

## Sacred Mountains. Abrahamic Religions and Musical Practices in the Mediterranean Area

A video by Nicola Scaldaferrì, LEAV, University of Milan

(2017, Color, digital 38'10")

Review by Diego Pani

### *Diego Pani*

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The documentary *Sacred Mountain: Abrahamic Religions and Musical Practices in the Mediterranean Area* is an audiovisual journey between three different Abrahamic rituals in three different mountain locations inside the Mediterranean area. The documentary's director Nicola Scaldaferrì is an Italian ethnomusicologist who works at the University of Milan. Scaldaferrì has devoted a conspicuous part of his career to the study of traditional musics from Italy, Albania and the Balkans, focusing mostly on the Arbëresh and the Albanian culture, the Balkan epic tradition and instruments like the Italian zampogna. This movie is the result of an intensive fieldwork in the three areas of Israel and Palestine, Albania and Southern Italy<sup>1</sup>, different contexts that are condensed in the documentary's shared narrative related to the religious pilgrimages and rituals placed in mountains.

"Sacred Mountains" is divided into three major chapters, related to three key moments of the religious pilgrimages to sacred mountains: (1) the first ascent to the top, described as "the point of contact with Heaven"; (2) the prayer on the mountain, "an occasion for festive and sacrificial practices"; and the (3) descent from the top, the "return to the valley in the gladness of divine grace".

The first chapter/key moment of the ascent to the top focuses on the pilgrimage to Mount Gerizim made by the Israelite Samaritans in the West Bank. This small community lives today between Israel and the Palestinian Territories and bases their cult on a strict respect for the Books of Moses. This first part of the movie focuses on the procession that happens every year fifty days after Passover, on Shavuot, when the community moves toward Mount Gerizim after dusk and gathers in communal prayer for the whole night on the top of the mountain, where their sacred places are located.

The second movie chapter/key moment of the prayer on the mountain is related to the Islamic brotherhood of the Bektashi, a Sufi branch founded in the thirteenth century in Anatolia, and today located in Albania. The shootings are here based on the climbing of Mount Tomorr, done every year by the members of the brotherhood on August 20-25. Here, for the whole night and the day after, the camera follows the prayer near the tombs of Dede, where the ritual participants practice the Kurban, the ritual killing of a sheep whose meat is consumed by the different families gathered on the mountain.

The last key moment focuses on the cult of the Black Madonna of Viggiano, Queen of Lucania, in Southern Italy. Here, a sanctuary built on the Holy Mountain after the discovery of the statue of the Black Madonna offers the space for the religious ritual that takes place every year in early September, when the "miraculous statue descends" into the village for a festival.

The movie features two main protagonists in a dialogue with each other, the mountain and the ritual. The first one is not only a location but is the center of belief. The mountain space becomes the place in which the community of believers gathers to experience a crucial moment in their religious and social life. Paved pathways, fixed Altars, country houses, visitor centers and tents are the material infrastructures that define the perimeter of the mountain. In this sense, the ritual changes the mountain itself: it fills it with people, colors, lights, music, different patterns of vernacular traditions that re-shape the perimeter of the mountain.

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<sup>1</sup> While the fieldwork carried on Albania and South Italy is related to a pluriennial research effort, the one accomplished in Israel is related to a specific project (divided between a two week in-site fieldwork and archival research) linked to the opera *Samaritans* directed by the composer Yuval Avital. Additional information on the project can be found on the Leav website: <http://leavlab.com/portfolio/samaritans> (accessed April 24th, 2018).

This short documentary of thirty-eight minutes is filmed using only one digital camera per shot<sup>2</sup>, carried in the field by the director, who also acts as a camera operator. A brief descriptive text introduces each film chapter / key moment, stating the location of the shootings, the community and the ritual involved. Other texts appear synchronously to song texts or prayers sung/declaimed during the ceremonies filmed. There is no presence of voiceover, and there are not interviews with people involved in the rituals. The only occasions in which there is a verbal contact between the camera and the crowd filmed are the ones in which certain persons ask some questions or make some jokes in the direction of the camera operator. These few occasions are acknowledged by the director with English subtitles and close-ups on the interlocutors.



The movie's narrative is constructed through the movements of the camera inside the ritual space and the high-quality audio recording of the "sound nebula" composed by the prayers, the animals, the musical instruments (pipes, drums, accordion, flutes, brass bands, etc.) and voices (solo and multipart singing). Covering an aural range that begins with the soft noise of the steps of the pilgrims and ends with the crackling of the audio speakers that diffuse dance music, the audio recording of the sounds of the ritual acts as a counterpart for the images taken by the camera. This latter interpolates wide-shots and close-ups in a constant switch between the "whole" of the location (the mountain) and the

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<sup>2</sup> The technical equipment included two different models of Sony cameras, one used mounted on a tripod for the first chapter on the pilgrimage to Mount Gerizim, and a smaller one used only by hand for the other two episodes. The audio was recorded by a Sennheiser shotgun microphone mounted on the camera and DSM binaural microphones connected to an external sound device, in alternation to a Shure VP88 used to record specific musical performances.

details of the people, constructions, statues, altars that constitutes the ritual itself. The lighting setup of the shooting entirely relies on the natural light conditions of each scene. The director doesn't rely on the use of any external source of light, a technical move that is related both to stylistic intentions (mainly about the preserving of the natural light of each shooting) and to practical needs (the presence of only one camera operator in the field is limiting in this sense). The natural light style of the shootings is effective in the representation of the different spaces in which the rituals are staged on different hours of the day. This is the case of the documentary first section in Palestine, when the camera is directed towards the believers praying in the dark, "embedded" in the night of the mountain. In the same way, the natural colors of the dawn in Albania and the morning in South Italy acts as a constant narrative component along with the general timing framework of the whole movie.

The solo work of the ethnographer/operator is not free from drawbacks. Camera movements are, in some instances, unstable. However, in relation to the basic film's narrative framework that is centered on the perspective of the director/research/camera operator, even these technical drawbacks contribute to the representation of the natural witnessing of the scenes by the operator in the field. The aims of this work of visual ethnography are related not to the documentation of the event but are directed towards the construction of a filmography experience. This latter can speak, through the cinematic eye of the director, about three different cultures and religious beliefs about the same category of space (the mountain) in which the sacred rituals are placed. The visual and aural perception of the director is conveyed into precise editing cuts between one shooting and another, in a coherent timing framework that wants to synthesize, through the audio/video recording, the whole research experience of the director.

The silent narrative of the documentary is framed as a journey between three different areas and religions, communities and beliefs, different sounds, languages, musics, and spaces. The director focuses his attention on the three different key moments of the pilgrimages to the holy mountains as a descriptive framework for the social and cultural complexity of the three communities involved in the research. As it is stated both in the final credits and the documentary synopsis, *Sacred Mountains* is "an audiovisual journey" that synthesizes in only thirty-eight minutes the research experience of the ethnomusicologist Nicola Scaldaferrri in these three different fields of research.