of womanhood. "Women are said to be private creatures who are inactive economically. Yet there is constant evidence of the importance of female contributions to the domestic economy. The view of women is itself dualistic: she is both Madonna and whore" (*Ibid.*, p. 180). This dichotomy highlights the outstanding contradiction of 'appearance and reality' in Mediterranean cultures, which "suggests that what anthropologists impressionistically have felt to be Mediterranean parallels reflect rather a sensitivity to some underlying dialectic or subsurface interplay of opposites" (*Ibid*.). However, these contradictions need further studies: as an over-characterization like the one Gilmore introduces may easily lead towards an overgeneralization of the diversity and the multiple natures of people in the Mediterranean. Whilst defining the geo-environmental approaches to the Mediterranean area, Gilmore himself presents an impasse towards conceiving the region: "if 'Mediterranean' is to define those countries touching the Sea and sharing its commercial mutualism, then Portugal, a most typically Mediterranean country, would be excluded. Libya and Egypt would be included despite their desert and riverine valley ecologies and their lack of a typical Mediterranean topography (5, p. 179-80). Obviously, then, "Mediterranean" implies much more than geography" (*Ibid*., p. 177). To study the Mediterranean as a region, then, we need to embrace a more nuanced perspective that recognizes not only the connections created by the Sea but also the diversity of its cultures and contexts.

As Dionigi Albera discusses in *The Mediterranean as an anthropological laboratory* (1999), there are many shortcomings to this unifying vision of the Mediterranean, as it is too broad and too vague (Albera, 1999, p. 219). Albera criticizes how much anthropological research in the Mediterranean has focused on rural, often marginal, communities, raising concerns on not representing the region comprehensively and tribalizing Mediterranean cultures. As both Llobera and Pina Cabral further criticized, the notion of the 'Mediterranean' as a unified cultural area largely emerged to meet the needs of Anglo-Saxon anthropology: " a 'culture area' is more useful as a means of distancing Anglo-American scholars from the populations they study than as a way of making a sense of the cultural homogeneities and differences that characterize the region departments" (*Ibid.*, p. 220). The concept of an 'honor and shame

complex' as a unifying cultural feature of the Mediterranean has also faced significant criticism. Albera introduces this *fetishization* of Mediterranean culture, using Herzfeld's term *Mediterraneanism*, to describe how the region is often represented as culturally distinct through an ideologically driven portrayal of *otherness,* akin to Said's *Orientalism*. He argues that themes of survivalism, exoticism, and ethnocentrism pervade much of the Mediterraneanist literature (*Ibid*.).

Mediterraneanism may indeed lead to some faulty perceptions and stereotypes about the region: as Naor Ben-Yehoyada's article *Mediterraneanist Anthropology* (2016; 2023) critiques about the perspective that some Mediterranean societies are frozen in time and that certain social institutions have remained unchanged amidst modernity. Ben-Yehoyada discusses how this notion has been challenged, arguing that all communities are in a constant state of interaction and change (Ben-Yehoyada, 2016; 2023, p. 4). His work emphasizes the importance of understanding the Mediterranean not just as a geographical entity but as a dynamic social and cultural space shaped by historical contacts. This perspective encourages a comparative analysis of social organization and cultural practices across the region, moving away from rigid nationalistic frameworks (*Ibid.*, p. 5-6). Ben-Yehoyada advocates for finding a balance in the anthropological understanding of the Mediterranean as an area of study. He critiques the shift from viewing Mediterranean traits as merely comparative to understanding them as expressions of cultural unity (*Ibid*. p. 10), while arguing for a nuanced view that recognizes both the similarities and diversities present within Mediterranean societies. Following Ben-Yehoyada's perspective, understanding the Mediterranean – without overgeneralizing the people and communities existing in it – offers a relevant lens of how contemporary socio-political relationships are forged in this complex and historically rich area. Its interconnectedness can help shed light on some of its common shortcomings, whilst its diversity can help us recalibrate concepts of universalism and cultural relativism, providing us with a more gripping analysis of its societies.

b. Women's Empowerment in the Mediterranean Region

Gilmore's examination of Mediterranean societies underscores the prominence of male-female relations as a shared cultural thread among Southern European and North African societies. This affinity is rooted in historical social structures where gender roles, particularly within the family and local communities, embody ideals of honor and shame. For

instance, Gilmore identifies the pervasive notion of women as private creatures, who oscillate between contradictory private and public roles, illustrating the dichotomy that often defines gender in Mediterranean societies (Gilmore, 1982, p. 180). This duality of female identity reflects both a domestic, honor-bound image and a stigmatized notion of public female agency, shaping social and economic roles within a largely male-dominated social sphere. Such perspectives link Mediterranean cultures to a system in which gender roles underscore moral codes and community reputation, reinforcing boundaries between the private and public spheres.

However, this portrayal of gender-based dynamics has been criticized for fostering stereotypes and potentially misrepresenting Mediterranean societies. The critique refers to the *honor-shame complex* as part of the broader *Mediterraneanism* (Albera, 1999, p. 220), often projecting rigid notions of gender relations that reinforce perceived *otherness* between the West and the Mediterranean, resulting in an oversimplified understanding of gender roles. By generalizing concepts of honor and shame, Mediterraneanist literature may overlook significant variations and dynamic changes within these societies, perpetuating a static view of gender roles and obscuring the region's diversity. Dionigi Albera and other critics also question whether defining the Mediterranean as a unified cultural area, based on shared gender norms, fails to account for the sociopolitical diversity that exists across the region. For example, while rural communities may display traditional gender roles, urban settings in the Mediterranean increasingly exhibit evolving attitudes toward gender (*Ibid*.). Thus, attributing fixed gender identities to the entire region risks "tribalizing" Mediterranean cultures and dismissing the role of agency and external socio-political influences on gender. Finally, the conditions of women in the region should be examined critically, avoiding assumptions about their roles as solely defined by structural submission, nor taking for granted the achievements of the countries' political agendas.

Indeed, the concept of 'statuses of women' across the Mediterranean region reflects a complex interplay of progress and persistent challenges, influenced by both legislative frameworks and socio-cultural factors. As the European Union report on *Women's Empowerment in the Mediterranean Region* (2017) discloses, while many countries have enacted laws prohibiting gender discrimination, especially in employment, significant gaps remain in the enforcement of these laws. Women in this vast and differentiated region continue to face lower rates of economic participation and higher unemployment than men,

even where anti-discrimination laws exist to some extent (EU, 2017, p. 10). This disparity cannot be attributed solely to differences in education - though access to education, particularly in rural areas, remains problematic. Instead, deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms and traditional views of gender roles within families and society contribute to workplace discrimination, as evidenced by a preference for hiring men. In countries with socialist histories like Bosnia and Herzegovina or Albania, where female participation in the workforce is more normalized, the gender gap in unemployment is narrower, suggesting that cultural attitudes play a significant role in shaping women's economic opportunities (*Ibid.*).

The lack of economic independence also reinforces women's disadvantaged positions in their families, often correlating with higher risks of domestic violence. In many Mediterranean countries, societal expectations regarding family honor and male authority exacerbate the issue, with few legal protections for women, such as a lack of recognition of marital rape (*Ibid*., pp. 6; 19; 25). Additionally, practical barriers like limited access to childcare, poor work-life balance, and challenges in obtaining business financing further hinder women's economic empowerment (*Ibid*., p.26). Political participation, while improving through government initiatives like quotas for female candidates, remains limited. Although more women are entering political office, it is still unclear whether this increased representation is translating into more gender-sensitive policies . Positions of real political or business power remain largely dominated by men, and public support for female leadership is still not widespread (*Ibid.*, pp. 15; 18; 19). In the judicial sector, however, the growing number of female judges has shown some positive impact, particularly in addressing gender-related issues such as sextortion, as demonstrated by initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Ibid*., p. 19).

Despite these ongoing challenges, some countries are making strides toward improving gender equality. Tunisia has implemented programs to foster female economic empowerment, and Egypt's recent declaration of 2017 as the 'Year of Egyptian Women', along with its 2030 National Women's Strategy, are examples of efforts aimed at promoting gender equality across political, economic, and social spheres (*Ibid.*). Nonetheless, these initiatives remain the exception – and *de iure* suggestions – rather than a *de facto* norm, and much more is needed to address the structural and cultural barriers that continue to impede women's full participation and equality across the Mediterranean region and its diverse communities.

c. The various statuses of women in Italy and Sicily

There were 12,424 cases of domestic abuse in Italy in the first six months of 2024, a 5% increase on the 11,808 registered in the equivalent period last year (Ansa Brasil, 2024). According to data from the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2024, Italy ranks 87th globally in gender parity. Female labor force participation is only about 40%, significantly below the EU average, and with even lower numbers in the South. Women continue to face challenges such as job insecurity, a persistent wage gap, and underrepresentation in higher-paying sectors and leadership roles. Women make up about 32% of Italy's parliament, a relatively low figure compared to other European countries. Reproductive rights are at stake due to the rise of conservative and right-wing parties. Moreover, the economic, political and socio-cultural status of women in Italy changes drastically from north to south of the country.

As Monica Bozzano analyzes in *On the Historical Roots of Women's Empowerment across Italian Provinces: Religion or Family Culture?* (2015) "it emerges that territorial divergences in Italy are pronounced and some provinces show very low degrees of feminization, in particular in the political domain" (Buzzano, 2015, p. 3). The data reveals a significant regional disparity in women's representation in provincial politics across Italy. Regions such as Liguria, Emilia Romagna, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Tuscany, and Piedmont exhibit relatively high levels of female political involvement, with around 30% representation. In stark contrast, regions like Sicily, Sardinia, and Calabria show much lower figures, averaging only 12% female participation in local politics, Agrigento, Sicily, having the lowest representation as 6.8% (*Ibid.*, p. 9). This divide extends beyond politics to the economic sphere, where the same northern and central regions lead in women's empowerment. Meanwhile, southern regions continue to lag behind, reflecting deeper systemic inequalities in both political and economic domains. In Southern Italy, particularly in Sicily, the situation is severe, with unemployment rates for women among the highest in the country and in Europe[1], exacerbating the gender gap and economic participation. Gender-based violence also continues to be a critical issue. Despite legal frameworks in place to protect women, incidents of domestic violence and femicide remain concerningly high.

[1] According to Giornale di Sicilia, "In 2022, Sicily was the last in the European Union for women employment. Only 30.5% of women aged 15 to 64 worked, compared to the 64.8% of the EU average" (GDS, 2022).

Moreover, Bozzano's data highlights a stark contrast in the share of religious marriages between different regions of Italy, with Sicily – specifically the province of Trapani – showing the highest degree of religious marriages at 89.5%. This figure stands in sharp contrast to northern provinces like Gorizia in Friuli Venezia Giulia, where the share of religious marriages is significantly lower, at just 41% (*Ibid.,* p. 9). This reflects broader regional differences in cultural and social values, with Sicily maintaining more traditional practices, particularly in religious and family matters, compared to the more secularized northern regions of Italy.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics: Selected Variables[18]

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Women in Politics	103	20.801	8.641	Agrigento 6.869	Bologna 43.207
Women in Top Manager Positions	103	26.046	2.941	Napoli 19.753	La Spezia 31.547
Female Education	103	30.122	3.1559	Biella 23.59	Roma 43.61
Religious Marriages	103	67.09	12.543	Gorizia 41.176	Trapani 89.469
Current Fertility Rate	103	1.2074	0.136	Ferrara 0.879	Napoli 1.561

(Bozzano, 2015, p. 9)

d. The places and the celebrations surrounding the investigation

Bivona

Bivona is an Italian municipality located in the province of Agrigento, Sicily, home to approximately 3,205 inhabitants and surrounded by the scenic Sicani Mountains. Known for its IGP-certified peaches, Bivona's history dates back to probable Islamic origins and is first documented during the Norman period (Marrone, 1987, p.37). The town once housed a significant Jewish community, remnants of which can be found in the remains of a synagogue and local heraldry (Marrone, p. 122). Between the 15th and 16th centuries, it emerged as a major feudal center in the Vallo di Mazara, being elevated to a duchy by Charles V in 1554 (*Ibid.*, p. 152), becoming the first of its kind in the Kingdom of Sicily and gaining city status. The town is home to numerous religious institutions, including a Jesuit college sanctioned by Ignatius of Loyola, and boasts a rich collection of sacred architecture from its medieval center, featuring one of the oldest known cults of Santa Rosalia in Sicily (Tornatore, 2024). Architecturally, Bivona is home to numerous churches, including the Chiesa Madre

Chiaramontana, a gothic structure with only the main portal remaining, and the Chiesa di San Bartolomeo, showcasing Baroque design elements. Other notable churches include those dedicated to Santa Rosalia and San Paolo.

The cult of Santa Rosalia, in particular, is one of the oldest in the region, underscoring the town's deep-rooted religious traditions (*Ibid.*). Monastic life has also been significant in Bivona, with various convents, including those of the Carmelite and Dominican orders, that have transitioned over the centuries from religious sanctuaries to centers of education and civic engagement. These institutions not only provided spiritual guidance but also fostered community development. The town's religious history is intertwined with the remnants of a once-thriving Jewish community, evidenced by the remains of a synagogue and local heraldry that reflect its diverse cultural past. Overall, Bivona's religious heritage is a cornerstone of its identity, as evidenced by the preserved architecture, vibrant local traditions, and the ongoing significance of religious festivals and practices in the lives of its inhabitants. Significant references to its history have been documented by Antonino Marrone and Salvatore Tornatore, who delve into the town's ecclesiastical history, and various historical documents that illustrate the evolution of religious life in the community.

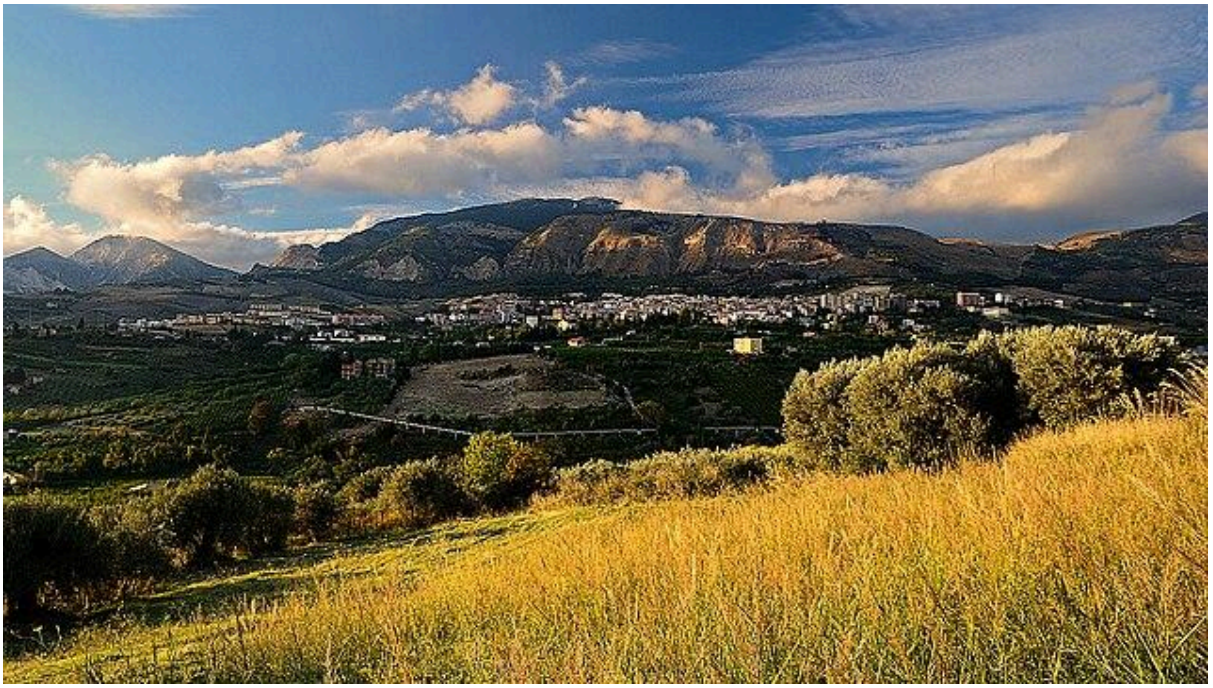


Figure 1. *View of Bivona*, Salvatore Giallombardo (2012)

Tavolata di San Giuseppe

St. Joseph's Day, *San Giuseppe*, on the 19th of March, is a celebration with a dense agenda of commemorations, songs and banquets, which contrasts with the reserved and punitive origin of the celebration, as it is often close or within the period of Lent. The *Tavulata di San Giuseppe*, a celebratory holy banquet laden to the Saint by specific families to ask or thank for a grace, is a popular religious tradition in Southern Italy and has central importance in Bivona. In the table of the *Tavulata*, every single element is embedded with religious and symbolic meaning, which is so specific to the Bivonese tradition that it cannot find an exact correspondent elsewhere. In the ancient times, the table was a moment of conviviality but also a moment of charity, where the delicacies of the table were subsequently donated to the poorest people of the town. The 2019 Video Report of the *San Giuseppe Celebration* by Piero Lattuca shows how women are the backbone of the preparation of the votive table (min 0.55 to 2.00): without their essential work the tradition will not keep going. Nevertheless, as soon as the celebration begins, the role of women is put aside and the table is surrounded mostly by men. Most particularly, the singers of the *Populu Me* (min. 36.00) have the central role in the celebration: they move from one table to the other across town to sing the ancestral litanies.

Figure 2. *San Giuseppe Votive Table,* Elena Greco (2024)

Santa Rosalia

Bivona is a town very attached to its religious traditions and various historical testimonies attribute it the oldest cult of Santa Rosalia in Sicily, elevated to Patron Saint after the miracle of ending the plague that struck the town in 1624. Solemn celebrations are dedicated to Santa Rosalia on 4 September. In the Church of Santa Rosalia, the gilded and polychrome wooden statue of the Santuzza is preserved, along with the remains of the 'sacred oak' of the cave where the virgin stopped during her hermitage, on top of which the religious building was built. Covered in pure gold, the statue was made in 1601 by the Bivona priest Ruggero Valenti (Tornatore, 2024). The Feast of Santa Rosalia of Bivona is deeply felt by the entire community, which takes part in the various religious celebrations with great devotion. On the 4th of September, in the church of Santa Rosalia, one can witness the traditional '*scinnuta*': when the statue of the Saint is dislocated from the apse to be brought in procession. The richly inlaid structure of the 'fercolo' – the feretory – is covered in pure gold and adorned with 12 silver bells, inside is placed the exquisite statue of Santa Rosalia, which is welcomed as it leaves the church with the waving of hundreds of hands to the sky. The feretory of Santa Rosalia, carried on the shoulders of twenty faithful, is then led in procession through the festively lit streets of the town, accompanied by the sound of marching bands and fireworks.

Figure 3. *Santa Rosalia's 400th Anniversary Celebrations,* Filippo Tagliarino (2024)

As can be detained from Piraino and Zambelli's work *Santa Rosalia and Mamma Schiavona: Popular Worship between Religiosity and Identity* (2015), a feminist interpretation of the story of Santa Rosalia sees her life as an act of resistance against traditional gender roles and her role in Sicilian society (Piraino & Zambelli, 2015, pp. 271; 273). Rosalia, born into an aristocratic family, rejected a life of privilege and an arranged marriage to pursue a solitary, spiritual path, choosing to live as a hermit on Monte Pellegrino. Her actions can be seen as a rejection of the patriarchal structures of her time, specifically the control over women's choices regarding marriage and their societal roles. This withdrawal from the norms set by her noble status also symbolizes a reclaiming of agency, as she devoted herself entirely to her own spiritual journey, which contrasts with the expected roles of women as wives and mothers. Her story, deeply tied to themes of personal autonomy, mysticism, and physical sacrifice, resonates with some feminist readings that emphasize women's autonomy over their bodies and lives. The symbolism of her hermitage in a cave – a secluded and often feminized space – reinforces her role as a woman retreating from the expectations of public, patriarchal life to claim her own sacred space.

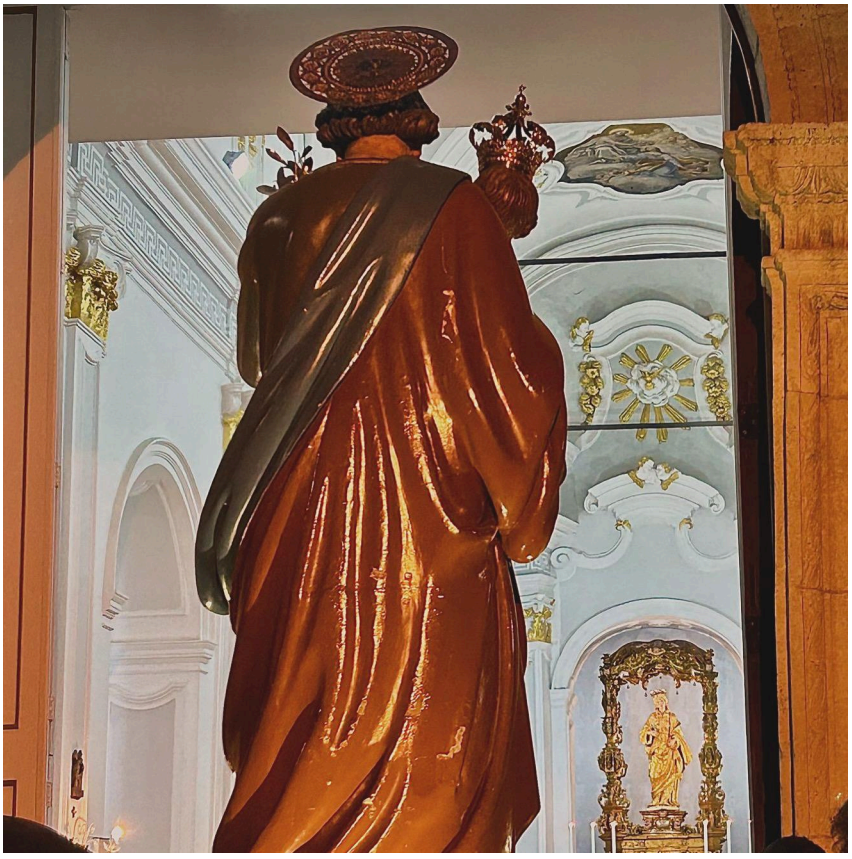


Figure 4. *San Giuseppe in procession salutes Santa Rosalia,* Sonia Baio (2024)

Chapter Two: Religiosity and the idea of womanhood in Southern Europe and the Mediterranean

I. William A. Christian Jr.'s *religiosidad popular*, a cross-century perspective

"*Una viuda que viva sola es medio vecino, una soltera sola es un cuarto de vecino*", quotes Christian in '*Religiosidad popular: estudio antropológico en un valle español*' (Christian, 1972, p.35). I assess Christians's work as his investigation resembles and intertwines with the purpose of my own analysis: what is the role of religiosity in rural areas and what role do women play in this socio-cultural, religious and symbolic interaction. Although it does not stand at the center of his research, reading Christian quickly helped me realize how, despite over 50 years of distance, many gendered norms and beliefs stay unchanged in 21st century Bivona. In order to analyze differences and similarities, progress and setbacks, I considered it interesting to review the 1960s rural behaviors of Christian's work to assess the ones unchanged and the ones challenged in the rural context of my own research.

One might wonder what close relationship an anthropological work held in Spain and one in Sicily may have: the answer is multifold. Firstly, it is historically and culturally relevant to acknowledge the consistent presence of the Spanish Kingdom in Sicily for over 200 years until 1713. Indeed, the Spanish domain in Sicily lasted longer than the Italian State itself (which is 'only' 163 years old). This 'domination' introduced influences that continue to shape language, culture, and society today. That said, it would be possibly easier to explain why a rural Spanish context resembles Sicily more than an urban Northern Italian context ever could. It is a question of historical influence, certainly, however, the 'rurality' itself plays a central role: going back to Pirandello's thoughts, it is the isolation itself that creates this reality. Christian similarly shows that the rural nature of a place, and the connections formed within it, shapes the community's identity, as there is little else to rely on. This allows for a comparison of these different temporal and spatial realities that share cultural and territorial similarities.

Lastly and most importantly, religion is the greatest ground of commonality for these two contexts: Roman Catholicism links countries and communities, as it exists at the center of the human and social experience of villages like Christian's *valle español* and Bivona. As Christian explains "*Cada domingo los aldeanos contemplan su pueblo como un todo social,*

y este tiene significado real en tanto que grupo de personas activamente en contactos unos con los otros [...] Pueblo y parroquia están inseparablemente unidos" (*Ibid*, p.36). Although this sensational connection is certainly diluted in our contemporary times, the 'parish' still plays a central role in the religious, social and cultural life of the town in Bivona. Diverse activities are led by the priest and the worshippers and distributed across the solar and Gregorian year; these are mostly held in the local churches, but not exclusively. A majority of the religious activities include a strong civic component, such as public processions and house blessings.

Religion and tradition are strongly linked: they exist and are fomented respectively and mutually. The greatest events of Bivona's tradition are – all but one – celebrations linked to religion: the Saint Patron celebration of Santa Rosalia, San Giuseppe, San Francesco, Madonna dell'Olio, Lent Rituals, the Day of All Saints and All Deads, and clearly Christmas. The only activity not related to religion, which has now become a local tradition as well, is the Peach Fair established nearly 40 years ago. All the other celebrations throughout the year are religious and celebrate specific Saints of the Sicilian tradition, some connected directly to the territory of Bivona. The development of culture in Bivona is strictly intertwined with religious tradition, similarly to Christian's observation "*cada pueblo posee su propia cultura, una cultura que viene acreditada por otros de los rededores y legitimada por la tradición*" (*Ibid.*, p.37).

Religion and culture mix, merge, and coexist alternating peaceful connivance to structural difference: as I have observed in my fieldwork and Christian similarly mentions, esoterism and popular knowledge meet/clash with religion, and their lines become blurred "*los saberes esotéricos de los aldeanos, como los lugares y la tierra misma*" (*Ibid.*). As I will subsequently analyze in my semi-structured interviews, the relationship between God and the people is often carried with a certain mysticism and a magic component, which bypasses the Church itself. There are multiple blurred lines I have encountered in my investigation in regard to the relationship people have with religion and tradition. Part of Bivona' society is extremely faithful to the religious traditions despite not considering themselves practicing Catholics: their attendance at celebrations that involve popular religion is strong and committed. They assess their belief to be motivated by community belonging and the carrying of tradition. In line with Christian's observations, it seems that "*La imagen de la devoción parece afectar a la personalidad social de sus devotos. Estos se acercan al*

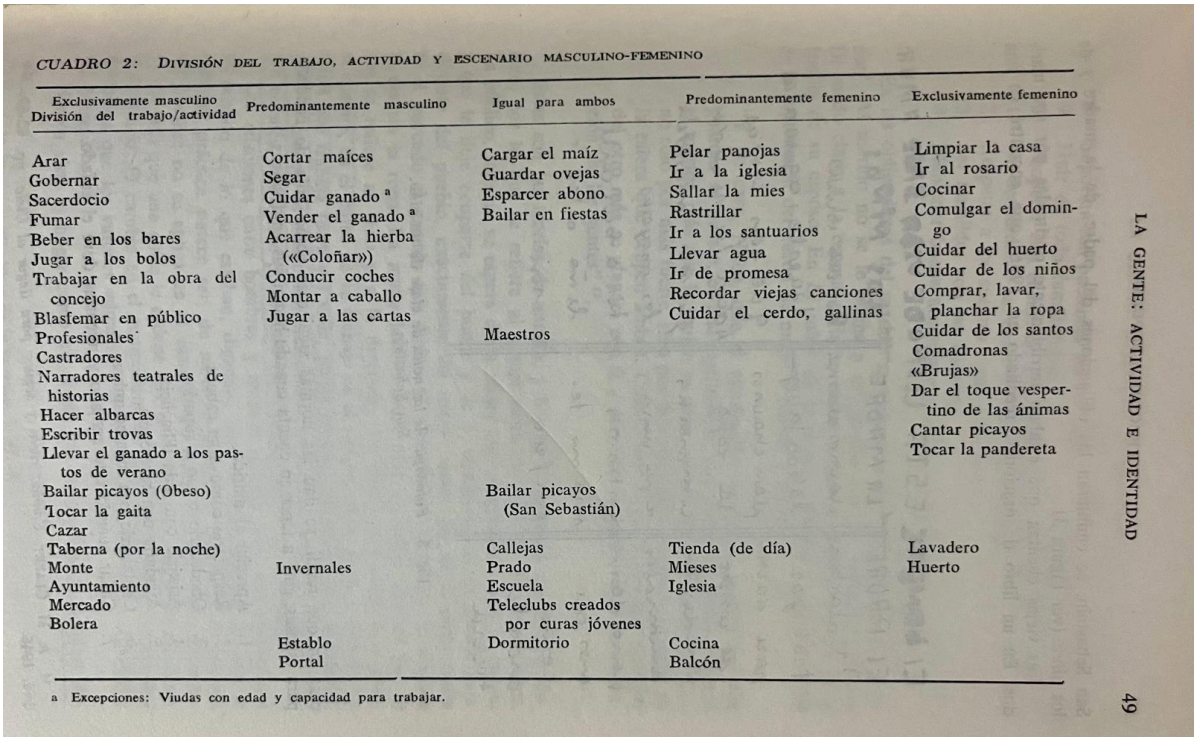
santuario como miembros de colectividades. Las ceremonias constituyen afirmaciones de identidad y solidaridad" (*Ibid.*, 68).

Many of the religious celebrations and ceremonies affirm communitarian identity, fostering a sense of belonging among people. This is done for two main possible reasons: not only belonging to the community, but also *fitting in* the community. In these societies, a strong religious presence indicates a solid position as insiders of the community, whether maintaining or enhancing their *status quo*. As Christian observes, "*las devociones [...] hacen referencia a la transformación de la gente de una condición a otra*" (*Ibid*., p. 127). Other similarities I have encountered in Christian's work are the familiar structure and the set of gendered norms that sanctions the role of women in rural religious societies, like the ones analyzed. Rural communities present "*un sistema de familia extensa, manifiestamente diluido, pero sin embargo real, que sirve de ayuda mutua en el trabajo, en el cuidado de los niños, en el recreo*" (*Ibid*., 47). In Bivona, up to nowadays, we find similar structures: families are not nuclear, but they extend up to the fifth degree of kinship; the bonds are tight, dedicated and loyal. A sense of safety and belonging ensures the trust in the community, which allows for youth to freely navigate the streets and for adults to rely on each other. It takes a village to raise a kid and no one dies of hunger or loneliness in Bivona.

Yet another interesting input from Christian's work is the '*Division del trabajo, actividad y escenario femenino-masculino*' (*Ibid.*, p. 49), of which I analyze especially the 'exclusively male' and 'exclusively female' roles. Except for agriculture and hunting, the tasks that used to be mostly exercised by men are now activities broadly available to the women of Bivona, especially those belonging to the Millenial and Gen-Z generations: namely, smoking, going out to bars, being professionals with administrative roles, or driving. On the contrary, the exclusively female tasks have, unsurprisingly, not become the normality of the male 'counterpart'. Cooking, taking care of the children and the household, cleaning, doing laundry: in Bivona, these activities are still mostly carried out by women.

What carries even more importance for the purpose of this investigation are the religious roles of the 'predominantly female-led' tasks. In the first place, no religious duties are outlined in the male tasks; on the contrary, blasphemy is amongst their most common actions. Across Christian's investigation, it is widespread that religious duties are a female priority. It is mostly women that go to church and sanctuaries and make promises (Spanish. *promessas*,

Sicilian *prummisioni*) to the Saints and Virgin Mary. I have had the possibility to observe this pattern in Bivona during my field studies: repeatedly, the women attending masses were the vast majority of people present. Across the 50 functions I have actively attended for the purpose of my research, the constant was that more than 80% of the people present in church were women. Similarly, for the votive tables of San Giuseppe I have studied between 2022 and 2024, the promises were almost entirely asked by the women: mostly mothers asking for the health of their sons, husbands and family overall.



CUADRO 2: División del trabajo, actividad y escenario masculino-femenino

División del trabajo/actividad: Exclusivamente masculino	Predominantemente masculino	Igual para ambos	Predominantemente femenino	Exclusivamente femenino
Arar	Cortar maíces	Cargar el maíz	Pelar panojas	Limpiar la casa
Gobernar	Segar	Guardar ovejas	Ir a la iglesia	Ir al rosario
Sacerdocio	Cuidar ganado [a]	Esparcer abono	Sallar la mies	Cocinar
Fumar	Vender el ganado [a]	Bailar en fiestas	Rastrillar	Comulgar el domingo
Beber en los bares	Acarrear la hierba («Coloñar»)		Ir a los santuarios	Cuidar del huerto
Jugar a los bolos	Conducir coches		Llevar agua	Cuidar de los niños
Trabajar en la obra del concejo	Montar a caballo		Ir de promesa	Comprar, lavar, planchar la ropa
Blasfemar en público	Jugar a las cartas		Recordar viejas canciones	Cuidar de los santos
Profesionales		Maestros	Cuidar el cerdo, gallinas	Comadronas
Castradores				«Brujas»
Narradores teatrales de historias				Dar el toque vespertino de las ánimas
Hacer albarcas				Cantar picayos
Escribir trovas				Tocar la pandereta
Llevar el ganado a los pastos de verano				
Bailar picayos (Obeso)		Bailar picayos (San Sebastián)		
Tocar la gaita				
Cazar				
Taberna (por la noche)		Callejas	Tienda (de día)	Lavadero
Monte	Invernales	Prado	Mieses	Huerto
Ayuntamiento		Escuela	Iglesia	
Mercado		Teleclubs creados por curas jóvenes		
Bolera				
	Establo	Dormitorio	Cocina	
	Portal		Balcón	

a Excepciones: Viudas con edad y capacidad para trabajar.

LA GENTE: ACTIVIDAD E IDENTIDAD 49

(Christian, 1972, p. 49)

I will not develop yet on the transformative and communitarian force that women represent in the community of Bivona, but Christian's exploration already pinpoints a central aspect of it: "*La persona que mantiene buenas relaciones con todos es la madre. La madre es el punto de apoyo de la familia, la preservadora de la honra familiar*" (*Ibid.,* p. 53). It is the mother, the woman *per excellence* in rural societies, who connects the family and the community, and is expected to fulfill all the main religious duties. As we will be able to observe in my research, and as Christian has highlighted, peregrination is a duty predominant of women (*Ibid.,* p. 136). Similarly in Bivona, peregrinations, *ex voto*, and *prummisioni* are religious practices for women. Moreover, as he reiterates, the relationship of men with the church is one mediated by women: women are the ones in touch with the priest and the ones that ensure the grace for

their husbands (*Ibid.,* pp. 168-169). The relationship between the three is a complex one, and men perceive with hostility the role of priests, especially when they interact with the private sphere of the family (*Ibid.,* p. 170).

Christian highlights how the possible gap in the approach men and women have with religion is grounded in the patriarchal and misogynistic doctrine of the Church itself (*Ibid.,* p. 172). As he states, "*Probablemente detrás de las múltiples devociones populares y de las actividades religiosas de las mujeres existe un sentimiento de impureza que les ha sido impuesto por la Iglesia y sus ministros*" (*Ibid.,* p. 171). Through demonstrated faith and rigorous celebration of the religious events, women renew a sense of purity and worth, which the Bible itself annihilated from them since Adam and Eve. As Christian states, "*Las mujeres no solo llevan el peso de la religión sobre sus hombros, sino que en general soportan los pecados de toda la cultura*" (*Ibid.*, p. 180). I could not think of a more contemporary statement than this one: beside religion itself, women seem to carry the faults of their whole culture and society in the multiple spheres of their private and public life. Not only do they atone for their sins through the perfect moral conduct – of what 'being a woman' means – for their society, they also keep that same society going. This particular dichotomous role is critical to the goal of this investigation: women are asked to comply with the imposed patriarchal norms, whilst they take an essential role in keeping that society going. They respond to patriarchal inputs, both criticizing and accepting them, acceptance being likely more common.

As I dove into my field research, I was able to observe one of the most compelling issues to womanhood and patriarchy – as I perceive them: women seem to be part of a structure that makes them the victim and the executioner, the poison and the antidote to many of the issues of their livelihood. Although victims of the patriarchy, they seem to reiterate patriarchal tendencies and accept them as theirs. They are driven by a stronger sense of duty towards their family, community and society, than they are by the rebellion of the sex. At times, even when equipped with the tools of understanding and fighting misogynistic stigmas, they believe in the importance of the structures already in place. Indeed, my research strives to analyze this dualism: understanding what really matters to the women of a town like Bivona, through which beliefs and actions they feel empowered to challenge the status quo, and which ones they feel comfortable perpetuating instead.

The needs of women in a community are multiple and diverse. Each woman feels her specific empowerment responding to different situations and applying diverse solutions, and this should not diminish their agency or impact as makers of tradition and changemakers. However, the coming together of women provided a strong ground to understand the shared needs of empowerment and womanhood in Bivona's community. Both in my field observations of the San Giuseppe votive tables and the Santa Rosalia celebrations, I witnessed the power of female camaraderie. There are shared goals and needs women living in Bivona feel: this could be the private space of complaining about their husbands while preparing food, or the public space of insisting that a celebration led by women can be successful. Understanding the union of women is essential to better perceive such a close-knit yet reserved reality like Bivona.

As I previously mentioned, women coming together is not the most common event in Bivona, and especially older women tend to feel comfortable within the *intimacy* of their household but not beyond it. This tendency is shifting as we observe the younger women preparing the Santa Rosalia celebrations: their coming together is transformative and challenging of pre-existing narratives, growing, as they involve other women to join their cause.

II. Female religiosity in contemporary Italy

As the young Committee of Santa Rosalia proved, in recent years there has been a notable resurgence of interest in the role of religion within public life, especially regarding female religiosity. Rosa Traversa's work *Religion made me free: Cultural construction of female religiosity* (2012) provides a nuanced exploration of how female religiosity manifests in contemporary Italy, offering an insightful framework for understanding the complex interplay between religion, gender, age, and cultural identity.

The contemporary return of religion in public life has introduced the religious *other* as a renovated object of knowledge, reflecting modern humanity's attempts to navigate global uncertainties through new and potent cultural niches (Traversa, 2012, p. 35). Traversa employs the concept of the post-secular and of the consolidation of fluid societies (*Ibid.*) to describe this religious revival, arguing that contemporary expressions of faith are not merely a rehashing of past beliefs; they embody renewed and modern forms that intertwine traditional and innovative elements. This hybridity is particularly evident in the use of communication technologies to disseminate religious messages and in the socio-political

efforts to legitimize faith through public demonstrations. The “post-secular” code reveals both the new opportunities for religious belonging and the socio-political constraints that accompany these modern forms of spirituality (*Ibid.*, p. 36).

Traversa argues that traditional elements from various geopolitical contexts are intricately linked with new interpretations of religious texts, leading to a localized and delocalized understanding of faith. Traversa's approach to religion emphasizes its nature as a cultural phenomenon. Rather than viewing religion as a monolithic entity, she draws on the ideas of scholars like Pargament (1997), who frames religion as a process of searching for significance related to the sacred. This perspective underscores that there is no singular form of religion; instead, there are various “forms of life” (Wittgenstein, 1953) that encapsulate the diverse experiences of individuals within religious contexts. In this regard, Traversa highlights the importance of examining the contextual, embodied, and gendered experiences of religion, arguing that failing to do so risks universalizing certain social norms and dismissing diversity as deficiency (*Ibid.*, p. 36-37).

Traversa's exploration of female religiosity in Italy emphasizes the complex emotional and cultural relationships that Catholic women maintain with their faith. These women often engage in a unique “feeling-approach” to religion, where their vulnerabilities become avenues for connecting with both God and the Catholic community. Some older Catholic women critique the traditional, submissive interpretations of faith that have historically repressed emotions, advocating instead for a more affective understanding of their relationship with the divine (*Ibid.*, p. 40). A significant theme in Traversa's work is the idea that women express their spirituality in ways that resist and redefine established norms. For instance, one interviewee articulates a rejection of moralistic attitudes prevalent in the Church, framing even exclamations of frustration toward God as valid forms of prayer. This perspective illustrates a profound shift in how women navigate their faith, advocating for an understanding of divinity that is intimately connected to their lived experiences (*Ibid.*, p. 42).

While Traversa's work reveals the multiplicity of experiences among Catholic women, it also addresses the tension between religious identity and feminist perspectives. Older women express ambivalence toward feminist movements within religion, acknowledging a latent Catholic feminism that has historically existed. Yet they also recognize a loss of institutional power for women within the Church, leading to discussions about informal empowerment achieved through religious engagement (*Ibid.*, p. 53-54). Younger women express a desire for

greater representation of female voices in public and formal spaces, suggesting that a Catholic-feminine point of view could enrich discussions on social issues. They acknowledge the predominance of women in church attendance but resist the notion that this reflects outdated gender stereotypes. Instead, they advocate for a reevaluation of women's roles in religious settings as a potential source of empowerment (*Ibid*., p. 53-54).

Traversa's work elucidates the intricate dynamics between female religiosity and broader cultural processes in contemporary Italy. By focusing on women's experiences, she challenges the notion that religious meanings and practices are static or universally applicable. Her insights reveal that women's engagement with faith is a site of agency and potential transformation, where traditional beliefs are negotiated and redefined in light of contemporary societal norms. The variability in women's religious experiences highlights the need for an intersectional approach to studying religion and gender. As she asserts, the female bodies in particular represent and facilitate specific ideological discourses that shape public perceptions and are subject to regulation, not solely as a means of controlling female sexuality but as part of a broader political struggle for power. Traversa emphasizes the importance of understanding how personal senses of faith can intersect with cultural contexts, allowing for possibilities of empowerment through religion. In doing so, she calls for an awareness of the fluid nature of religious belonging and the ongoing redefinition of gender and religion as constructs that are continually shaped by individual and collective experiences (*Ibid.*, p. 55-56).

As Alberta Giorgi and Stefania Palmisano further proved in *Women and Gender in Contemporary European Catholic Discourse: Voices of Faith* (2020), women's activism within the Church is gaining momentum, though still limited by traditional ecclesiastical structures. According to the work by Giorgi and Palmisano, "women constitute the majority of the faithful in the Catholic Church, with higher rates of participation than men, despite the Church's marginalization of their roles" (Giorgi & Palmisano, 2020, p. 2). This is particularly significant as women are often responsible for the intergenerational transmission of religious beliefs, which suggests that a decline in women's participation could heavily impact the future of Catholicism (*Ibid.*). The disparity between the high participation of women and their limited leadership roles in the Church is evident. Women are excluded from key decision-making processes, such as voting at the Synod or holding clerical positions, highlighting a deep structural inequality (*Ibid.*, p. 8). In response, women's movements are

growing, particularly within feminist theological circles that challenge gender norms in religious traditions. Feminist theology and activism have made some headway in pushing for the ordination of women and the reform of patriarchal structures, but these efforts often meet resistance from within the Church (*Ibid*, p. 4). For example, the Catholic Women's Council (CWC) launched in 2019 advocates for women's equality within the Church, promoting an inclusive dialogue about women's roles and rights (*Ibid*, p. 5).

III. Religious feminisms and types of agency

Similarly, in Islam, religious women are developing tools to define their own means of empowerment and feminism. As Traversa analyzed in her work, Muslim women in Italy viewed the veil as a symbol of freedom rather than oppression. By wearing the veil, these women asserted a distinct identity and engaged in public spaces while embodying religious commitment. The veil's use is described by some participants as "a source of happiness, quiet, and internal peace" (Traversa, p. 40), challenging the view of the veil solely as a tool of subordination. As Saba Mahmood highlights in *Feminist Theory, Agency, and the Liberatory Subject* (2006), feminist theories often tie agency to resistance against structures of subordination, framing it as a means for individuals to claim autonomy and freedom. Mahmood challenges this view by suggesting that agency can be expressed through acts of piety and submission within religious practices (Mahmood, 2006, p. 35) – actions that are often misunderstood by secular feminist paradigms as inherently oppressive. Mahmood critiques the 'normative status' of freedom in feminist discourse, where agency is typically understood as the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (*Ibid.*, p. 39). For Mahmood, this view limits the understanding of women's agency in non-Western contexts, where aspirations may not align with secular-liberal values of autonomy or resistance. Instead, she proposes an open-ended understanding of agency, seeing it not solely as opposition to power but as a historically specific capacity enabled by relations of subordination (*Ibid.*, pp. 34; 42).

In examining the women's mosque movement in Egypt, Mahmood observes that women actively participate in religious practices and teachings that might appear to reinforce patriarchal structures. However, she argues that these practices enable a form of agency aligned with virtues that are associated with feminine passivity and submissiveness – qualities like shyness, modesty, perseverance, and humility (*Ibid*., p. 37). These women see their participation in the mosque movement as an ethical project rooted in cultivating piety,

not as a strategy of resistance. Mahmood writes, "The women's mosque movement represents the first time in Egyptian history that such a large number of women have mobilized to hold lessons in Islamic doctrine in mosques, thereby altering the historically male-centered character of mosques" (*Ibid*., p. 33)

Mahmood's theoretical contribution is particularly valuable in her call to "detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics" (*Ibid*., p. 42). She critiques the assumption in feminist theory that agency must be tied to freedom from domination and individual autonomy, highlighting that these ideals are deeply rooted in liberal thought and may not resonate universally. Mahmood writes that by viewing agency "as a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable" scholars can better understand nonliberal projects and motivations (*Ibid*., p. 34). This reframing opens up an analytical space to explore practices that are not easily captured by the binary of resistance and subordination, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how women engage with and inhabit norms in ways that are meaningful within their cultural and religious frameworks.

Through her analysis, Mahmood advocates for a feminist theory that respects the diversity of women's experiences and refrains from imposing secular-liberal values onto those whose lives are shaped by different aspirations and commitments. This framework ultimately challenges feminists to rethink what counts as agency, autonomy, and freedom across different cultural and religious contexts. Mahmood's approach can ultimately shed a more embracing and inclusive vision of the roles that Catholic women play within their religious and cultural communities. The socio-cultural dynamics of a Mediterranean reality like Sicily, can benefit from a perspective that positions assertive religiosity as an act of agency, beyond Westernized perspectives of empowerment.

a. Four approaches to agency

Kelsy Burke's analysis in *Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions: A Review of Four Approaches* (2012) outlines four primary theories to understand the agency of religious women. Burke argues that agency, defined by Lois McNay as "the capacity for autonomous action in the face of often overwhelming cultural sanctions and structural inequalities" (Burke, 2012, p. 2), allows researchers to view women as active agents within patriarchal religious frameworks rather than as passive followers. Burke critiques and extends these

models, highlighting the necessity of recognizing diverse forms of agency that may not align with Western feminist expectations (*Ibid.*, p. 3).

Resistance agency focuses on women who challenge religious structures overtly. Burke notes, "agency is most visible when individuals resist the status quo" (*Ibid*., p. 5), citing examples of Catholic feminists advocating for ordination reforms (*Ibid*., p. 4). Yet, Burke also critiques this model, referencing Saba Mahmood, who argues that viewing agency only as resistance can ignore "other modalities of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion" (*Ibid*., p. 7). *Empowerment agency* captures instances where religious women derive personal strength and empowerment from their faith without directly opposing religious doctrines. For instance, Burke describes Pentecostal women who "feel empowered by God's love" (*Ibid*., p. 6). However, she critiques this approach for its assumption that women inherently seek empowerment within religious confines, which may exclude those who see compliance as fulfilling (*Ibid*., p. 8). *Instrumental agency* considers how women leverage religious involvement for non-religious benefits, such as social or economic opportunities. For example, Muslim women in the U.S. may find the veil advantageous as it "allows them to feel comfortable pursuing higher education within co-educational institutions" (*Ibid*., p. 9). Burke cautions that this approach might "mask the ways in which religious participation reinscribes inequalities" (*Ibid*., p. 10).

Finally, *compliant agency* challenges the Western idea that agency must involve autonomy, arguing instead that agency can be expressed through compliance with religious norms. Burke asserts, "agency perceived as autonomy is inadequate" (*Ibid*., p. 11) for women who act "not for themselves, but for a divine God" (*Ibid*.). Here, Burke aligns with Mahmood's argument that agency can be realized within acts of piety, as seen in Orthodox Jewish women who view purity rituals as empowering expressions of faith (*Ibid*., p. 12). Burke ultimately calls for a redefined understanding of agency, "detached from autonomy and liberation" (*Ibid*., p. 13), and argues that the four approaches illustrate agency's complexity in the context of gender-traditional religions. These frameworks can help better understand how diverse women in diverse contexts may approach religiosity and the diverse meaning and importance such holds for them.

The exploration of women's roles in Sicilian popular religion reveals a complex interplay of agency, tradition, and generational transformation, particularly evident in the contrasting experiences of older and younger women in Bivona. The elder women involved in the San

Giuseppe tradition exemplify a form of embodied agency rooted in domesticity and community continuity. Their meticulous ritual practices, such as preparing votive tables and storytelling, serve to reinforce social bonds and cultural memory. Their agency, while powerful within familial domains, is largely constrained by traditional gender roles and patriarchal expectations, operating within a framework that values their contributions but limits their influence to the domestic sphere. Conversely, the younger women participating in the Santa Rosalia Committee actively challenge these established norms by assuming leadership roles and innovating within a space historically dominated by men. Their efforts to reclaim authority over cultural heritage highlight a more overt form of agency, as they navigate systemic barriers and redefine gendered expectations in religious contexts. Despite these differences, both generations share a commitment to community solidarity and cultural preservation, illustrating how female agency in popular religion can manifest in both subtle and transformative ways. This dynamic underscores the integral role of women in sustaining Sicilian Catholicism and reveals how their diverse expressions of devotion shape the spiritual and social landscape of Bivona.

IV. The roles of women in popular religion

Popular religion is often described as encompassing local, informal, and deeply embedded practices, many of which are led and maintained by women. This domain – often less visible in official doctrines – provides a space where women can actively shape religious expression and social structure, especially within the context of domestic life. In the context of Southern European ethnography, especially around practices like the San Giuseppe celebrations in Bivona, the association of popular religion with female agency is deeply significant. As observed, the women in Bivona, through activities like cooking, storytelling, and ritualistic preparation of votive tables, exercise a unique form of religious agency that blends memory, family, and community involvement. However, the question arises: Does this type of religious engagement reinforce traditional patriarchal roles, or does it provide a platform for women's empowerment within a religious framework?

As Bourdieu's concept of *doxa* reveals, many unquestioned beliefs structure behaviors unconsciously, reinforcing traditional norms even in seemingly egalitarian practices like shared religious activities. The female domestic sphere can be positioned as a form of *doxa* – a 'taken-for-granted' belief system that implicitly affirms existing social structures (Deer, 2008, p. 120). Bourdieu's *doxa* and *habitus* provide critical insights into how these gendered

roles are perpetuated within popular religion. Women in Bivona are revered for their religious contributions but are expected to fulfill these roles in ways that align with their positions as mothers, daughters, and wives. In this way, *doxa* operates to maintain an implicit order, where the unexamined, habitual behaviors reinforce gender norms. While these roles provide women with a specific form of agency, they also bind them within the limits of culturally sanctioned behavior, often restricting the scope of their influence to the domestic and communal sphere.

Nevertheless, in Bivona, the women's rituals surrounding San Giuseppe's feast serve as a means of reinforcing community solidarity and cultural continuity. These rituals carry what Durkheim termed 'collective effervescence' a shared emotional intensity that strengthens community bonds and promotes a unified moral order (Durkheim, 1995, p. 228). This communal unity, however, comes at the expense of individual expression, as the established roles of men and women within these rituals become reinforced through repeated cultural practices, often unconsciously accepted by community members as a natural division of labor. Clifford Geertz's symbolic approach, which views religion as "a system of symbols" that conveys and sustains cultural meanings, further illustrates how popular religion reflects and reinforces communal values (Geertz, 1973, p. 250). The symbolic actions in the San Giuseppe preparations – the cooking, the votive offerings, and the creation of a sacred table – are acts laden with cultural significance, embedding the values of care, devotion, and familial piety within the community's religious practices. For women like Mrs. Lina and Nonna Pina in Bivona, these rituals embody their connection to the sacred, as well as their responsibility for cultural preservation. However, their roles also conform to expectations that situate women within supportive and nurturing positions, aligning with their prescribed social function rather than challenging it.

In conclusion, popular religion in communities like Bivona reveals a complex interplay between agency and constraint for women. The *doxa* within popular religion allows women to exercise religious agency, but this agency is often bound by implicit, unquestioned norms that align with gendered expectations. The symbolic and communal aspects of popular religion, as theorized by scholars like Durkheim and Geertz, demonstrate how women sustain and enrich community life through religious practices. However, by situating women's roles within the confines of the domestic and communal, popular religion also reinforces the existing social structure, allowing for subtle empowerment without enabling substantial

structural change. In this way, popular religion serves as both a space of cultural preservation and a reflection of gendered social norms, illustrating the dual roles of *doxa* and religious practice in shaping community and gender dynamics.

Chapter Three: Exploring Bivona to find answers

To explore the questions developed in the previous chapters, I will present the insights gathered during my field research in Bivona from March 2022 to March 2024.

I. March 2022

a. 17 March 2022

I arrived at the Parla household as my first destination, just 10 minutes after arriving in Bivona. In a period still scarred by COVID-19, the votive tables were private functions, closed to the community, which the priest would have come to bless on *San Giuseppe Day*. But the magic of *San Giuseppe* extends beyond the day itself: it is the weeks, at times months, of preparation involved, which starts from the moment people have done a *prummisione*, a religious promise to the Saint. I was at the Parla household to meet the daughter, mother, grandmother and aunts who were preparing for the *San Giuseppe*'s table. I went there with my mother, a presence which I believe to be essential to set the tone of familiarity needed to not feel like a stranger/researcher, but as a 'friend'. My mother was a precious fieldwork assistant, able to translate the reasons behind my research to her generation and prone to ask relevant questions about the preparation of the foods. I was certainly welcomed with more excitement and familiarity because I was accompanied by a woman that belonged more to that reality than I did. I believe my presence would have felt invasive otherwise. There is, indeed, a certain feeling of privacy and containment when it comes to women in the town, a sense of modesty and shame that makes them feel somewhat defensive towards the outside, but also extremely performative when society asks them to. As Herzfeld notes in *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics and The Real Life of States, Societies, and Institutions* (2016), insiders are often cautious about how their customs and shared understandings are perceived by outsiders (Herzfeld, 2016, p.2). My mother's knowledge of local customs and language helped establish a tone of familiarity and acceptance. Her questions about food preparation facilitated conversations with the women that might not have been as forthcoming otherwise, helping bridge my own sense of 'outsiderness' and creating a foundation for the trust necessary to observe and understand this cultural setting.

As the day, as well as my research, evolved, I couldn't help but associate these behaviors to what I explored in *Veiled Sentiments* by Lila Abu-Lughod: underneath what seems stagnant and silent, at times repressive, lies a world of intimacy, contact, and storytelling that simply needed to be discovered. My mother's moderation helped me to gently enter the powerful circle of the Bivona women's *veiled sentiments*. It was interesting to see how, as opposed to women, the men of the house did not welcome our presence with the same excitement. On the contrary, some of them left the house as soon as we entered, and after a couple of hours, when they came back and saw us there, I overheard them saying "*Ancora 'cca su!* They are still here!". The panorama of the food preparation was indeed only female-led. Nevertheless, as my mother reminded me, men are the ones who harvest the products for the *San Giuseppe* directly from the mountains: they are the ones picking *finocchio*, *cardi*, *carduna*, *munaceddi*, *garufi*. They are the ones doing groceries, as they know better who can provide them with the best ingredients. Even at the last minute, they were able to retrieve the needed ingredients: many are also farmers themselves.

At the Parla's household, we first visited the house of the daughter, Loredana. In Loredana's house, her mother in law and her aunts were preparing *pignolata*. Loredana immediately started listing all the desserts they had cooked so far: *chiacchiere, cannolli, pecorelle, pane con le santine.* One of the aunts showed excitement towards my research "Will we end up in books?". There was a certain feeling of shyness and doubt towards my research, yet I believe they put up their best performance when they were showing the process of dessert making or when I was recording part of the preparation. Here, a note on the pride and the care towards tradition in Bivona needs to be made, especially in regard to my investigation. Every person who was organizing the *San Giuseppe* that year was quite proud of the fact that someone was writing about it and carrying over a tradition they are afraid will disappear. "Young generations are not interested anymore, it is such a great thing for you as a young person to do that". All of these conversations were happening while women were carrying on their dessert preparation, and at the same time also taking care of the children of the house. Certainly, for a mother this shall not sound fascinating: the ability – or imposition – to handle multiple tasks at the same time. Yet, I found it astonishing, as I kept wondering, how much is on these women's shoulders? How much of it is unheard?

While observing the women preparing, Loredana, the woman of the house, offered us some non-alcoholic aperitivo. Hospitality is incredibly important when visiting people: refusing it

would break almost a sacred pact. It is a duty of women to welcome guests in a specific way: put on the nicest linen tablecloth, offer coffee, beverages, small desserts, and make sure the guest accepts after having refused the offer three to five times. Women hold unapologetically the space of the house, it is the place where the management and leadership belongs to them, leaving men only with the apparent feeling of being the 'head' of the house. Once the traditional regards were covered, the environment slowly started feeling more relaxed and open: a good amount of chitchat about the weather, the coronavirus pandemic, and about who else was putting up votive tables that year helped us switch to a tone of confidence. The way in which emotions and feelings started flowing into the conversation mesmerized me. This is how it gets when the initial guard falls down and we are just women talking. For example, Elvira, one of the eldest women who has been in charge of the votive tables for decades, talked about her daughter in law and her ten years' fight to get a full time position as a teacher in Sicily. The kitchen became the place where feelings were shared, away from the male gaze, the private became collective.

Once finished with the preparation of the *pignolata*, which was gently layered in small cones so every guest at the *tavolata* could get one, they immediately asked us to taste it. Afterwards, we moved to Loredana's mother's place; the two live only a couple of meters away from each other. This is how it works in places like Bivona - people from the same streets grow up together, fall in love, and they move away from the paternal house together, but never too far. There is a tight sense of locality in Bivona, those who come from there would not think of living far from it: going away is indeed a tragedy, and this highlights the highest sense of community that daughters feel towards their original household. Subsequently, we moved to another house where the fried vegetables and the *frittate* were made, because there was too much food for just one house.

Figure 5. *Women piling pignolata,* Elena Greco (2022)

Even moving from one house to the other was a ceremony, an emotional walk. I asked the women to help them carry some food: the feeling of moving without a bag, with an open plate of food, no tupperware, gave me such a heartfelt feeling of community and familiarity. It is quite astonishing to me, being born in such a private household, to be let in by so many people. This openness is about San Giuseppe, it is about celebrations where you accept people because God brought them there. The veteran women of the celebration exposed the table which was almost ready, explaining what was missing. The preparation of the votive tables and the manners of the women around me, the stories and opinions they were timidly starting to share, the familiar links and responsibilities, highlighted the most pressing question that drives my research: women's power and powerlessness within their popular, familiar and religious communities. At that moment, I understood how my research would certainly be more focused towards the feminine issues and roles in the town, a more niche and specific analysis that considers societal and patriarchal structures, placing women as active agents in the tradition and community, while men remain at the margins of the research.

When Loredana's grandmother, Nonna Pina, arrived, all the women in the room stopped their tasks and started praising her for her looks and energy. She is 'famous' in Bivona, she is 90 and a force of nature: always happy, joyful and with a youthful appearance. She contributed to the narration of the table: she was the one who saved the season's primes, different fruits of each season, to expose them on the San Giuseppe table. The grandmother said she always does that, carefully freezing them, to make sure to have a good bunch of fruits by the time of the San Giuseppe table. Then she told us an anecdote on how as a girl she did not pass her primary school license, as she did not know how to recite the *Salve Regina,* which is a *Populu Me* song. While we went through these memories, the women still explained the preparation of the table and how it was previously done with more simple ingredients. They recalled past celebrations of San Giuseppe: for instance, Elvira recalled the year of 1994 when they prepared over 900 beads of *pignolata*. As she mentioned, "at that time they shared food even with the soldiers": at the center of the celebration and the community there is the act of sharing.

Once they were done with the majority of the preparation, the women started sitting down, gathering in a circle with their chairs and chatting. The conversations varied in between the women's personal stories and the memories of the San Giuseppe celebrations, the value of

tradition and the fear of a future where the memory of Bivona is lost to their youngest generation. Some women who dropped by to greet us shared how “they are not made to prepare that type of food”. Then someone started a conversation about my mother‘s name, Rosalia, our Saint Patron. They started saying that no one wants to give traditional names to their children anymore. They started a long conversation back and forth about names and nicknames. While chatting, the women of the house kept bringing food for us to share, praising “Hopefully San Giuseppe will help us!”. Multiple conversations were taking place at the table while I was talking to Mrs. Elvira about my thesis. Loredana’s grandmother and my mother were talking about the Pecoraro family, the family that has carried the San Giuseppe tradition for at least a century. They discuss how only one son is left and he is eighty years old and carries on the tradition with his wife. Once again they comment on how youth is not interested in the tradition and how it may slowly die.

The conversation organically moved on to grandchildren, how different it is to teach children while being a mother and being a grandmother. They talked about how women are more *sperte*, woke, than men. Then they went into a long discussion about chimneys and cleaning, about how husbands do not understand how hard it is to clean, and how little shared are the struggles of the household. I could see a certain pattern arise from these conversations, which was perpetuated throughout my investigation. There were ‘topics of womanhood’ that the women gathered in the circle would bring up with a certain frequency, at times almost with a mechanical and repetitive tone, for which each one of them asserted similar things: the loss and maintenance of tradition, raising children, praising and complaining about their female duties. Litanies, similar to poetic verses of the women of Abu Lughod’s *Veiled Sentiments*, a conformed speech which dares to criticize the system whilst complying to it, never abusing or subverting their role in it fully.

After a long conversation about the house and the weather, we went away and promised to come back tomorrow for the holy blessing of the table with the priest. Going downstairs, we stopped in the garage where the vegetables were cooked. Another aunt was taking care of them, cooking them in salsa pots. The aunt was alone in the room and warmly welcomed us and showed us what she was cooking. She started a conversation with us on the expertise needed to pick these greens and the magic they hold in traditional cuisine and medicine. She highlights how many of them are no longer used in our preparations and the extent to which these are almost unknown in the north of Italy. Talking to this lady was enlightening, as she

was knowledgeable, thoughtful and critical in her reasoning, which contrasted with the conversations and patterns we were having on the floor above. She discussed how we should market our herbs and spread awareness about their benefits as they are unknown beyond the mountains. She talked about the properties of hypericum, fennel infusions, and the multiple ways of cooking the herbs. That lady certainly needed someone to talk to and express her ideas and beliefs. I strongly believe that in many households men often silence women expressing their opinions. During my research, it was common to hear men saying '*Ancora parli!'*, 'You're still talking!', when women extended their conversations or wanted to cover a topic more thoroughly or critically. When women got the chance to gather and talk in spaces outside of the arbiter and presence of men, not only their knowledge sparked in acumen, but also their conviviality and sensitivity seemed amplified and liberated.

Studying the patterns and the topics of these conversations is an essential part of this thesis, as their gathering, while appearing as liberating and empowering, raises doubts about whether it reinforces rather than challenges patriarchal authority. Towards the end of my first day of fieldwork, I reflected upon women's hospitality, sense of belonging, the caring of tradition and the fear towards the future. When it comes to the idea and the preparation of the celebration, I see a mainly women-led tradition. There is little presence and interaction of men in keeping these specific activities alive.

b. 18th March 2022

On the morning of the 18th, I visited Maria Rosa's house. Maria Rosa is a 30 years old woman who recently got married and had a child. Her son Antonino was born premature and went through intensive care. Antonino is now well and recovered and Maria Rosa decided to fulfill a promise to San Giuseppe. In order to do so, Maria Rosa called the help of one of the most recognized holders of the tradition in Bivona, Mrs. Elena, whom people call Lina. In the past 50 years Mrs. Lina has been a central figure for the San Giuseppe tradition. She belongs to the Pecoraro family, as she is the wife of one of the last *Populu Me* singers. That morning I met Maria Rosa, Mrs. Lina and a neighbor to see their preparation of the table.

It was a process where I participated firsthand in the making of the typical dishes, with the guidance of Mrs. Lina. The environment was definitely different from Loredana's house, as there was a smaller number of women helping and they were not related to each other. As

Maria Rosa is a young woman, I knew I did not need my mother‘s intercession to access the group. In this context, we were all helpers of Mrs. Lina, who was directing the preparations like a master: explaining step-by-step the ingredients to use, how she separates the eggs and how she reaches the perfect consistency for the perfect *frittata*. This morning was gorgeous and I have gladly recorded multiple parts of this preparation, in which I was myself an active participant and a learner. The most incredible and enlightening encounter was Mrs. Lina. She opened a world of meaning and reflection on the value and the devotion for San Giuseppe: without her understanding a great part of the traditions related to the celebration would have stayed unseen. In that moment, I decided to ask Mrs. Lina if she would have liked to be interviewed.

Figure 6. *Women cleaning fava beans,* Elena Greco (2022)

c. Interview with Mrs. Lina

I arrived at Mrs. Lina’s house and I was welcomed by her and her husband. We sat down and started discussing in an unstructured interview her relationship with San Giuseppe and the relationship of the Pecoraro family. Mrs. Lina did much of the talking during the interview despite her husband being there the whole time. The conversation with Mrs Lina quickly turned towards mysticism and her relationship with San Giuseppe himself. This was a crucial point to understand the interconnectedness between religion and paganism, as people devoted

to Saints seem to have a strict relationship with them beyond church, with the deities and the Saints themselves. Mrs. Lina's experience of religion is strictly intertwined with magic and mysticism: as she explained, San Giuseppe talks to her in many different ways, both through moments of her daily life and during her dreams. This strong relationship led her to bring tradition forward: she stated that "even if in that specific year she may not prepare the San Giuseppe votive table herself, San Giuseppe will send her where she is needed. For instance, she explained how, despite Maria Rosa deciding to make the votive table just a couple of days before the holiday, Mrs. Lina had already the symbolic germinated wheat, the *lavureddu,* ready for her.

Figure 7. *The lavureddu Mrs. Lina prepared for Maria Rosa,* Elena Greco (2022)

In fact, Mrs. Lina admitted that she prepares a couple more of those every year, in case people may need or want to organize a votive table. Mrs Lina'ss devotion and presence in the San Giuseppe tradition is heartwarming, especially because throughout the year she cultivates the celebration for the whole community, harvesting and preparing the elements of the tables for her and others. Similarly for the *bracco/violacciocca* flowers – *Matthiola incana* – Mrs. Lina grows her own bush in the garden. The *bracco*, which I have pressed here, is the principal flower on the San Giuseppe table: every year it blooms after the last frost, towards the beginning of spring, which connects to the days when San Giuseppe is celebrated. Mrs.

Lina has the flowers for her table and for those who may need it. This is yet another way for her to be religious and devoted, all year long, through harvesting and caring: Mrs. Lina believes to have a strong religious connection even with that flower. Her devotion towards San Giuseppe and the constant enhancement of her belief through harvesting and helping others in the votive table underlines her tight relationship with the Saint, which transcends common belief and becomes an integral part of her identity and day-to-day life.

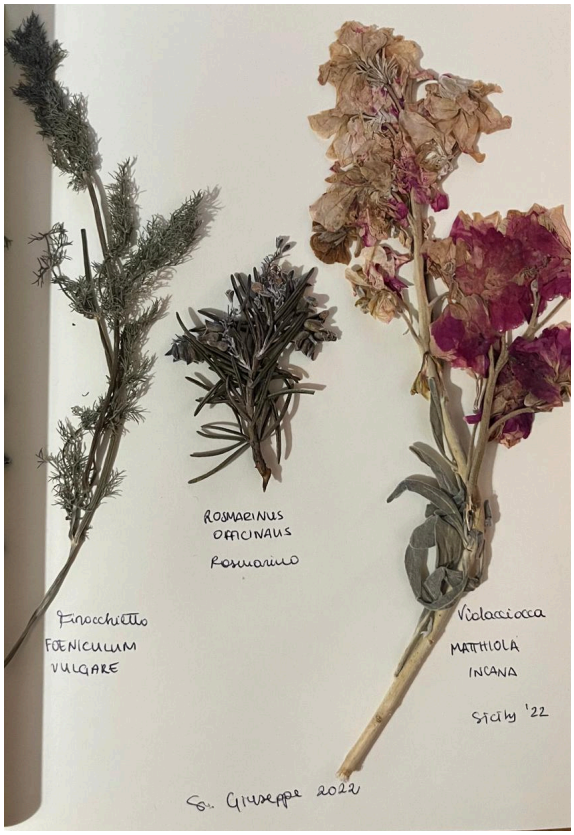


Figure 8. *Pressed endemic plants used in the San Giuseppe celebrations,* Elena Greco (2022)

One of the most astonishing experiences during my investigation were Mrs. Lina's communications with San Giuseppe. San Giuseppe comes in her dreams predicting the future, especially with dreams that relate to the votive tables. She stated that "San Giuseppe achieves to put her in the way of the people who need our help to prepare the votive table". For example, Mrs. Lina narrated how San Giuseppe notified her that Maria Rosa and her mother would have come to ask her for help to prepare the table. She narrated that she had a dream in which two women came to visit her at *Piazza Madonna delle Grazie* (which is where Maria Rosa's mother lived) and asked her if she had some ingredients to add to the San Giuseppe table; behind them a tall child was standing and smiling with a tray of desserts. The two

women were carrying three bags of votive food, which you offer to the table of San Giuseppe as a promise, which turned out to be the actual number of bags that Maria Rosa promised to San Giuseppe in real life. Two days later, Maria Rosa and her mum showed up at Mrs. Lina's house to ask for help.

Similarly, on another occasion, Mrs. Lina said that San Giuseppe brought another woman her way. When she was going to Maria Rosa's house with a bouquet of bracco flowers, a lady from a town nearby stopped in her car and asked where she had found those flowers, as she had been looking all over the neighboring towns for them to set up her own San Giuseppe votive table. Mrs. Lina warmly acknowledged the Divine guidance that took that lady to end up on her street and meet her in the exact moment as she was holding the bracco flower, so she could cut another branch from her bush and give it to the lady in need for the table. Superstitions and beliefs are strong and varied in Bivona. Many relate to a holy connection to San Giuseppe, others are rather linked to avoiding divine punishment: as she further stated, tradition is to be followed precisely or San Giuseppe might show his disapproval. Some stories women have shared with me described how San Giuseppe made himself very vocal when tradition for his votive table was not followed or an event he disliked happened.

d. 19th March 2022

As we gathered as a family on the 19th of March the main topic of conversation was naturally San Giuseppe and my thesis. One of the biggest celebrations happened in 1995 to bless a relative's medical recovery. Despite three decades having passed, my family and the town vividly remembered the memories of the table. My family shared how to prepare such a big table, the collective commitment of the whole family and the seven floor building to actively contribute to the preparation of the votive table. Multiple were the memories that came up from these conversations, but I would like to highlight those that related to what I had observed before with Mrs Lina.

The supernatural and its superstitions play an essential role in making the tradition much more than a simple religious event, the Sicilian connection to the sacred and the profane shine through these living and dynamic beliefs. Sabrina, my cousin, told me how once a Bivona person organized a modern and colorful table which was completely different to the traditional one. It was a "tacky table with orange tulle, eggplants who wore sunglasses and all

sorts of despicable details", said my cousin. The story has it that while the family was watching over the table – as San Giuseppe's table can never be left alone – the "statue turned its back to the table as a strong wind came in the room and swiped it, even if all windows were shut". That was a symbol of blasphemy and discontent as the table maker did not respect tradition. Similarly, at the table my family made in 1995, those who were watching over the table at night fell asleep and they narrated that they were woken up by the strong sound of someone knocking and when they went to the door to check no one was there.

An interesting set of topics emerged from my first round of observations and interviews, and what I found most captivating is the intersection between all of them: the presence of traditional roles, the existence of practices that women have shaped and changed with their own discourse and empowerment, the development of womanhood and sisterhood along the tricky practice of trusting, the connection with religion and spirit, magic and superstition. Women are at the front of the creation of this axial scenario in which they are the holders, the carriers and the innovators of tradition, religion, community and spirituality.

e. First considerations: the language and the performance of women's preparations

Observing the women of tradition, I found a rich tapestry of expressions, spanning pride in tradition, a sense of responsibility, and an unspoken resilience – a form of social poetics that emphasized their roles as both custodians and active creators of tradition. Their culinary actions are not merely tasks but ritualized acts of remembrance, deeply intertwined with tradition and storytelling. Through cooking, they materialize memories, blending oral history with physical embodiment, each gesture laden with inherited meaning. This performative aspect of remembrance is heightened by the intimate, communal space of the kitchen – a realm where history is both recited and enacted through each recipe, ingredient, and shared moment.

The process becomes a layered narrative where women hold the role of cultural transmitters, using food as both a medium and a message. This is vividly underscored when they prepare each dish, which is not just an act of nourishment but a symbolic offering, a connection to past generations and a preservation of sacred tradition. In doing so, the kitchen transforms into a sacred space, merging the boundaries between the domestic and the divine. The

physical preparation - layering *pignolata*, slicing herbs, organizing the votive table - is thus an act of cultural continuity and a profound expression of faith, rooted in both personal and collective memory.

In these kitchens, food preparation serves as a language, one as rich and layered as any spoken word, allowing women to perform and pass down their heritage with an unspoken understanding that connects them across generations. Through their labor, stories, and collective rituals, these women enact a form of resilience and agency, simultaneously reinforcing and reshaping their roles within a patriarchal framework. These women are more than carriers of tradition; they are the custodians and curators of a living memory, shaping and preserving cultural identity through acts of care, hospitality, and devotion. In honoring this tradition, they assert their presence as active, essential participants in the continuity and adaptation of cultural life in Bivona.

Chapter Four: The dynamics of tradition and the role of women

I. The feminisation of religious tradition

The prominence of women in popular religion, particularly in informal and unofficial practices that aren't endorsed by the established church, has long been recognized in European ethnographic studies. Common explanations for women's religiosity in Southern Europe often center on psychological aspects and negative doctrinal views about women, alongside their exclusion from formal religious roles. This literature suggests that women are driven to religion by feelings of unworthiness, guilt, and shame. However, Lena Gemzöe in her work *Feminine Matters* (2000) offers a new perspective on women's religious roles that exceeds the negative view of 'women as sinners' and is based on women's everyday roles and experiences. As she writes, "women are not really reconcilable with the image of woman-as-Eve" (Gemzöe, 2000, p. 10). Drawing on Jose Cutileiro's concept of women as 'unordained priestesses', Gemzöe shows how women not only act within religious contexts but also create new meanings through their reinterpretation of rituals, symbols, and beliefs. Gemzöe posits that women are not merely participants but also main characters of these religious contexts: women 'domesticate' religion, as their religious expression is driven by an ethic of care rooted in their domestic roles as mothers and caretakers. This involvement extends their influence into public social spaces, increasing their power in the community.

Women's domestication of religion encompasses practical and spiritual responsibilities for informal death rituals, including bodily care, mourning, praying with the dying, maintaining the memory of deceased family members through cemetery care, holding masses, giving alms, and praying for souls. Gemzöe's observations deeply resonated with the fieldwork I carried in Bivona in 2022 during the preparation of San Giuseppe. Women shape their spaces in religious contexts, they own agency over the knowledge and the *savoir-faire* necessary to the success of the ceremony, and they do so in the most intimate yet powerful way they may know: their houses and their memory. As mothers and caretakers, tradition takes form in the acts of cooking, of preparing the votive table, in giving a helping hand to the neighbor, or taking care of the children while the others are busy preparing the religious feast. It is through these actions that the women of San Giuseppe take on their religious agency: it is not the men holding knowledge of the votive table, it is not the priest, it is a woman's job to bring the San

Giuseppe to life. As Gemzöe notices – and it is identifiable in other researches in Southern Europe (Christian, 1972; Antunes, 2015) – women have the main religious responsibilities of caring for the living and for the dead. Even in their happiest moments, they are the ones that cherish and pray for the loved ones, they are the ones that bring you a picture of their deceased father to show them to you as they unveil their family history, like Nonna Pina did with me.

As Pedro Antunes highlights in his work *Depois da morte. O restauro imaterial da encomendação das almas* (2015), women in Portugal hold a closer relation to the questions of spirituality and the questions of death, reaching an intensity of spiritual awareness greater than that of men. As the practice of '*encomendação das almas*' in the region of Tras-os-Montes shows, the ability to cultivate rituals surrounding death allows women to master the social domestication of death, offering them a path to both spiritual transcendence and social liberation through the performance of these sacred rituals (Antunes, 2015, p. 58). In my research, an example of this transcendent and spiritual proximity was certainly Mrs. Lina, as her interview and insights about San Giuseppe proved. Her 'connection' with San Giuseppe was so personal and heartfelt, it was clear that the relation not only enabled her to better provide for the Saint's celebrations and help different women with these domestic rituals, but also allowed her to hold a position of empowerment in the Pecoraro family and in the community of Bivona.

As the examples of Mrs. Lina and Nonna Pina showcase, religious practices in Bivona are deeply shaped by women, and their participation not only sustains communal beliefs but also grants them a form of authority and empowerment within a traditionally patriarchal system. Gemzöe develops two key concepts to understand the evolving role of women in religious spaces: '*the religious field*' and '*feminisation*'. The religious field encompasses a range of practices, such as the cults of saints and Mary, death rituals, pilgrimage, and material religious culture – as the ones we have uncovered above – all of which Gemzöe shows are deeply feminized. The '*feminisation*' of the religious field involves three aspects: the numerical dominance of women; women's religious authority through their elaboration of religious knowledge and expertise; and a process of interpretation whereby women define the meanings of religious practices and symbols based on their concerns and experiences, introducing 'female' themes and expressions.

During my research, I was clearly able to notice the first aspect of Gemzöe's '*feminisation*': I have observed approximately 50 ordinary Masses taking place in the two main churches of Bivona. In these ordinary acts of religious belonging, the ratio of women to men was astonishing: 80% of the Masses' observants were women. Certainly, I am not here to unpack the full psycho-sociological reasons behind women attending Masses in towns – beside pure faith, of course. However, it is worth mentioning that a woman's presence at Mass is calibrated with the presence of the other women attending, acknowledging that who goes frequently to Mass is a respectful woman. But the performative act is only part of what interests me about this 80% quota. What got me thinking, as a young secular woman of Bivona, is the *why*? Why are women in the community of Bivona still so attached to the religious life of the town? Why are they still conforming to the rules and the 'sins' the Church attributes to them, as 'Eve', 'impure' and 'fornicators'? Why is it only women going to ordinary Masses and why don't they stop going? Is it that simple? Is it easy to conclude that women are like a Greek *pharmakon* - *φάρμακον*, the poison and yet the remedy of their own problems? If the Church enhances and perpetuates patriarchal structures, why don't women stop going all at once?

Possibly, one answer to these many questions is in Gemzöe's theory itself: Gemzöe contends that this *feminisation of religion* is crucial to understanding broader religious dynamics, noting that women's practices redefine religious themes and symbols, moving away from traditional theological constructs of Eve's sinfulness or Mary's chastity and toward lived experiences like caregiving and bodily health. As she mentioned, women in Vila Branca "perform a religious authority of their own" (Gemzöe, 2000, p. 96) that, while publicly accepted, remains "at odds with the official view of the church" (*Ibid.*, p. 95). It is possible, as I have observed in my field research, that women find their unique ways to create heartfelt connections with spirituality, to mint their own religious terms and bypass the impositions attributed by the Church. It is women in the first place that, when attending the Mass or after it, would say "Women who go to the Mass come here to 'beat their chest', but then they are the biggest gossipers", "I do not like this priest, he is too conservative, too precise", "I have a relationship with God, not with the priest", "The meanest women are the priest's housekeepers".

The sense of denial and discontent towards the official religious pillars and those who align with them can be considered to be a response to women activating their own resources and

understanding to pursue their religious beliefs. Many women do not seem to seek the mediation of the typical religious interlocutors. On the contrary, they may find a more profound relationship with God in the absence of it. As Gemzöe describes in *La femminilizzazione della guarigione nel pellegrinaggio a Fátima* (2017) – translation by Lorenzo Cortesi – during the women's pilgrimages to Fatima, which embodies the *'localization and materialization'* of Mary, their key religious experiences occur in contexts not mediated by the church or priests (Gemzöe, 2017, pp. 127; 132). These pilgrimages are driven by a desire to care for the health and well-being of family members through the fulfillment of vows. As I have similarly witnessed in Bivona with the *prumissioni* for the votive tables, women encounter their own form of religiosity in their spiritual individuality, but most importantly, in the mediation for the health and well-being of their family and community. Their role as religious caregivers is essential to the maintenance of the community, and their practices enhance the existence and carrying of religious traditions.

Another example of how this role may empower them as women and as religious informal authorities is expressed in Susan Starr Sered's ethnography *Women as Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women in Jerusalem* (1992). Sered presents a compelling study of elderly Jewish women, particularly of Kurdish and Yemeni origin, residing in Jerusalem. Sered focuses on how these women, though excluded from formal religious leadership roles, become ritual experts within their communities through a process she terms as the '*domestication'* of religious beliefs and practices. This domestication refers to a deeply personal and creative adaptation of broader religious traditions to suit the everyday realities of their lives. Sered describes this as "a process in which people who profess their allegiance to a wider religious tradition personalize the rituals, institutions, symbols, and theology of that wider system in order to safeguard the health, happiness, and security of particular people" (Sered, 1992, p. 10).

These women perform significant religious roles in the domestic sphere, guiding others in rituals, such as lighting Sabbath candles or preparing holiday meals, and safeguarding religious symbols and practices within their families and elderly care homes. It was very common to see this in Bivona during the making of San Giuseppe's traditional platters. Each woman, despite her will to stick to the original way of preparing the dishes, would implement her small and big 'changes' to the recipes: tricks to improve the consistency of a *frittata* to make it last longer; meticulous processes to make sure that the eggs were not rotten; changing

one ingredient of a dish for another – such as switching the strong taste of sardines to the mildest one of canned tuna – to make sure their children would enjoy it. The *domestication of the religious tradition* is first and foremost to be considered as an act of women caring for their families and their communities. Hence, it is a year-long act, as Nonna Pina demonstrated when she showed me how she keeps and freezes the first fruits of each season to make sure she can have them all on the San Giuseppe's table.

At the time I wondered why she would care to freeze all the fruits, as it certainly differed from the original tradition, because fridges in Sicily are rather a modern invention. Then Nonna Pina made it clear: freezing a plump peach from summer and putting it on the altar in spring would ensure that "her son has a productive year in the peach orchards" – their main agricultural occupation – and overall, that "they would have fruits and prosperity for each season". As Nonna Pina proved, women implement innovation to maximize the results of the religious practice for their families. The constant act of caring that women practice in Bivona intertwines with the religious components at all times. As Mrs. Lina's efforts showed us as well: every year she prepares a couple of extra *lavureddi*, the germinated wheat, in case someone in the community needs them for their votive tables. The great contribution they provide to the community and the essential knowledge of the San Giuseppe tradition makes them ritual experts, like Sered's women in Jerusalem.

Similarly to what the author explored, despite physical limitations and the challenges of aging, these women maintain a sense of agency and resilience, asserting their roles as custodians of tradition and informal spiritual leaders. Their religious practices become both spiritual and social, fostering a sense of interdependence and continuity in a rapidly changing world. Sered's ethnography highlights the intersections of gender, age, and religion, showing how these elderly women transform and personalize their faith to ensure the well-being of their loved ones and preserve their cultural and religious identities, just like in Bivona. Through this lens, Sered argues for a broader understanding of religious authority and expertise, noting that even without formal roles, these women wield considerable influence within their communities through their religious knowledge and practices.

As the work of these three anthropologists demonstrated, and my fieldwork was able to reiterate, a critical gender and age perspective is essential to understand religion in Southern Europe and the Mediterranean, especially in rural contexts like the ones analyzed by Gemzöe

and Antunes in Portugal. These perspectives redefine women's religious lives, not around sinfulness or chastity, but around caregiving and community: focusing on women's roles reveals that their actions (re)define popular religious practices. A first approach to the *feminization* and the *domestication* of religion is necessary to disclose the hidden facets that 'tradition' and 'religion' hold in communities like Bivona. They provide an opportunity to understand the longing for spirituality and divine intervention that women feel in their communities and help us conceive of the most complex levels of their socialization that transcend religion. It would be diminishing to only analyze the strictly religious practices and beliefs I have observed in the gathering of these women during the years. Despite the majority of the convivia happening in religious contexts or to prepare a religious celebration, like San Giuseppe and Santa Rosalia, these spaces of womanhood were essential for the emancipation of these women's matters. In these hubs they were able to process and discuss circumstances and emotions of their lives, develop diverging narratives, and complain about their statuses as women. The religious events became essential gatherings for them to develop their opinions and fight – implicitly and explicitly – the patriarchal impositions they would encounter in their daily lives, within their family and community.

As it was already clear in my observations in 2022, women would have to deal with all sorts of businesses while preparing the votive tables: they had to take care of the kids, of the house, of their husbands. When they were able to rest, women would simply gather in a circle to update each other on their issues and thoughts: whether the weather had been too cold, or their emigrated children homesick, or their cleaning products not effective. A sweet circle of banal yet unique lives, a small bubble of female poetics and agency, which I believe the anthropologists Jill Dubisch and Lila Abu Lughod have masterfully depicted in their ethnographic researches, as a brilliant tool that enhances women's empowerment within intrinsically patriarchal societies.

II. The poetics of womanhood

Jill Dubisch, in her exploration of the *poetics of womanhood* (Dubisch, 1995, p. 212), presents a powerful theory on how women in religious contexts use ritual not only as a form of personal expression but also as a means of public intervention. Dubisch argues that by appropriating the very cultural materials that define their socially constructed roles – such as motherhood, domestic responsibilities, and bodily decorum – women shift their traditionally

private attributes into the public sphere through religious practices. This movement allows them to challenge and transcend their prescribed gender roles, gaining visibility and agency in a broader social context. In rituals, particularly those associated with death and mourning, women's expressions of suffering, lamentation, and physical acts of martyrdom serve as a form of poetic and cathartic elevation.

Dubisch explains that this bodily and emotional display of suffering creates a performative space where women's pain is not only made visible but also consecrated and legitimized in the public eye. She refers to this shared expression as an 'idiom of suffering' (Dubisch, p. 214), where personal grievances and social limitations experienced by women are transformed into a collective, politically charged language. Through these rituals, women detach themselves from their everyday roles and create a space for empowerment, using their pain as a tool for both personal separation from traditional expectations and to form communal bonds. As Dubisch notes, this performative aspect of ritual allows women to use their experiences of suffering to bridge the gap between the personal and communal, thereby reshaping their social roles and achieving a form of transcendence (*Ibid.*, p. 218). Thus, the *poetics of womanhood*, as Dubisch theorizes, is not just about personalizing religious practices, but also about claiming a space where women can assert their identities and struggles in ways that resonate with both their gender and their social contexts.

In *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (1986), Leila Abu-Lughod offers an in-depth exploration of Bedouin social life, focusing on how poetry functions as a channel for expressing private emotions that challenge the public codes of honor and modesty. Abu-Lughod begins by addressing Western misconceptions about the harem, arguing that it is not an oppressive space but rather a domain where women exercise agency and autonomy (Abu-Lughod, 1986, pp. 2; 5). Within this context, poetry emerges as a central element of Bedouin culture, providing a medium through which women can articulate emotions such as desire, frustration, and sorrow – feelings that are otherwise suppressed in daily interactions governed by strict social norms (*Ibid.*, pp. 7; 10). She particularly emphasizes how women use poetry to voice sentiments that would be deemed inappropriate in public, especially in relation to the stringent codes of honor that shape Bedouin life (*Ibid.*, p. 233). *Ghinnawa* poetry allows women to express deep vulnerabilities and desires in a private, intimate setting, often shared only with close kin and other women. In this emotional

space, women temporarily escape the constraints of social hierarchy and gendered power dynamics (*Ibid.*, p. 234).

Abu-Lughod's analysis highlights the contrast between public discourse, which demands honor and self-control, and poetic expression, which allows for the articulation of personal weakness and emotional pain. While these 'veiled sentiments' may challenge Bedouin gender roles, they are embedded in tradition and thus reinforce the very social structures they critique (*Ibid.*, p. 240). Poetry operates within what Abu-Lughod calls an 'antistructural' space, offering a form of resistance to dominant ideologies without directly threatening the system itself (*Ibid.*, pp. 252; 255). It allows women to navigate the restrictions of a patriarchal society while creating a space where their feelings and identities can be affirmed. Poetry thus serves as a counterpoint to the public discourse of honor and modesty, enriching our understanding of Bedouin social dynamics by illustrating how individuals reconcile personal experience with cultural ideals. Abu-Lughod argues that this tension between public conformity and private expression reveals much about the complexities of power, gender, and resistance in Bedouin life.

Abu-Lughod's focus on *ghinnawa* poetry as a means of personal expression among Bedouin women echoes the communal activities in Bivona, where women also find opportunities to share stories, voice complaints, and support one another in the circles of their houses. These gatherings provide a space for expressing personal sentiments and fostering emotional connections, much like the private recitations of poetry among Bedouin women. In both societies, women's roles in upholding tradition also allow for subtle forms of resistance and empowerment. Bedouin women use poetry to assert their agency, voicing emotions that are otherwise repressed in daily life. Similarly in Bivona, women demonstrate agency and social poetics in the circles of intimacy they hold away from the male gaze. These acts of expression, though framed within socially accepted practices, represent a quiet challenge to patriarchal norms, allowing women to subtly reshape their communities.

III. Women's circles: trivial gossip or female camaraderie?

Chitchat, gossiping, and complaints were a constant in my observations: women would gather and share their doubts, their suffering, their thoughts; and sometimes, in between those, they

would slip some news about town, some spicy detail about someone's life, some information that they considered "common knowledge", hence allowed to be shared.

For as much as gossip has been normalized to be a 'bad quality of women' or a 'threat to feminism' itself, I have always wondered about the deeper roots of this urge, as it often surrounds the conversations of small and big groups of women, including the girls from the Santa Rosalia Committee I got to meet afterwards. As Esther Eidinow explains in the chapter 'Identifying Gossip' of her book *Envy, Poison and Death: Women on Trial in Classical Athens* (2015), "the word 'gossip' originates from the Old English 'god-sibb' or 'gods-sibling', meaning godparent. The term was used for those (of both genders) who acted as 'sponsors' at a baptism, but it also seems to have developed a more specific meaning, describing those women who attended a mother before, during and after a birth" (Eidinow, 2015, p. 172). Hence, god-sibb's original meaning was one of protection and camaraderie with one another, especially between women. As Silvia Federici explains in *Witches, Witch-hunting, and Women* (2018), "female friendships were one of the targets of the witch hunts. It was in this context that 'gossip' turned from a word of friendship and affection into a word of denigration and ridicule" (Federici, 2018, p. 40).

As Maria Verena Peters discusses in her article *From the Whisper Network to #MeToo—Framing Gender, Gossip and Sexual Harassment*, "the stigmatization of women as gossips has been used as a strategic tool to keep women from solidarizing with one another openly. Especially women who spoke up against mistreatment, abuse, harassment or rape by men were thus discredited and/or silenced" (Verena Peters, 2020, p. 8). Gossip in groups of women, its cadence and interactions can further be understood as a tool of survival, of prevention, and expression, highlighting the enduring importance of veiled sentiments as means of agency and empowerment. For instance – imagining how this may have applied to previous and current generations – if a woman in Bivona had been beaten up by her husband, women without concrete tools to act upon the fact may have discussed or murmured the topic in their gatherings (crocheting, grocery shopping, sitting outside of their buildings), for multiple reasons: to make more women aware, to enact some sort of vigilance and prevention, or simply to share a common pain. Saying that spreading gossip is an enemy of healthy female relationships may be diminishing the role that these gossiping circles have had throughout time and may still apply to the reality of Bivona today.

Eidinow highlights how "recent research in evolutionary psychology suggests we should treat this activity with far more respect as gossip facilitated social bonds" (Eidinow, p. 172). As bell hooks noted in her work *All About Love: New Visions*, "one reason women have traditionally gossiped more than men is because gossip has been a social interaction wherein women have felt comfortable stating what they really think and feel" (hooks, 2001, p. 59). As Jackie Guendouzi explored in her work *'You'll think we are always bitching': the functions of cooperativity and competition in women's gossip* (2001), the features and structures of women's talk are highly cooperative (Guendouzi, 2001, p. 29). As she explains, "women's conversations in all-female groups are often built around a framework of cooperativity, women play with their talk in a manner that is like the jamming sessions of jazz musicians" (*Ibid.*).

It would be beneficial to approach the circles of 'trivial' and common conversations like the ones observed in Bivona as a central place for the *poetics of womanhood* to take place. Even if not equipped with the same musicality or expressive potential of Abu Lughod's *ghinnawa*, the female gatherings and their circles of whispered information can represent a form of spoken resistance and underline the importance of 'veiled sentiments' as a tool for agency and empowerment. Depriving women of these gatherings could hinder their freedom and means of expression, as well as the strong bonds of intimacy and camaraderie that instill from it. Silvia Federici's acknowledgment of the importance of gossip and its role in the carrying of tradition and the empowerment of women sheds a comprehensive light on these values and opportunities:

> *This conception of 'gossip,' as we have seen, emerged in a particular historical context. Viewed from the perspective of other cultural traditions, this 'idle women's talk' would actually appear quite different. In many parts of the world, women have historically been seen as the weavers of memory – those who keep alive the voices of the past and the histories of the communities, who transmit them to the future generations and, in so doing, create a collective identity and profound sense of cohesion. They are also those who hand down acquired knowledges and wisdoms – concerning medical remedies, the problems of the heart, and the understanding of human behavior, starting with that of men. Labeling all this production of knowledge 'gossip' is part of the degradation of women – it is a continuation of the demonologists' construction of the stereotypical woman as prone to malignity,*

> *envious of other people's wealth and power, and ready to lend an ear to the Devil. It is in this way that women have been silenced and to this day excluded from many places where decisions are taken, deprived of the possibility of defining their own experience, and forced to cope with men's misogynous or idealized portraits of them. But we are regaining our knowledge. As a woman recently put it in a meeting on the meaning of witchcraft, the magic is: "We know that we know."*
>
> (Federici, 2018, pp. 41-42)

Federici's observations align profoundly with what I was able to witness in the circles of Bivona, as well as in the individual experiences of women. Despite their knowledge was often silenced and diminished by the men of the house, in their gatherings – and when approaching me – women were able to communicate genuinely and intimately, ultimately enlightening their knowledge, sharing it, and repurposing it for the future generations.

IV. The 'frontstage' of tradition as a limit to women's empowerment

Nevertheless, it would be an oversimplification to state that the maintenance of memory, along with the carrying of tradition, is a woman's job only in Bivona. The holding of these discourses in the community is double-fold, as men still play an essential role at the 'frontstage' of celebrations. Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) relies on a theatrical analogy to suggest that the individual discursively performs and sustains social roles within their everyday interactions. As Guendouzi states, "*frontstage* performances happen when impression management is at its most salient and *backstage* performances when the distinction between performer and audience is less defined" (Guendouzi, 2001, p. 30). Guendouzi notes that '*frontstage*' performances are more meticulously managed and influenced by dominant expectations of politeness and decorum, whereas informal personal conversations are generally recognized as part of '*backstage*' behavior (2000: 243). She also highlights that a key aspect of *'backstage'* conversations is the tension between the norms governing both frontstage and backstage settings, and states "this tension is 'exacerbated' by women's need to gain symbolic capital in relation to social norms" (*Ibid.*).

Women's presence and religious ownership seem to live restricted within the 'domesticate' backstage environments that I have analyzed, but struggle to make it to the front line of religious tradition in town. It is men that present the San Giuseppe votive table once it is ready and open to the public, they lead on the ritual to divide the food amongst the community, they stay to the side of the votive table to welcome people in, while their wives silently stand by their side. Men then start intonating the ritual songs of the *Populu Me*, as women step back.

Figure 9. *Women, behind men, chat while men sing Populu Me*, Elena Greco (2024)

Populu me, initially directed by the Pecoraro family like many of the San Giuseppe traditions, originally included women, namely their sister; similar traditions in nearby villages include women as well. It is not clear how over time women's voices were left behind in *Populu Me*, to the extent that now men reluctantly say "*Populu Me* is no woman's matter", and when asked "What if we start involving young girls that are interested?", the eldest ones answer "Even to that?". For as much as men play a critical role in maintaining religious and popular tradition and life on the *'frontstage*', they do so with a traditional paradigm that is rarely prone to change. I have often witnessed this 'presence' in the public space, but rarely found it

in the private spaces where I carried my investigation, where men hold a *laissez-faire* approach and do not get involved in the concrete making of tradition – the 'domestic' part of it especially.

Allow me to repurpose Erving Goffman's seminal work to attempt drawing a psycho-sociological, as well as a cultural, profile of the Bivonese traditional community. For as much as I was able to experience in Bivona, men seem to take up the front stage with their socially expected behaviors. The front stage is where individuals control how they are perceived to fit their audience's expectations: through the frontstage the men enable and hold their power as the 'official' – yet 'performative' – carriers of tradition. As Goffman highlights, "a performance is part of a broader social script, and individuals are expected to adhere to it when in the front stage" (Goffman, 1959, p. 41). In contrast with ordinary Masses where women made up the 80% of the attendees, for extraordinary Masses, like the celebrations of San Giuseppe and Santa Rosalia, the ratio would change to 60% women and 40% men. This might be caused by the fact that extraordinary Masses hold more performative power and can be considered a part of the '*frontstage* life'. Nonetheless, in the *backstage*, where they may relax and be themselves without the pressure of managing impressions, men's presence is blurred, at times prevailed by the female counterpart that holds knowledge, domestic importance, and practicality.

What struck me the most during my research was the prevention of women moving past the *backstage* and taking over the *frontstage* of celebrations. The housewives of Bivona live intensively the *backstage* of preparation, often setting aside the societal and gendered norms typically associated with the domestic environment: they wear sportive clothes and no makeup, they are friendly, strong, witty, organized, they are 'bossy' and decisive over the choices of the house and the choices they have to make to put together the votive tables. However, when the curtains of the performance open, the scene drastically changes: women reduce the volume of their voices, engage less with the same female companions that helped them put together the feast, they do not take credit, they behave composedly and honorably, as they are expected to by society. The light of female camaraderie seems to fade. Men's main presence in the *frontstage* of the 'celebration-performance' allows them to reiterate gendered roles and norms. Women's absence from it ensures that men are not overstepped in the public sphere, leaving the narrative unchanged. A question raised spontaneously from my observations in Bivona: Are women not allowed to take over the public space? Are they

convinced the public space doesn't belong to them? Or simply, are they okay with the place and roles they cover in the Bivonese society already?

Similarly for the Santa Rosalia's celebrations, it is often men at the front stage of tradition, they hold the roles of leadership and presidency, they repeatedly take over the Committees through the years "to ensure that the tradition stays alive", but they act abruptly when tradition is challenge bottom up, by women and youth.

Chapter Five: Women's empowerment in the carrying of tradition

I. Young women against prejudices: Santa Rosalia Committee 2024

a. December 2022 to September 2024

For the rest of my investigation, I had the chance to follow and be part of the 2024 Santa Rosalia Committee. 2024 marked the 400th Anniversary of the Proclamation of Santa Rosalia as the Saint Patron of Bivona. Santa Rosalia's Committee has a waiting list of 2-3 years, the committees are mostly male dominated, and repeatedly composed by the same group of people, who consider themselves as the 'veterans' of Santa Rosalia's celebrations. Less frequently, women in their 50s have taken part in the celebrations, rarely as the President of the Committee: the last record of it was in 2016, when a women-led committee brought back a whole series of culinary and artistic traditions related to Santa Rosalia that previous committees had forgotten. For the previous 20 years, the President was always a man, and at times, in his committee some wives of the male members would participate. The 2024's Committee was different: in 2022, two young women, Chiara and Veronica, went to the Church to sign up to be a Santa Rosalia committee. As the first couple of years were taken, the first available year was 2024. A group of 20 young women, who did not attend church but cared deeply to "carry on the tradition of Santa Rosalia and pass it down to the new generations" wanted to be part of a new Committee for 2024.

Since 2022, the members of the committee were being discouraged by their own families and the outside community to take on the celebration. They would often be told "Leave the celebrations to those who have always done them", "Why are you committing to something that will require time and patience", "Do you have any men in the committee, you need them to negotiate prices and to be more bold when you fundraise money around town", "You girls are shy, you will not have the guts to go around town asking for money, or when you have to fight other people during the planning of the event". The discouraging comments the women of the committee received, possibly dictated by the 'pure' intentions of their families thinking "the daughters would get too many responsibilities", joined the ones of people genuinely believing "a group of women would have not been able to ask, negotiate and manage money to make things happen". The sexism and the patriarchal comments these women went

through in the following years will be dense and repeated, embedded with pity, patriarchy and disrespect.

To clarify, when I mention ‘girls’ or ‘daughters’ I do not mean young women in their teenage years, I mean women that ranged from their 20s to their 50s – students, workers, mothers, singles, married, often financially independent, with different sexual orientations – yet always called *‘picciotte’*, young girls, and criticized or scolded by their own families for this decision as if they were teenagers. I believe that, once again, language is sovereign of meaning, and a diminishing term like ‘young girls’ can easily represent what is imposed onto them on a daily basis: despite the mature age, women do not seem to be considered to be able to make their own decisions, nor able to manage practical matters or cumbersome affairs.

During my time witnessing the conversations around the celebration, it was often the case to hear themselves doubting how they would have been perceived by others. In their initial gatherings, they would frequently say: “We will not make it”; “Don’t worry my father is going to talk to them”; “My husband will set this guy’s record straight to get us a discount”. Nevertheless, the narrative soon changed to “If this guy is used to making business with men, he doesn’t know what 20 really mad women can do” and again “We do not need a man in this matter” or “We are women, we will do this better than they did”. As astonishing as it may sound, it was possibly one of the first times that a group of young, independent women took over a religious matter in Bivona, without being backed by any men or a religious mediator. The absence of traditional mediators and mindsets bothered many: the Church in the first place, which addressed them publicly as a ‘peculiar committee’, demanded them extra money that was not requested to male predecessors, and intentionally used sermons against them during the celebrations.

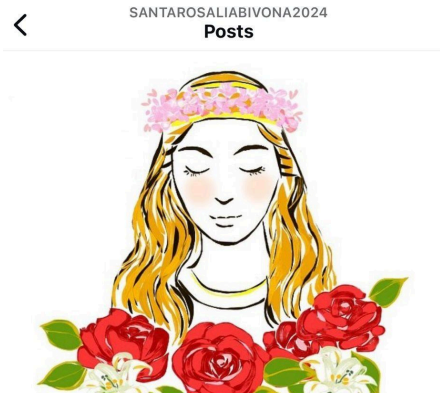
Nevertheless, the 2024 Committee was able to re-create important moments of the Bivonese Santa Rosalia’s tradition: the typical classical band concert in the main square, which had not taken place for 10 years; the production of the traditional Santa Rosalia’s dessert, *cubata*; the enactment of songs by local storytellers to narrate the story and the legend of Santa Rosalia and the traditional show of *I Pupi Siciliani*, the Sicilian puppets that narrate the stories of Charlemagne in Sicily; the sharing of ‘bread and oil’ with the population in the communal gardens, a place that has largely been forgotten by the community. The Committee’s main goal was to put together a celebration that would embrace both tradition and innovation,

adding moments dedicated to youth and fun – including local enogastronomy, music, DJ nights, and a strong social media presence – to approximate the youngest generation to traditions for which they had not show interest nor willingness to bring them forward.

b. The program

The 400th Anniversary Committee had an early start introducing new perspectives on the carrying of Santa Rosalia's tradition. In April 2024, they had already shared a new 'image' of the celebration. A new logo, drastically different from the original statue, depicted Santa Rosalia as a young woman, surrounded by flowers, with no gold nor halos, just a crown of peach blossoms. The new image soon became the symbol of their whole campaign: gadgets, tshirts, tote bags, the young gentle girl was the icon of something new.

Figure 10. *Santa Rosalia logo*, Comitato (2024)



Another drastic change from the previous committee was certainly the use and engagement with social media. The Committee communicated with their audiences especially on Instagram and Facebook, two platforms that are used by the integrity of the Bivona community: where the legacy of community gossiping takes a new dimension in the comments section and the in-person dynamics are often replicated digitally. These two main changes in approach were certainly key to understanding the goal of this group of women: to introduce innovation, or simply a contemporary view, in a traditional celebration often driven by old, white men; to approximate the youngest generation to something they do not feel belongs to them. A secular-like approach was taken on many matters of the celebration, for instance on the prayer printed on the commemorative *santina* – a commemorative card – distributed to the population during the fundraising and the religious celebrations. It recited:

O Radiant Rose, who with gentle fragrance inundate hearts, infuse in us the hope and strength to face the experience of Life as You did. You who were simple, candid, bound to the Spirit and poor in matter, accompany us in the search for a more sincere life.

O our beloved Patroness of Bivona, protect and guide our community in the adversities it faces. Embrace and intercede for our sick and extend your protecting hand over our land. Assist in the journey the youth, women, men, children, the elderly and your faithful all.
O our Santuzza, Rosa dei Sicani, we pray to you for a better future: free of war, pestilence and vexation. We rely on the centennial devotion in your name, and trust you to guide us to build a world of inclusion, peace and love.

Differently from previous years, words such as 'inclusion', 'peace', 'love', 'war', were used for the first time instead of the classic litanies. A sign of renovated protection from the Saint in times of contemporary crisis, but also a call to action and to raise awareness in the community of Bivona who read it. In a world that evolves and accepts new identities, a celebration like Santa Rosalia – that embraces so many secular and religious people in Bivona – could not be left behind. Similarly, in the organization and planning of events, the Committee wanted to shed light onto the possibility of creating an inclusive, all-age comprising program, which aims to involve the youngest generation, whilst providing a solid set of activities for the other age ranges.

While this may sound purely superficial and folkloristic, anthropology invites us to find deeper meaning and interpret even the 'banal choices' made for a simple town celebration. As I will analyze in the following chapter, innovation played a masterful role in the vision that the women of Comitato Santa Rosalia had this year. A renovated energy and flux of people surrounded Bivona during the five days of the popular celebrations: the two main musical events, a 90s DJ night and the final concert with the artist Lorenzo Fragola, brought at least 5,000 people to the town[2], a great turn-out that the whole town commented to be 'never seen before'. The initiatives of the Committee varied from these nights dedicated to youth where people aged 18 to 50 would join in crowds, to events purposefully tailored to people that cherish tradition and religious moments: like the making of the almond treat *cubata*, the *Pupi* – Sicilian puppet – show, the *bread and oil* night. The goal was to unify history and contemporary times, to push forward innovation and collaboration, and to grow the reach of the celebration and spread knowledge about it within and outside the Island. The Committee's passion and objectives moved deeply people from across Europe – not only the Sicilian emigrants that attended more numerously this year – but friends and families who

[2] An approximation of numbers is provided by the technical assessment of Eng. Napolitano in 'Piano di Sicurezza Piazza San Giovanni', 2024

wanted to participate actively to the success of the celebration: donating money from the United States, traveling from Europe and the UK – as friends of the Committee and of the cause – to attend and help with the organization during the entire August.

Figure 11. *The making of cubata with the female experts and the UK friends*, Comitato (2024)

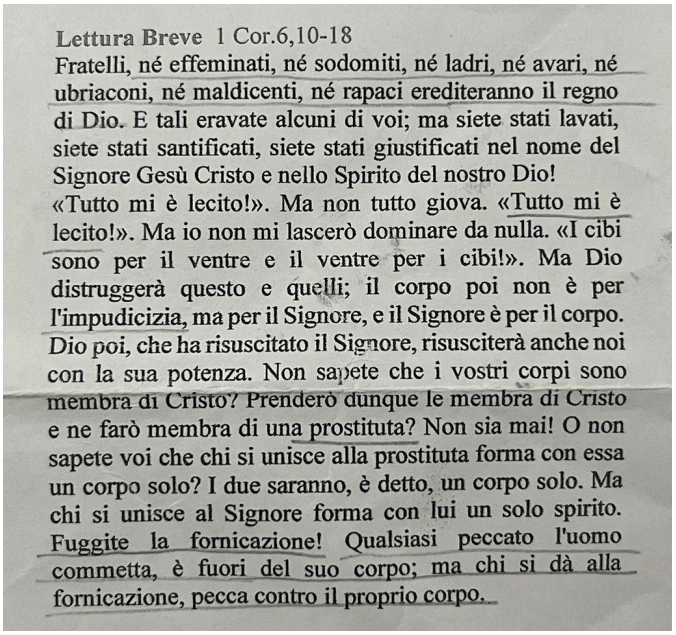
Figure 12. *The friends of the Committee with the Santa Rosalia t-shirts*, Elena Greco (2024)

Figure 13. *The young Committee Santa Rosalia 2024 in their 90s party*, Comitato (1st of September 2024)

Figure 14. *The youth turn out of the 90s Party*, Comitato (1st of September 2024)

c. The local response

The committee received different types of responses to their work. In the first place, on multiple occasions they had to deal with people that doubted and criticized their faith and practices. First and foremost, the Church itself was reluctant towards them: the fact that the majority of these women did not attend Mass frequently or had lifestyles that differed from religious customs – for instance, having homosexual relationships, living with their partners before marriage, being frequent attendees of Bivona's nightlife – played an important role in how they were perceived by the priest and his enclave. Moreover, the style of the celebrations was also frowned upon, as it included wine tasting, modern music and dance. The Church did not miss the occasion to point that out in the public square, where the priest would always address them as a 'peculiar Committee' or presented chosen readings that shamed "people who engaged in impure lifestyles: the drunkens, the homosexuals, the prostitutes, the fornicators". Similarly, the outside women who are diligent attendees of the church reached out a couple of times to the members of the Committee – me included – to highlight that it would be beneficial if they would attend Mass more frequently and that a Santa Rosalia Committee must be necessarily religious.



Lettura Breve 1 Cor.6,10-18
Fratelli, né effeminati, né sodomiti, né ladri, né avari, né ubriaconi, né maldicenti, né rapaci erediteranno il regno di Dio. E tali eravate alcuni di voi; ma siete stati lavati, siete stati santificati, siete stati giustificati nel nome del Signore Gesù Cristo e nello Spirito del nostro Dio!
«Tutto mi è lecito!». Ma non tutto giova. «Tutto mi è lecito!». Ma io non mi lascerò dominare da nulla. «I cibi sono per il ventre e il ventre per i cibi!». Ma Dio distruggerà questo e quelli; il corpo poi non è per l'impudicizia, ma per il Signore, e il Signore è per il corpo. Dio poi, che ha risuscitato il Signore, risusciterà anche noi con la sua potenza. Non sapete che i vostri corpi sono membra di Cristo? Prenderò dunque le membra di Cristo e ne farò membra di una prostituta? Non sia mai! O non sapete voi che chi si unisce alla prostituta forma con essa un corpo solo? I due saranno, è detto, un corpo solo. Ma chi si unisce al Signore forma con lui un solo spirito. Fuggite la fornicazione! Qualsiasi peccato l'uomo commetta, è fuori del suo corpo; ma chi si dà alla fornicazione, pecca contro il proprio corpo.

Figure 15. *Mass Readings of the 3rd of September 2024*, Elena Greco (2024)

Translation:

Brothers, neither effeminate, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor stingers, nor drunks, nor slanderers, nor raptors will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God!
«Everything is permissible to me!». But not everything is of benefit. «Everything is permissible to me!». But I won't let myself be dominated by anything. «Food is for the belly and the belly for food!». But God will destroy this and those; then the body is not for the impudence, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body.
God then, who raised the Lord, will also raise us with his power. Don't you know that your bodies are members of Christ? So shall I take the members of Christ and make them the members of a prostitute? Never be it! Or don't you know that whoever joins the prostitute forms a single body with her? The two will be, it is said, one body. But he who unites with the Lord forms with him one spirit.
Run away from fornication! Whatever sin man commits is out of his body; but he who gives himself to fornication, sins against his own body.

The chosen sermon, in the context of the Santa Rosalia Committee's experiences, reveals deep layers of social, religious, and moral judgments. It can be understood as an attempt to reassert traditional religious authority and reinforce social norms in the face of a group that challenged these very norms by leading a significant religious celebration in ways that differed from conventional expectations. The hidden meaning of this sermon, as directed at the Committee, lies in its strategic use of religious rhetoric to undermine the legitimacy of the women's leadership and lifestyles while simultaneously reinforcing the power dynamics that define who is considered morally 'worthy' within the religious community. The passage also references a central religious theme: the idea of being washed,sanctified, and justified in Christ. This contrast – between those who are saved through proper adherence to religious norms and those who live impure lives – creates a moral dichotomy that clearly places the Committee on the wrong side, in the eyes of the priest. The women are implicitly told that they do not measure up to the sanctified community, thus positioning their leadership in a religious celebration as hypocritical or unworthy.

The use of phrases like "everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial" offers another layer of subtext. Here, the priest may be addressing the Committee's decision to modernize the Santa Rosalia celebrations, which, as already mentioned, included elements like wine tastings, modern music, and dance. These were likely seen as indulgent and irreverent by the church. The rhetorical device of asserting that "while many things may be permissible, they are not necessarily beneficial" is a subtle way of delegitimizing the Committee's choices by suggesting that their innovations are spiritually harmful, even if they are not explicitly forbidden. This critique of their celebration style becomes a coded message: just because the Committee can incorporate modern elements does not mean it is in line with religious or moral benefit. The emphasis on bodily purity, especially through the warnings against fornication, homosexuality and joining with prostitutes, serves as a further attack on the Committee's perceived lack of religious adherence and incestuous lifestyles. The metaphor of joining with a prostitute and forming "one body" with her is an extension of the priest's criticism of the women's lifestyles. It suggests that their moral impurity is not just an individual failing but a collective one that threatens to taint the religious body they are part of. This imagery reinforces the belief that the Committee's leadership over a religious celebration is inappropriate; their "sinful" lives are seen as incompatible with the sanctity of the event they are organizing.

The choice of the sermon's themes reflects a broader attempt to reassert control over who is considered morally and religiously fit to lead religious practices. By invoking moral and bodily purity, the priest reaffirms the Church's hold over what constitutes acceptable religious practice, subtly implying that the Committee's deviations are an affront to the sacred traditions they are tasked with upholding. Additionally, the prayer functions as a social policing mechanism, indirectly encouraging the congregation to view the Committee members through the lens of sin and impurity. It reinforces existing prejudices, particularly towards non-heteronormative relationships and non-traditional family structures. In doing so, the Church seeks to rally the community to reject the women's authority by associating their leadership with moral failure. The women's independence, autonomy, and progressive changes to the celebration are thus undermined by casting them as emblematic of sinful rebellion against the established religious and social order.

A different approach was taken by the people who considered themselves secular or atheist in Bivona. In one particular case, a lawyer from town who never donated to the previous

Committees was “moved by the goal of 2024” and decided to give 100€ to the cause. He thanked the women for “narrating a different story of Santa Rosalia and picturing her as she was: a rebel and a feminist against the status quo, who fought above all for her beliefs and freedom”. The 2024 Santa Rosalia Committee received extensive congratulations from the vast majority of the population, who would do so particularly by privately messaging the members of the Committee or commenting on posts online. The main audience who engaged positively and actively since the beginning with the Committee was certainly the average age group they represented, 18 to 50 years old, both men and women. Moreover, a great collaboration unfolded with associations in town: during the five days of the celebration, the women cooperative association ‘*Rosalia*’ attended to bring awareness about economic violence against women and means of empowerment.

By the end of the celebration, a wave of enthusiastic people – that exceeded the original age group and was able to touch the older generations – was happy to congratulate the Committee for “reviving the celebration of Santa Rosalia”. Finally, the 2024 Committee decided to move their objectives forward and not let this season of joy and excitement die with the end of the celebrations. Indeed, they decided to create an association for the territory: ‘*Rosa Mundi*’, focused on women’s empowerment, promoting art and culture, and fighting against prejudice.

II. Committee Santa Rosalia 2024: The enactment of (de)patriarchal narratives and the (re)appropriation of heritage

a. The marginalization and invisibilization of women in heritage

The experiences of the women in the 2024 Santa Rosalia Committee exemplify the intersection of gender, age, religion, and power dynamics in traditional and religious communities, aligning with theoretical discussions on how women contest and transform their roles within patriarchal structures. In this case, women faced significant opposition rooted in gendered assumptions about their capacity to lead, negotiate, and manage a historically male-dominated event, which resonates with several key theories on gender and heritage. Drawing on theoretical insights from female scholars – such as Elena Settemini, Lena Gemzöe, Laurajane Smith and Margaret Wetherell, and the doctoral work of Guadalupe Jimenez-Esquina – will help examine gender roles and power dynamics when related to the

questions of heritage, offering a nuanced understanding of how women contest and transform these spaces, and why they do so.

As Elena Settimini assesses in *Women's representation and participation in UNESCO heritage discourse* (2020), "the intersection between gender and heritage has been largely ignored in heritage discourses and it has become an area of inquiry only recently, when researchers began to address how changing constructions of masculinity and femininity interact with what is valued and included as heritage" (Settimini, 2020, p. 1). The construction of gender and the construction of heritage are intertwined. Guadalupe Jimenez-Esquina, in *Del Paisaje al cuerpo: una crítica feminista de la patrimonialización del encaje en la Costa da Morte* (2018), discusses the historical exclusion of women from cultural heritage, arguing that both tangible and intangible heritage have been masculinized (Jimenez-Esquina, 2018, p. 59). Jimenez Esquina critiques the historical exclusion of women from cultural heritage, particularly in how they are left out of 'authorized heritage', which has traditionally focused on male figures and their contributions to art, history, and public memory (*Ibid*.).

Women's contributions to heritage have often been marginalized, their roles in cultural preservation devalued, and their presence in decision-making processes minimized. This reflects the situation in Bivona, where the Santa Rosalia Committee was typically male-led, and women were largely excluded from decision-making roles. As Jimenez Esquina highlights, the absence of women in heritage is not due to a lack of capability but stems from systemic, political, institutional, and social factors. The 2024 Santa Rosalia Committee confronted this very issue: they were questioned not because they lacked skills, but because society had historically deemed men more suited to these roles. The use of 'authorized heritage' as a male-dominated field reflects broader social biases that undervalue women's contributions to cultural preservation and leadership. By reclaiming the Santa Rosalia celebration, the women in the committee actively contested their exclusion, aligning their experience with Jimenez Esquina's critique of the invisibilization and misinterpretation of women within cultural narratives.

Jimenez Esquina's critique of the '*cosmetic*' measures often used to address gender inequality (Jimenez-Esquina, 2018, p. 107) is also relevant here. While women were given the opportunity to lead the event, they faced additional obstacles and stigmas that men would not

have encountered. These additional burdens highlight the superficial nature of such 'inclusion', where women are allowed to participate but only within frameworks that reinforce patriarchal control. True gender equity requires a deeper transformation of these frameworks, something the women of the Santa Rosalia Committee began to achieve through their assertive leadership and rejection of patriarchal control. Jimenez Esquina's reflection on the '*burden of heritage*' (*Ibid*., p. 169) speaks to this often unacknowledged labor that women perform in maintaining cultural traditions. Heritage, while romanticized, can impose significant demands, particularly on women who are expected to carry out this labor without recognition. The women in the Santa Rosalia Committee took on considerable responsibilities in reviving the traditions of their community, all while facing criticism and opposition. Their experience reflects the unequal burden that often falls on women in heritage management, where their contributions are vital yet undervalued.

Women have been largely invisible and misrepresented in the archives of history and both tangible and intangible heritage has been often selected from a perspective of heritage masculinisation, thus building heritage values on "a monolithic concept of the human factor that does not contemplate the existence of different identities" (Settimini, 2020, p. 6). These discourses play a significant role in shaping how people perceive social realities, and they also help legitimize those realities. Therefore, it is crucial to examine how discourses have been employed in the construction of identities. As Settimini mentions, gender can be "a means of forming networks of power, capital, authority, and as a mode of resistance", with the potential to influence our future perspectives. As a result, gender should not only serve as a way to define identities but also as a critical tool for analyzing and challenging power dynamics (*Ibid.*, p. 2).

b. Heritage-making as an opportunity to challenge the status quo

The heritage-making process, as Laurajane Smith and Margaret Wetherell suggest in *Emotion, affective practices, and the past in the present* (2018), is a performance that involves more than the mere preservation of objects or rituals; it is an active process of creating cultural meaning in the present (Smith et al., 2018, p. 9). The women of the Santa Rosalia Committee reactivated social history by bringing back traditions that had been lost under previous male leadership, thereby asserting their role in the preservation and

transmission of cultural memory. Moreover, it is their active process of creating new cultural meaning that shall be explored further. As a matter of fact, enacting old practices ensured the fulfillment of the cultural *status quo* and installed their legitimacy as the makers of tradition. But it is only through the new practices that they were able to challenge the *status quo* itself and redefine the meaning of cultural legitimacy as a whole.

As Jimenez-Esquina interprets, quoting Laurajane Smith, "heritage is a multilayered performance... that embodies acts of remembrance and commemoration while negotiating and constructing a sense of place, belonging, and understanding in the present" (Jimenez-Esquina, 2018, p. 70). The women of the Santa Rosalia Committee embodied this concept in practice, rejecting the traditional male-dominated model of organizing the celebration and asserting their independence from male intermediaries. Their integration of both traditional and modern elements into the celebration, such as enogastronomy and social media, represents a feminist reimagining of heritage that is inclusive of women's experiences and contributions.

The concept of 'despatriarcalization of heritage', as advocated by Jimenez Esquina, calls for a fundamental rethinking of how heritage is managed and who gets to participate in its creation. As she rightfully highlights, and it is reflected in the essence of these acts of disobedience, despatriarcalization is not "just increasing the visibility of women but transforming the patriarchal structures that shape cultural heritage. It advocates for equal participation of all members of society in heritage creation and management, as well as recognizing the rights of individuals to opt out of maintaining certain traditions that may be exploitative or unsustainable" (*Ibid.*, p. 78). It is disobedience that skyrockets unexplored possibilities towards the agency of women in culture and heritage, and to go beyond the dichotomies we have asserted so far, such as female vs. male, old vs. new, tradition vs. innovation.

Seeking representation stays at the heart of the new societal tendencies that these women were forging in their communities, and possibly reflect the bigger global need of embracing heritage and tradition with the necessary modifications that propulse us to be a more inclusive society. The conversations of heritage can and should be "a practice of intergenerational communication" (Smith et al., 2018, p. 9): it is only through the implementation of a greater collaboration between the multiple groups that compose the identity of Bivona that we can

truly assess how the practices of tradition are managed and who they are structurally leaving behind. The contribution of the new generations and their different comprehensions of the world is an opportunity to drive forward heritage and support women and minority groups who are currently discriminated against by these patriarchal institutions. As Gemzöe et al. mention in *Contemporary Encounters in Gender and Religion: European Perspectives* (2016), a new and more complex understanding of these practices should be embraced to grasp the incoming roles that women advocate for within their religious and cultural practices. The editors discuss the importance of an intersectional approach in feminist studies – and outside of them – noting that religion must be considered as part of women's identity alongside race, class, age, and other markers (Gemzöe et al, 2016, p. 3). Moreover, they advocate for nuanced analyses that consider how power relations, gender, and religion are interwoven in various contexts, emphasizing solidarity between secular feminists and religious women, showing a new relationship between feminism and religion itself (*Ibid*).

In conclusion, the case of the 2024 Santa Rosalia Committee offers a powerful example of how women can contest and transform patriarchal structures through their participation in religious and cultural traditions. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from gender and heritage studies, it becomes clear that these women not only redefined their roles within a traditionally male-dominated space, but also reshaped the narrative of their cultural heritage through innovation. Their efforts speak to broader themes of gender, heritage and power, highlighting the importance of women’s agency in reclaiming their place in both religious and cultural practices. Through their leadership, they contributed to the despatriarcalization of cultural and religious heritage, offering a model for how women can engage in meaningful, transformative action within their communities.

Chapter Six: The Future of Tradition

I. Heart in the past, eyes in the future

In 2023, I was asked by the Municipality of Bivona to find an ideal promotional storytelling for their Peach Festival, which takes place every year in August. From my past political campaigning experience, it was already clear that the politics of the town were seeking to bring innovation without disrespecting tradition: that's when we coniated the motto '*Heart in the past, eyes in the future'* and we created a logo made of a colorful mosaic of tiles on top of the Arab-Norman limestone portal, which is one of the main symbols of Bivona.

Figure 16. *Condividi Bivona logo*, Elena Greco (2022)

Figure 17. *Arab-Norman Portal in Bivona,* FAI (2024)

Similarly, the storytelling for the promotional campaign of the Peach Festival – the main agricultural production and cultural event of the year in town – followed similar lines: the goal was innovating while cherishing the essence of what had already been. That's when we envisioned '*The Future of Tradition*': a living oxymoron, for which tradition is necessarily repurposed and re-imagined in a contemporary key. The need to move forward with tradition, whilst providing new narratives and perspectives on heritage and its knowledge is a poignant need, both globally and locally. Even realities like Bivona were clearly driven to empathize with merging conservative realities and the ever-evolving global scenarios, fomented from

within by the latent power women hold in their communities. As the eldest women of tradition and ritual experts demonstrated in their daily role as 'backstage directors' of the cultural life and the women of the Santa Rosalia 2024 Committee externalized and brought 'frontstage': there is an essential need to carry tradition and popular culture updating it with new needs and inclusive understandings.

As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett interpreted through the words of Jean Cuisenier, heritage is very much a product of the present: "we significantly modify the original intentions and with them, the meaning that their producers and practitioners attributed to them" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 125). Heritage-making is an intentional process carried out in and for the present, aiming to meet modern political needs and aspirations. This process is not solely the domain of experts and professionals, but is also actively shaped by nations, communities, and individuals. Macdonald (2013) further contends that heritage is a process of what she describes as 'past-presenting', where the past is invoked in the present to address current cultural and social goals for the future, and actively address the needs and aspirations of individuals and groups (Smith et al., 2018, p. 9).

Thanks to the theories laid by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Macdonald we can better perceive how the presentation and ownership of heritage symbolizes a socio-political and cultural tool of (re)appropriation and empowerment itself, and how necessary – and unavoidable – it is for people to redesign and co-create tradition, whilst cocooning its existence. As Lee Harris suggests in her article *The Future of Tradition: Transmitting the visceral ethical code of civilization* (2005), tradition may be one of the "only possible mode for transmitting a community's habits of the heart, and it does this by providing the recipe for making the kind of human beings who will viscerally feel and respond to the same habits of the heart as the community to which they belong" (Harris, 2005). However, "these recipes, like those used for cooking, do not by any means demand to be rigidly or mechanically followed. To make pasta, for instance, you need the essential ingredients but otherwise you are free to experiment [..] in the end you have the same essential nature and accomplish the same pragmatic purpose, a satisfying bowl of pasta" (*Ibid.*). For as much as this sentence might not be Italian-approved – as we do take our culinary tradition far more conservatively than the religious matters I have discussed in this work – Harris lets us in on a very heartwarming reality: traditions and communities will not disappear if we twist ingredients and create new recipes of the heart.

Ultimately, these discussions and the two female-led communities I have analyzed in this thesis emphasize that traditions are not static relics. Rather, they are living, adaptable frameworks that need to be continuously revisited, reinterpreted, and sometimes reformed to remain relevant. The future of tradition hinges on a delicate balance: respecting the foundational elements of the past while allowing for growth and innovation. This dialogue ensures that while tradition shapes the future, the future also reshapes tradition. Women of Bivona not only followed tradition, but transformed it based on the needs of their communities and the groups they represented: it could be the aunt that switches tuna for sardines to make her kids happy; it is Nonna Pina freezing the fruits of each season; it is Ms. Lina making extra *lavureddi* and harvesting *bracco* even if she doesn't know if someone will need them next year; it is the young girls of a community offering 100 kg of almond *cubata* to the population and then dancing until 2am at the 90s party they have organized.

Nevertheless, these theories and perspectives do leave behind some absolutely discerning theories that are complementary to understanding the fluid nature I am attributing to tradition and innovation. As previously mentioned, the *despatriarcalization of heritage* entails a more profound contestation of the identities that produce culture. According to this view, it shall not be only women challenging the *status quo*: it is the nature of heritage itself that should embrace fluidity and convergence, detach from dichotomies and antonyms, and accept plurality. As Bruno Brulon Soares analyzes in *Rupture and continuity: the future of tradition in museology* (2020), "the outdated opposition between modern and traditional, so rigidly defined in the West, has proven to be inadequate to explain the role and the functions of museums" – and I would add heritage – in the present (Soares, 2020, p. 15). Moreover, Soares explores how "time may give form to relations of power and inequality" (*Ibid.*, p. 16). Tradition, as a notion that is based on a Western-oriented linear time, has been used to affirm difference as both temporal and spatial distance. It implies a symbolic separation between past and present, or between different societies and populations subjected to different places in the temporal scale of progress and civilization. We possibly need to detach from a linear perspective of 'what tradition was, is and will be' and acknowledge how its narrative has been used to obtain and modulate power.

As Eric Hobsbawm explores in *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), practices that appear or claim to be ancient are often recent constructions designed to serve particular social or

political purposes. Hobsbawm defines '*invented traditions'* as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past" (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 1). These traditions are less about historical accuracy and more about creating a sense of stability, community, and identity: establishing social cohesion or embedding certain values, such as obedience and respect for hierarchy. These practices are often politically motivated, as they align with nationalism, colonialism, and other large-scale sociopolitical projects. As he states, "insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious" (*Ibid.*, p. 2). Hobsbawm invites readers to critically assess the 'historical authenticity' of traditions and recognize how they are often politically motivated fabrications tailored to modern agendas. As the story of *Populu Me* in Bivona teaches us, we have long envisioned it as a male-led tradition, until we recall that until the early 1970s, women were included in it as well.

The exclusion of women from tradition and culture should be perceived as a socio-political tool to diverge and limit their place in society. This critical turn should foster communities to challenge their perceptions of tradition in the first place. If we revisit heritage and culture from the assumption that tradition and authenticity are themselves constructed, we can further explore why we still approach them as something essential, that is the utmost duty of a great number of women to bring forward, conservatively or transformatively. A possible answer lies in the fact that tradition might not exist *per se*, but the communities that live with it do exist: women exist in navigating the structures of tradition, and they subtly or abruptly challenge power to find their space in holding their community through them. This is possibly because women were brought up socially to care, to be the caregivers of their nuclear and extended families, and necessarily of their villages, or because they had to fight for their own presence and existence within contexts that subordinated them, developing a greater attachment to what tradition and community is: women fought to find their dimension.

As I re-engage with my research question on which role women own in holding community together through tradition and innovation, the answer may be in the middle: in the cyclical, fluid approach that lives in the conjugation between tradition AND innovation, a sweet spot more than a gray area, that entails the simultaneous co-existence and subversion of these two

dimensions to create a new one, the dimension of caring. It was the care of women – elderly caregivers and rebellious youngsters – that moved popular celebrations forward in Bivona. Through caring, loving, and resisting, they made things happen, they propelled the life of their communities. Finally, it is through the dimension of caring that we should shed a light on women's roles, as a society that lives in apathy and conforms to the structural forces imposed upon it is a society that will slowly lose both tradition, innovation, and love.

II. The Anthropology of Emotions

If asked for a path towards a more just world, I would direct people to 'Grace: Touched by Love', the introductory chapter of *All About Love* where bell hooks gently depicts a society abandoned to violence and egoism: "Reviewing the literature of love I noticed how few writers, male and female, talk about the impact of patriarchy, the way in which male domination of women and children stands in the way of love" (hooks, 2001, xxiv). As a love song to the nation, bell hooks proposes new visions on "how to live in a culture where love can flourish" (*Ibid,* xxix). Most importantly, hooks let us to a valuable consideration: "The word 'love' is most often defined as a noun, yet all the more astute theorists of love acknowledge that we would all love better if we used it as a verb" (p. 4): a verb, an action, an active commitment towards something or someone. Similarly to what Laurajane Smith and Margaret Wetherell comment on Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's *Intangible heritage as metacultural production* (1998), heritage has been increasingly addressed as a 'verb' (Smith et al., 2018, p. 9). There seems to be a contemporary need for an 'active' – as opposed to 'passive' – approach towards the matters of love and heritage. Today more than ever, what is required from humanity is a transformative intervention: a commitment to doing and living, to seeking emotions and meanings beside the ones forced upon us. It is in this active life of emotions and heritage that we can further envision the actions and interactions of the women I have encountered in this anthropological journey.

The *Anthropology of Emotions* helps better understand some of the contemporary needs of these communities. The intersection of anthropology, emotions, and the future is a rich and complex field of study. Recent scholarship has highlighted the growing significance of emotion and affect within the humanities and social sciences, challenging the traditional view of humans as purely rational beings. This shift has had a profound impact on various

disciplines, including anthropology, where researchers have increasingly recognized the centrality of emotions in shaping cultural experiences and perceptions of the past, present, and future. The influential work of Lutz and White has been central to this shift, as they have emphasized the cultural construction and context-dependent nature of emotions. Catherine Lutz and Geoffrey White in *The Anthropology of Emotions* (1986) explain that anthropology's interest in emotions emerged largely as a critique of "the dominant cognitive view of humans as mechanical information processors" (Lutz & White, 1986, p. 405) and to better understand the sociocultural experiences of individuals within their communities. This focus moves beyond biological interpretations, emphasizing emotions as culturally specific, socially mediated experiences.

In contrast with the traditional view of emotions as irrational forces, their work focused on "the formulation of emotion in conscious understanding and in interactive discourse" (*Ibid.*, 417). Detailed analyses of concepts of emotion have emphasized the "primary importance of cultural meaning systems in emotional experience, challenging in some cases such basic oppositions in our theoretical vocabulary as reason/emotion, culture/ personality, and public/private" (*Ibid.*). A culturally embedded approach to emotions, and further considerations on their centrality in understanding communities, goes hand-in-hand with the tendencies I have witnessed in Bivona. As they further develop, "concepts of emotion emerge as a kind of language of the self – a code for statements about intentions, actions, and social relations" (*Ibid.*). Quoting Levy, they underscore the role of emotions in forming the actor's relation to a social world. Consistent with this point of view, "numerous ethnographic studies have noted that emotions are a primary idiom for defining and negotiating social relations of the self in a moral order: emotions emerge as socially shaped and socially shaping in important ways" (*Ibid.*). Emotions are determining and identifying factors of the approach that social and cultural actors have towards their community and heritage.

An appropriation of emotions in understanding heritage and different cultural sensitivities has been largely explored in most recent studies across and beyond the Mediterranean. As Laurajane Smith, Margaret Whetherell and Gary Campbell brilliantly introduce in their work *Emotion, Affective Practices, and the Past in the Present* (2018): "Emotion is everywhere – in the curl of a lip and a shrug of the shoulders at an exhibition of slavery, it is there in the will to commemorate and curate, in stifled sobs at remembrance ceremonies, in fired-up family genealogists, commitments to nationalism, the discomfort felt as tightly held

assumptions are questioned, and in the sticky patina of fingerprints on popular glass cases in museums" (Smith et al., 2018, p. 1). On these lines, Andrew Beatty in *Anthropology and Emotion* (2014) advocates for a narrative approach to studying emotions, suggesting that emotions are best understood within the context of lived experiences rather than through generalized structural frameworks (Beatty, 2014, pp. 6; 13; 16). This approach aligns with Malinowski's participant-observation method, which emphasized capturing the 'imponderabilia of actual life' (*Ibid.*, p. 3): the subtle, everyday expressions of emotions within social interactions, which I had the chance to witness and grasp as essential during my field investigation.

Additionally, Smith, Wetherell, and Campbell highlight how emotions shape our interpretation of the past and our interactions in the present. They describe affective practices as culturally embedded ways in which emotions are used to construct identity, community, and memory. Emotions thus serve as lenses through which individuals interpret historical events, experiences, and personal narratives. This concept underscores the role of emotions as both personal experiences and collective expressions that reflect societal values. As Sara Ahmed states, "emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments" (Smith et al. 2018, p. 41).

III. The affective turn in museology

Overall, the *Anthropology of Emotions* seeks to understand emotions as deeply embedded in and shaped by cultural contexts. Through ethnographic methods, anthropologists explore the specific ways societies understand, express, and regulate emotions, revealing the integral role emotions play in cultural identity, social relationships, and collective memory. One area where this *affective turn* is particularly evident is in the realm of museums and heritage institutions. Scholars have explored how museums are increasingly embracing emotional and affective practices in their curation and engagement with visitors. The *affective turn* in museums has led to the rise of '*affective curatorship*', wherein curators actively seek to evoke and harness emotional responses from visitors. This approach recognizes that the museum experience is not just about the dissemination of information, but about the emotional and sensory engagement of the visitor.

Scholars such as Marzia Varutti have examined this '*affective turn*' in museum studies, a field closely related to anthropology. Varutti's work illustrates how anthropology's focus on emotions extends beyond traditional field settings, influencing public spaces and collective memory work. A successful Sicilian women-led example, *Museo dei 5 Sensi*, in Sciacca redefines precisely the traditional museum by transforming the entire town into an experiential 'diffused' museum where visitors engage with local life through all five senses. The project's goals are to foster deep cultural connections, support sustainable tourism, and highlight Sciacca's history, art, and environment. Visitors interact with artisans, participate in food tastings, explore scenic spots, and attend guided experiences that reflect the area's vibrant traditions. This initiative particularly involves locals, enhancing community pride and providing a genuine, memorable experience for all.

The creation of emotions through senses and experiences is one example of creating heritage as a shared practice that engages, in the first place, the communities living in it, and broadens the access and fruition to heritage as a whole, creating a practice of cultural democracy. As Elisa Bonacini states in *Engaging Participative Communities in Cultural Heritage: Using Digital Storytelling in Sicily* (2019), "cultural democracy encourages pro-active participation in local cultural life and makes cultural resources accessible to all. This participation supports social and cultural awareness, contributing to lifelong learning and active citizenship" (Bonacini, 2019, p. 42). Cultural democracy entails the existence of a participatory culture involving communities to promote cultural heritage through shared responsibility and rights. By fostering a culture of active and inclusive participation, subaltern narratives can be given the platform to be heard.

In summing up the dynamic interplay between tradition, innovation, and the essential role of emotions, this exploration illustrates how tradition is not a static inheritance but a fluid, living framework. Women stand at the avantguard of reinterpreting and transforming this framework, leveraging their lived experiences, social insights, and emotional intelligence to bridge the past with a progressive, inclusive future. In Bivona, these new narratives exemplify how heritage is shaped by the community's heart and spirit. Through these activities, heritage becomes both a commitment to preservation and an adaptive force, responsive to the current and evolving needs of those who inhabit the town.

In Bivona's cultural life women embody tradition and reshape it in ways that resonate deeply within their communities. They are the unseen *backstage directors* who preserve rituals and

practices, and the new *frontstage innovators* who incorporate contemporary and inclusive perspectives, helping tradition remain meaningful and accessible. Women thus embody the delicate balance of honoring the past while reimagining it for future generations, exemplifying that care, love, and resistance are potent agents of change. The power of emotions and affective practices in heritage-making further illuminates how women can reshape socio-cultural norms. As they challenge and redefine traditions, women break down rigid dichotomies, rejecting the limitations imposed by conventional definitions of heritage. By fostering a participatory, emotionally resonant approach to tradition, they create a socio-cultural panorama where diverse voices and practices coexist and enrich each other.

In conclusion, this active, lived, and inclusive model of heritage asserts that communities will not only endure but thrive when they are guided by a commitment to adaptation, respect, and collective memory. Through active participation, care, and an emotional connection to their roots, women play a transformative role in the socio-cultural fabric, crafting traditions that empower rather than constrain, and spaces where everyone belongs. As these communities continue to evolve, they chart a hopeful path toward a world where heritage is not merely preserved but lived, cherished, and continually reinvented for all.

Conclusions

From the moment I read Christian's quote "*Una viuda que viva sola es medio vecino, una soltera sola es un cuarto de vecino*", I kept wondering: would four '*solteras*' living together count as a full man in the village, then? Will the union of women be so powerful to out-thrown prejudices? This thesis has undertaken an in-depth exploration of some of the roles of women in the Sicilian town of Bivona, focusing on their involvement in religious and community life and how they serve as custodians of both tradition and innovation. Through careful observation of cultural rituals, such as the celebrations of San Giuseppe and Santa Rosalia, and by examining the broader socio-cultural landscape of the Mediterranean region, the study has shed light on the significance of women's roles in sustaining and evolving local traditions. It has also highlighted the duality of these roles: women simultaneously preserve and subtly challenge the patriarchal structures that shape their society.

The findings reaffirm that in rural Sicilian society, women hold an indispensable position as both the keepers of religious practices and the primary nurturers of communal ties. From preparing the *Tavolata di San Giuseppe* to organizing the elaborate festivities of Santa Rosalia, the women of Bivona are responsible for the continuation of long standing customs. This study has shown that, through these acts, women not only transmit cultural and religious knowledge across generations but also establish spaces for social support and shared identity within the community. The public and private spheres intersect as women gather in kitchens and living rooms, sharing stories and responsibilities. Here, religion, tradition, and community become intertwined, with women at the center of this intricate web, exemplifying their multifaceted roles as "community holders" beyond mere custodians of faith.

While these roles offer women a sense of purpose and belonging, they also underscore the restrictive nature of their societal positions. Bivona, like many Mediterranean communities, is marked by a traditional social structure that limits female agency in visible leadership and decision-making, particularly within religious institutions. This work has explored how women in Bivona, by taking charge of religious preparations, subtly assert their influence within a predominantly male-dominated society. Through community-oriented actions and collective gatherings, women negotiate with the patriarchy, adhering to it outwardly while carving out private spaces of agency and solidarity. The '*backstage*' efforts of these women in organizing religious celebrations symbolize their resilience and agency, challenging the perception of passivity often attributed to them. Thus, women's involvement in Bivona's traditions serves as both a mechanism that enforces their subordination within the male-centric framework of the community and a vehicle for empowerment.

This study also observes an evolving generational dynamic, with younger women demonstrating a shift in attitudes toward tradition and religious practices. Unlike their elders, who approach these celebrations with reverence for their religious significance, the younger generation exhibits a more secular connection to the cultural aspects of these traditions. The Santa Rosalia Committee, led predominantly by younger women, exemplifies this trend: their engagement is driven by a desire to preserve communal identity rather than by strict adherence to religious doctrine. This generational shift introduces new possibilities for cultural evolution in Bivona, where tradition is reinterpreted in ways that resonate with contemporary values. The committee's efforts underscore the capacity of younger women to

redefine traditional roles, creating a more inclusive and adaptive understanding of local customs.

My work situates the experiences of Bivona's women within the larger Mediterranean context, where historical, socio-political, and cultural factors have shaped similar gendered patterns of religiosity and social participation. Across the Mediterranean, women have traditionally borne the burden of upholding religious practices, often as an extension of their roles within the family. This paper has contextualized Bivona's practices within this broader pattern, drawing on comparisons with communities in Spain and Portugal to illustrate the shared characteristics of women's roles in rural Catholic societies. However, this investigation has also highlighted the unique expressions of resilience and agency that Sicilian women bring to these roles. Through their unwavering participation, Bivona's women demonstrate a unique capacity to sustain their cultural heritage, embodying the resilience and adaptability that characterizes Mediterranean womanhood. The gradual '*despatriarcalization of tradition*' emerges as a collective effort that, while still bound by traditional norms, pushes for a more fluid and inclusive understanding of heritage.

This exploration suggests that tradition in Bivona – and by extension, similar communities – is not a static or singular concept. Rather, it is a "living heritage" that evolves through the active participation and reinterpretation by each generation. By adopting this perspective, Bivona's women, particularly the younger generations, illustrate how tradition can be both preserved and transformed. This research supports the notion that tradition serves as a 'verb' - an active process rather than a passive inheritance. Moreover, by analyzing these cultural realities with the lenses of *caring* and *emotions* we are able to more deeply empathize and understand the common interest that unites women in their quest to be key agents in their communities and what thrusts them towards empowerment.

The women of Bivona serve as a testament to the power of community, the resilience of tradition, and the potential for quiet yet impactful transformation within entrenched social systems. By actively shaping and sustaining these customs, they not only preserve the town's unique cultural heritage but also lay the groundwork for gradual shifts toward a more equitable and inclusive society. Any small or big conquer is a conquer to the cause, I believe. It is the gentle mumbling in the circle of the *veiled sentiments* while preparing *frittatas*, it is the call out of misogynistic behaviors on the public square, it is the union of all the small

pieces and, most importantly, it is hearing everyone's needs and beliefs without prejudice. This is what my thesis is about, embracing the actions and results of commonality, understanding individuality, challenging feminism itself to focus more profoundly on the unique empowerment each woman and the union of women may feel in different contexts.

Future research could expand on these findings by exploring other communities in the Mediterranean region, examining how women across this cultural landscape negotiate their roles within tradition and modernity. Moreover, investigating the impact of globalization and digitalization on younger generations would offer valuable insights into the evolving relationship between community and individuality. Considering the individualistic global society we live in, it would have been an interesting means of comparison to evaluate the beliefs of the youngest generation – namely Gen Z – which may not perceive tradition and innovation in the same way as the women that have been interviewed and observed in this investigation. I intend to dig deeper in other feminist theories and the use of the body for activism, delve into female individuality and spirituality as another component of what drives faith in women, and redefine the individual values that drive them to mediate tradition and innovation. Finally, this study is blind to central questions of intersectionality such as race, class and sexuality, which have not been developed thoroughly, as the concept of 'women's group' has been considered as a 'unifying' factor in the analysis. Nevertheless, questions of class and race are indeed less influential in the context analyzed: as the fruition of traditional celebrations is open to all people without economic distinction and Bivona presents a quite homogenous, if not totalising, white Caucasian population. A focus on the male counterpart to the makers of traditions would have been useful to understand more profoundly the gendered dynamics of the town. Nevertheless, such digression would have possibly deprived my study of its initial and central focus: women.

In conclusion, this study stands as both a celebration and a critique of the intricate tapestry of tradition, faith, and gender in Bivona. It calls for a deeper recognition of women's contributions to cultural heritage and a continued exploration of how tradition, far from being a monolithic construct, is a constantly evolving narrative, shaped by the emotions and the care of those who engage with it daily.

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