

Experiencing the *Maggio* of Accettura through Sound

Accettura, in the province of Matera, Basilicata is a village of approximately 2.000 inhabitants. The festival *Maggio* which takes place there in the springtime has been an important theme in Italian ethnographic studies ever since the 60's of the last century.

The *Maggio* concerns a complex of events whose center is the festival of San Giuliano, the patron saint of the village, and the union of two trees cut down in the surrounding forest: a large turkey oak (*Quercus cerris*) called *maggio*, which then gives the name to the entire ritual, and a holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) called *cima*. The events follow one another in an alternation and superimposition of situations profane and religious, with strong historical and symbolic inferences, and involve the entire community of Accettura over the course of several weeks. The climax is reached in the four days that extend from Saturday to Tuesday of Pentacost. During these days, the oak is dragged through the village, together with numerous other trees, by the force of dozens of oxen; the holly is cut and brought to the village and united with the oak to form a new 'being' which is raised in the town square and climbed with spectacular actions, while at the same time, the cult of San Giuliano unfolds with intense moments of religious devotion.

The days of the festival are accompanied by an almost uninterrupted torrent of sound. The ritual itself, in all of its complex articulations, actually flows on the wave of an authentic river of sound. First of all, an 'official' sonorization is programmed, performed by musical groups, fanfares, religious choirs, in close synergy with the calendar of the festival. Precisely with the aim of avoiding the possibility that there might be moments of silence, some professional ensembles are invited from the neighboring region of Puglia: they are the groups of 'bassa musica' formed by winds and percussion, whose actual task is to play without interruption, especially at moments when greater physical effort is needed, as in the transport and the climbing of the trees that will engage the people of Accettura. At the same time, the visitors coming to Accettura to attend the festival bring musical instruments (*organetti, tamburelli, zampogne*) [diatonic accordions, frame drums, bagpipes], joining with the local musicians in long jam sessions. Very often, these sessions take place with persons who do not even know one another and who only come together on this occasion to form a temporary community of performers. Similar modes of participation characterize other important events of the same region, especially the 'musical' pilgrimages connected with important Marian cults, such as the black *Madonna di Viggiano*, and the *Madonna di Pollino*.

This form of musical participation at the festival, and the creation of temporary communities of performers, was something I was aware of for some time, having taken part as a *zampogna* performer (attracted most of all by the well-known skills of the people of Accettura as singers accompanied by the *zampogna*) and also because of the various studies on musical practices I have conducted in the same area.

It was precisely my direct experience that made me aware of one of the paradoxes that characterized the research on the festival of *Maggio*. The event had been considered, first and foremost, from the point of view of the ritual gesture – immortalized also by illustrious photographers and artists – and had occupied scholars in researching the meanings and interpretations (ancient symbologies of the marriage of the trees, historical traces of profane and religious stratifications, etc.) that later found abundant space in the narrative of the

festival. The result of all of this, however, undervalued the sound component. To recall an ironic observation of Roberto Leydi, in this case, one could experience, first-hand, the ‘deafness’ of a certain ethnography, capable of accurately describing worlds where absolute silence seemed to reign; in this case, a ‘deafening silence’. Starting with this paradoxical situation, it was therefore decided to study the festival of *Maggio* by focusing primary attention on the musical and sonic components and to the forms of participation that these involve. In doing so, also bearing in mind the theoretical perspective of acoustemology advanced by Steven Feld, which considers the auditory experience of sound as a form of knowledge.

Feld’s direct involvement in the Accettura project has its origin in a previous collaboration we carried out in 2004 in the same region on the rites of carnival with the presence of cowbells, themes which Feld has investigated several times. This first work, published in the CDbook *Santi, animali e suoni* [*Saints, Animals and Sounds*], illustrates a new way of presenting the research. The core is made up of a soundscape composition accompanied by a sequence of photographs by Syefano Vaja, with several short essays, assigned to specialists in the field, offering background information, reflections and analyses of the events. Therefore, there was a reversal of perspective: the role that in traditional ethnography was usually performed by the written text, was in this case entrusted to the narrative sound and to its counterpoint of images, with additional information provided in the form of text.

In the case of Accettura, taking this format for granted, and considering the complexity of the situation, a further step was devised: to examine the main days of the festival, according to a method of research characterized by a dialogical and participatory dimension (which in my case, meant also being active as performer of the *zampogna*) and to offer a representation of this method on the narrative level as well.

This approach led to the composition of a team, which, in addition to Feld and myself, also included two photographers (Stefano Vaja and Lorenzo Ferrarini), and a group of collaborators concentrated on the various typologies of the sounds and musical performances of the festival (Fabio Calzia, Cristina Ghirardini, Elisa Piria and Guido Raschieri). In addition, two of the most important performers of the *zampogna* of the region (Alberico Larato and Quirino Valvano) were with us, who, together with me, took part in the festival both in moments of ‘spontaneous’ music-making, as well as in the official processions. Also important was the involvement of the team of Don Giuseppe Filardi, parish priest of Accettura, in his multiple role of historian, researcher and organizer, but above all, as parish priest, and thus, the actor-director of the delicate equilibrium of a festival where the intense popular devotion for San Giuliano is mixed with ritual and identity practices.

The team was active during the days of the festival – this concerns the edition of 2005 – working in synergy on the various fronts of listening, observation, and participation. The final report that would arise from it, completely entrusted to sounds and images, would have to be capable, at the same time, of examining the participative aspect as well as the multi-form dimension of the festival, allowing it to embrace the numerous stratifications. This was actualized, first and foremost, in the production of two complementary CDs, one containing the soundscape composition realized by Feld, and the other, the ‘documentation’ of musical practices within the context of the tradition of Accettura curated by myself, and in a dialogical essay in which the various implications of this work are discussed, also with reference to previous research experience conducted in other fields. Alongside this nucleus of materials, which makes up the heart of the operation, are two parallel photographic essays by Ferrarini and Vaja, focusing on various perspectives, comprising

narrative sequences in color as well as documentary photos in black and white. The audiovisual part was complemented by a collection of short essays, aimed at bringing particular aspects into focus: the photographic investigations, the historical aspects, and ethnographic research.

The final publication (*I suoni dell'albero. Il Maggio di San Giuliano ad Accettura*, edited by Nicola Scaldaferrì & Steven Feld, Nota 2012, and the new edition in English, *When the Trees Resound. Collaborative Media Research on an Italian Festival*, Nota-VoxLox, with an introduction by Lorenzo Ferrarini) may be consulted for the complete contents and for a detailed discussion developed in the dialogue – especially with reference to the implications and operative modalities.

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