Tradition and identity: a case study of multigenerational Calabrian families living in Adelaide, South Australia

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Abstract

The present paper derives from a larger study of Calabrian-Australian families using ethno anthropological research methodologies (De Martino, 1977; Ricci, 1996). Specifically, it investigates the strategies used to overcome migrant disadvantage by preserving traditional cultural practices and structures in the settler country. The study showed this may be achieved through cultural strategies, in particular the establishment of social networking, family alliances and religious practices. The paper demonstrates how the study group reports a strong identification with Calabrian cultural values in the Adelaide milieu, where a tangible and metaphorical presence of the *alter ego* Calabrian village, is still able to connect people, affirm their sense of we-ness and keep alive traditional cultural values.

Key words: Calabrian-Australians, identity construction, social networking, family alliances, traditional values

Introduction

The settlement and social incorporation of Italian migrants in Australia has been reasonably well researched over an extended period. The research which peaked in the 1980s and 1990s referred in the main to the first generation¹ of Italian migrants and covered among other things demography (Bertelli 1986, 1987; Ware 1981, 1988; Hugo 1990, 1993; Parimal and Hamilton, 2000), history (Cresciani 1986, 2003; Pascoe 1987, 1992); sociology (Storer 1979; Kelly 1983, 1985; Castles 1991, 1992; Collins 1988; Vasta 1993; Chiro and Smolicz 1997; Chiro 2003, 2008; Smans and Glenn, 2011), sociology of religion (Pittarello 1980; Bertelli and Pascoe 1988, O'Connor and Paganoni 1999) and linguistics (Bettoni 1981, 1986, 1991; Bettoni and Rubino 1996; Kinder 1990; Rubino 1989, 1990, 1991, 2006; Leoni 1995; Tosi 1991)². Notable research on the second generation and in particular second generation Italian-Australian women focussing on cultural practices and identity construction was conducted by Pallotta-Chiarolli (1989), Vasta (1992), and Baldassar (1999).

The motivation for the present paper emerged from the desire to revisit previous research on Italian-Australian identity and cultural practices after a twenty year absence. It was further decided to carry out the empirical research with a focus on one particular Italian regional group: the Calabrians. The choice was determined in part by the problematic nature of considering Italians in Australia as an homogenous ethnic group with a common language, customs and lifestyles. As Castles (1991: 56) noted twenty years ago, the great regional and social differences in their country of origin is a feature that Italians transferred to Australia. It was decided to study Calabrian-Italians, in particular, because they have not figured greatly in previous studies even though they represent the second largest region of origin of Italian migrants in Australia and South Australia. Recently Rose (2005) and O'Connor and Rose (2008) have examined the historical settlement of migrants from the Calabrian town of Caulonia. In an older study of social and linguistic aspects of Calabrian migration to Australia, Misiti (1994) had predicted the imminent demise or dispersal of Calabrian culture. This provided a further motivation to examine current cultural practices and identity construction among a group of multigenerational Calabrian families living in Adelaide, South Australia.

Theoretical considerations and methodology

Previous studies affirm that individuals can fluctuate from one identity to another (Baynham and De Fina, 2005) or that new forms of collective consciousness permit migrants to develop new cultural strategies and integration practices (Vasta, 1993). Others suggest that identity is continuously negotiable through social interaction (Goffman, 1983), and that there are no limits to negotiability as a result of the fluidity of culture (Bauman, 2007). However, the level of negotiation and integration can be fairly variable, subjective and involve different aspects of human behaviour. In other words, individuals in ethno minority groups can appear to have an elevate level of integration into the public sphere of the host society, whereas their private life might reveal different results. Furthermore, it is important to consider that cultural transformations as processes are not necessarily homogenous and continuous, rather they may be characterized by discontinuities, resistances and shifts (Cirese, 2005).

Historically, Calabrian people, before migrating, belonged to the rural subaltern class. Many Calabrians had managed to overcome their position of disadvantage by adopting ethnospecific cultural and religious strategies, such as social networking, family alliances and religious practices. There is a long tradition of Italian anthropological studies which focus on folklore as a cultural response to exploitation. Some of the key researchers are Gramsci (1950), Lombardi Satriani and Meligrana (1982), De Martino (1977), Cirese (2005, 2010) and Teti (2004). According to Gramsci (1950) 'popular' and 'folkloric' are to be considered in opposition to the 'world interpretation and understanding' of the hegemonic class. Folkloric Calabrian culture is composed of ancestral strategies that are used to confront meta-historical crises of homesickness, famine, migration or inequality (Lombardi Satriani and Meligrana, 1982). Through such cultural strategies, migrants are also able to affirm their archetypical identity. De Martino (1977) refers to this as the ethos of transcendence, a cultural solution enacted to avoid their metaphorical annihilation generated by historical events. As a response to such conditions, Calabrian migrants around the world have recreated their "alter ego" villages, as one of the strategies used to preserve their cultural traditions and identity in the host society.

Participants of seven Australian-Calabrian families spanning three generations were recruited by introduction between family groups. Data was gathered through a questionnaire in the first phase and, subsequently, open interviews during follow-up visits by the researcher, who was also of the same regional background of the study group. The fieldwork in the Calabrian community of Adelaide covered a 12-month period from September 2011 to September 2012 using participant observation and ethnographic methods. The decision to use a qualitative approach was based on the desire to undertake an empirical study which was not limited by the lack of statistical data of ethnic sub-groups, such as the Calabrians of the present study. The study group consisted of forty-one individuals, twenty-two males and nineteen females, including 20 first generation, 11 second generation and 10 third generation participants. The median age of the first generation was 70.8 years. These participants migrated to Adelaide in a period between 1950 and 1972, consequently their age is relatively younger than the national average for Italian Australians (Chiro, 2003). The median ages of the second and third generations are 44.4 and 26.6 years respectively.

Results and discussion

Interviews and participant observation with the three generations of participants across the seven family groups indicated strong support for the maintenance and transmission of traditional Calabrian cultural values and social practices. In particular, it was evident that tradition and identity are strongly linked in the life-worlds of the participating family members. The three key factors supporting the maintenance of Calabrian identity in the family groups who participated in the study were:

- Social networking
- Family alliances (and partner choice)
- Religious practices

Social networking

In order to maintain Calabrian cultural values participants reported on the importance of maintaining social networks. The purpose appears to be to re-establish ex novo Calabrian identity, maintaining and transmitting traditional cultural values. During the 1950's and 1960's chain migration was one of the main factors that influenced the social structure of Italian-Australian communities which are marked by a strong regional character. According to Signorelli (2006), migrants' identity is strengthened by social networking which bonds people together. At the centre of the social network are the 'us' in terms of 'the people of my village'. This is in contraposition with the circle of acquaintances comprised by the 'other from us', the outsiders (cfr also; Marino, 2012). The first generation participants of the present study also reported that a system of networking practiced among members from the same village (the *paisani*) connected and assisted migrants from departure to settlement, creating bonds among different families. This cultural strategy promoted high levels of weness and Calabrian cultural values, which included the choice of area of residence, the choice of the *compare* (godfather) and choice of marriage partners. Today this mutual support continues to be transmitted to the second and third generation at different levels in order to preserve Calabrian identity.

The Calabrian community of Adelaide resides mainly in the northern Adelaide suburb of Salisbury and in the western suburbs: West Lakes, Royal Park, Flinders Park, Kidman Park and Seaton. 90% of the first, 80% of the second and 60% of the third generation participants of the study group reported residing in these areas. First generation participants reported having their closer friends and family living within a 5 km radius of their residence, and in frequenting the same churches: Henley Church and Mater Christi (90%) and in participating

in Calabrian feasts, in particular Sant'Ilarione, San Giuseppe of Salisbury and Maria Santissima di Crochi (95%).

As a first generation female participant of the study group reported:

We bought this house in Seaton because there is the church around the corner and there are plenty of Calabrians. We feel safer. On Sunday's the church bell reminds us of our village. [Interview, December 2011].

The woman stated that she explicitly sought to buy a house close to other *paisani* and near the church. This confirms the importance of the community network as sustained by Signorelli (2006). This well-organized system, legitimated by kinship and neighbourhood, is still able to represent, protect and support migrants and their respective families. The same group (first generation) shows a weak interest in other regional Italian clubs (only 40% reported attending such clubs at most twice a year). With regard to their descendants, they generally attend the same churches and feasts: 80% of the second and third generation participants declare they regularly frequent the same church feasts associated with Calabrian religious practices: *Mater Christi, Sant'Ilarione, San Giuseppe* and *Maria Santissima di Crochi.* A mere 10% declare they attend other regional or inter-regional Italian clubs no more than once a year.

Family alliances and partner choice

Calabrian family alliances are legitimated *via* christenings (called *comparato* or *San Giovanni*), confirmations and weddings (Minicuci, 1989). In the Catholic sphere the compare is the person who promises to share the responsibility of the child's education with the parents. The *comparato* is sanctioned by a religious rite and creates a strong relation that involves not merely the people directly concerned, but also each member of the two families, leading to a multiple alliance. Usually parents choose a *compare* who is one generation older than the child. For this reason, in the study group, *compari* are mainly first and second generation migrants. Of the participants 80% reported having a Calabrian person as a *compare* with the remaining 20% having an Italian *compare* but not of Calabrian background.

In the Calabrian community of Adelaide the choice of marriage partner also plays a pivotal role in reaffirming and transmitting cultural identity. The marriage itself can lead to a solid multi family alliance. Historically, in Calabria, the marriage system was not the result of individual choice, but the consequence of economic and political strategies in regulating reproduction as well as governing and managing social and economic issues, as a result of the strong poverty those people used to experience(Minicuci, 1989). According to Bourdieu (1972) biologic reproduction, social and cultural issues are part of the same structure. The traditional model, which had played a pivotal role in studies of traditional Calabrian practices (Lombardi Satriani and Meligrana, 1982; Minicuci, 1981,1989; Ricci 1996; Teti, 2004) and in folkloric songs (Gatto, 2007) required that marriage must be contracted, insofar as possible, inside the same community and not infrequently among first cousins (Minicuci 1981, 1989). For example, a male participant who had migrated during the 1950's reported singing a traditional Calabrian song:

I came from far only to meet you, I overcame mountains and rivers because I wanted to reach you. I am your lover and your cousin, please open the door, our parents organized the wedding. [Oral source].

This example does not mean that traditional norms are mechanically applied by all Calabrian-Australians in the Australian context, however they are embodied in their Calabrian *habitus* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 2000; Minicuci 1989; Signorelli 2006). Indeed, 94% of the first generation of the present study is married to a person of Calabrian background while 6% is married to an Italian with a non-Calabrian background. Similarly, 83% of the second generation also reported having a partner with Calabrian background, while 7% are married an Anglo-Australian person. In regard to the third generation, 43% is single, 14% is married or engaged to a person of Calabrian background, another 14% to a person of Italian background and 23% has a partner with non Anglo-Celtic origin. The 43% of single persons also expressed a preference in potentially having a Calabrian partner or, at most, a partner with Italian background. It appears therefore that the participants of the present study express a preference in adopting their traditional cultural models.

As a first generation male participant reported:

The best wedding is between people from the same village or region! Wedding among Calabrians! Wedding of the same road, elders used to say. Rocco (the interviewed's son) is married to Pina who is originally from Calabria, and I am happy. [Seaton February, 2012].

The latter statement, in appearance predictable for the generation of the participant, could influence younger members of the family and serve as a normative function by the intergenerational socialization process (Bourdieu, 1972; Minicuci, 1989).

As a second generation male participant reported:

Marry a Calabrese woman! She shares the same values as family care, mutual collaboration in the household and the education of the kids [Interview. Seaton (SA), December, 2012].

A similar attitude is evident among third generation participants, as in the following quote:

INTERVIEWER: 'Sam, do you have a girlfriend?' S. Well, actually I have not found the right girl! She must be serious, virgin and from Calabria. [Interview. Seaton (SA), December, 2011].

The young participant clearly showed some resonance with the traditional values sharing the same cultural space within the family domain, as suggested by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992).

Religious practices and feasts

Religious celebrations play an important role in connecting Calabrian *paisani* and affirming their sense of belonging. Each year, in Adelaide, the Calabrian Community organizes seven religious *feste* celebrating the patron saints of the villages from where the first generation migrated. These feasts represent 25% of all Italian religious festivities celebrated by Italian communities in Adelaide (O'Connor and Paganoni, 1999).

The feasts are celebrated in the same suburbs where Calabrian migrants reside (Western suburbs and Salisbury). Usually the religious celebration is preceded by a *triduum* or a *novena*, the mass is sang or celebrated in Italian and precedes or follows a procession with the saint's statue. The afternoon and the evening are dedicated to food and entertainment. 80% of the second and third generation participants of the study group reported they attend

Calabrian *feste* whereas only 10% frequent other regional or inter-regional Italian festivities. These data are relevant in order to understand the importance of the intergenerational transmission of traditional Calabrian identity. The *festa* represents a significant occasion for the community by re-affirm ethnic identity and reproducing the archetypical imagined Calabrian village in Australia. Studies have reported that such performances contain a number of anachronistic practices due to the lengthy space-time separation (Cirese, 1971). The fossilization of ethnic identity is characteristic of overseas migrant communities (Carsaniga 1994; Ciliberti 2007; Tsitsipis 1992). In previous studies of traditional Calabrian practices, the feast represents a fundamental cultural institute able to liberate, alter and suspend the everyday norms, in creating a imagined structure that, temporarily, involves every participant and eliminates structural inequalities (Lombardi Satriani and Meligrana 1982; Teti 2004).

Conclusions

In spite of previous research among Italian Australians which affirms that the descendants of first generation migrants are well incorporated into Australian society (Parimal and Hamilton 2000; Price 1993), the Calabrian Australian participants of the present study demonstrate, in various ways, that they have maintained a strong Calabrian identity based on traditional cultural values. Through social networking, multiple family alliances and religious rites, the participants and their compatriots were able to reconstruct *ex novo* an archetypical Calabrian social space in the host society and reaffirmed their ethno-specific cultural identity. Similarly, and as a consequence of the intergenerational influence transmitted by elder members of the family, younger members of the study group have also incorporated traditional Calabrian cultural values into their *habitus*. Consequently, participants of the second, and, to some extent, third generation, continue to show some preference in choosing a Calabrian and/or Calabrian Australian partners. In the Adelaide milieu, especially on religious occasions, the reconstruction of an *alter ego* Calabrian village, contributes to the maintenance of homeland cultural values helping to resist the exogenous influences of the dominant society and reaffirming Calabrian cultural identity.

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Footnotes

¹ With regard to the generations, the authors have adopted Cirese's (2010) definitions: the first generation includes people born in Italy but Australian residents; the second generation defines those born in Australia with at least one immigrant parent; the third generation consists of Australian born people with two Australian born parents who have at least one grandparent was born in Italy.

 $^{^2}$ This is not intended as an exhaustive list of the research undertaken on the Italian Australians nor does it cover all the works of the named researchers. It is meant merely to provide a representative sample of some the key works at the time.