

Women who cook with Angels in Calabria

Alfonsina Bellio

*Ecce panis Angelorum,
factus cibus viatorum:
vere panis filiorum*

INTRODUCTION

For peasants of the preindustrial age, the preparing of food was not merely a private culinary matter. Especially at certain times when collective sensitivities were heightened, it was an expressive and dramatic occasion of intense sociality, articulated by specific rituals or predetermined apotropaic codes. These rituals and codes drew on a world of signs that can be recognized as a symbolic reading of life experience, inscribed in a web of analogies and correspondences. (Camporesi 1980: 30)

Both the centrality of food and its symbolic value are universally recognized, and are phenomena that the ethnologist is habitually confronted with, in spite of the diversity of cultural practices. As several specialists have stressed, the food habits of the Italian south, notwithstanding their diversification in space and time, also show a deep connection with an articulated and consistent system of founding mythical elements, beliefs, values, and rituals. This system, although modified by the demise of peasant civilization, still displays interesting and continuously mutating aspects today.

The symbolism of food behavior in southern Italy provides an ideal lens through which one can make out, as in filigree, a cultural dynamic that, beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, has followed a rapidly changing “systole-and-diastole” trend oscillating between “tradition” and “change”. (This is not the place to put these terms into context, which would require thorough discussion.) Within this wide conceptual spectrum, what I put forward here is a number of considerations where ethnographic prac-

tice has a central role. The present study is part of an ongoing research on the female dimension as a link with the worlds of *surmatore* (Hamayon 1990: 332), which I am conducting in the Italian south, and especially in Calabria. In these regions, it is often the women's role to maintain a relationship with the sacred, which naturally falls within the sphere of the preparation and cooking of food and, more generally, of the managing of hearth and home. It is usually women who ensure reciprocity with the spiritual spheres of existence. In Calabria, women used to (and sometimes still do) act as go-betweens with the spirits of the dead, the saints, or the angels, through ritual and divinatory practices often connected to food (Bellio 2003 and 2006).

THE FOOD OF THE GODS

The offering of food as an intersection with the supernatural plane is indeed one of the forms in which different cultures conceive of a possible communication between this world and others, whether supernal or infernal. The anthropology of the sacred traces the significance of religion to the etymology of the word, from *re-ligare*, hence the "tying together" of different worlds, but also *re-legere*, in the sense of explaining what would otherwise be incomprehensible. In both cases, human needs are projected in a metaphysical dimension (Boyer 1992: 12 and ff.). Thus food, intended as a "category of sociability" that "through the liturgy of the table is included within the area of competence of communication" (Camporesi 1980: 8), also becomes a part of forms of communication embracing all the constituent elements of a community: the living, the dead, and angelical figures, whether holy or divine, all of which interact, albeit from distinct spheres.

Food as a universal medium of contact with the supernatural is also used to ritually evoke a lost condition of beatitude, connected with the notion of divine or paradisiacal food. Many myths narrate of a happy condition when Man lived in a variously portrayed celestial abode where he had unlimited access to "sweet fruits" and other delicious food, until an act of disobedience towards the Creator, or sinful behavior, caused him to be ousted. Hence the need to procure food through harsh toil and the sweat of one's brow (*Genesis* 3:17). Myths about expulsion from Eden are associated with periodical rites

aimed at re-establishing, at specific festive moments of both the human cycle and the yearly cycle, this connection with the ultra-mundane world through the votive offering of food, especially sweets, which allude to paradisiacal and divine food. Thus, sweetness is the dominant taste of such festivals, where a relationship of reciprocity with the divine is established through a sacrificial ritual (Müller, 2003: chap. V). Conversely, however, Western iconography is also rich in references to food –especially when consumed in excess– as temptation. One has only to think of the symbolism of the “forbidden” fruits in Hieronymus Bosch’s *Garden of Delights* (Madrid, Prado):

in the *Garden of Delights* one had recognized a representation of the innocent and sublime *ars amandi* of the sect of the Adamites; hence the depiction of the exchanging of fruits symbolizing voluptuousness. The exaggerated pleasure that fruit gives is also emphasized by the size of the brambles and lam-poons that the naked young people avidly feed upon. In the ancients’ ‘key of dreams,’ fruits such as the cherry are regarded as a symbol of voluptuousness, here the depravity of the exchanging of places between man and animal is stressed. (Giorgi, 2005: 104)

Thus, a sinful aspect of food emerges, also represented by the exchanging of food between man and animal. In this perspective, food is a source of temptation. The Catholic Christian religion, especially since the Tridentine shock, puts the stress on penitence, in its widest possible sense of the separation between soul and body, the latter being the “weak” element in the Man-system. The meaning of food is thus ambivalent. From a source of life, it becomes a source of death, in the sense of death in sin. The only true nourishment is provided by spiritual food, the *panis Angelorum*, the central symbol of liturgy, the Corpus Domini which the community of believers must constantly refer to in order to be able to get around in the world. Through the institution of the Eucharist on the Day of Unleavened Bread (*Mark*, 14:12-16; 22-26), the *panis Angelorum* is Christ’s offering of himself to Man, but it must also be *the believer’s gift of him-self*, as well as his source of nourishment: “We need to start anew from Christ, that is, from the Eucharist ... ‘Give ye them to eat’”. (*Luke* 9:13).¹

1. John Paul II, homily for the Corpus Domini, 14 July 2001.

The expression *panis Angelorum* stresses the immaterial, spiritual nature of food. Porphyry of Tyre stated that, since the gods are spiritual beings, they do not consume food but specially distilled substances. The Bible abounds in examples of the same notion. For example, the Archangel Raphael reveals himself to Tobias and his father and tells them that when they saw him eating he actually only appeared to be doing so (Müller 2003: 51). The expression “bread of angels” thus alludes to the spiritual essence of food, but in different ways, although all alluding to various angelical beliefs, and, as we shall see, is sometimes used even for marketing purposes.

THE SISTER OF THE SERAPHS

The angelical experience is the key element in a case of clairvoyance I observed in Calabria. The protagonist is a woman who, apart from this exceptional gift, lives a quiet life as a mother, wife and schoolteacher. While I was conducting research in the area, my informers repeatedly spoke to me of this “*Signora of the Angels*” or “*Sister of the Seraphs*”, as some call her. From my very first visit to the Cappella della Misericordia, the place where she operates, I realized this was going to be a significant ethnographic encounter, one that would offer a perspective on the contemporary religious climate within and beyond the borders of the Calabria region.

The road to Verzino, a village in the Crotone area, is impervious. The bends are a challenge even to stomachs well accustomed to tortuous drives. Sometimes my car seemed to struggle to keep going. On either side of the road, spring exulted, exhibiting green in many shades, including some surprising ones. Past the hills, the mountains. Gray gullies overhung a rocky streambed, less arid than one would expect, dotted with sparse bushes. Along the road were white pear trees, as flowery as wedding bouquets. I was to drive along that road many times, in all seasons. In May, I rejoiced in the changing colors of the fields as the road climbed up. In the winter I feared the frost, which can make some stretches most dangerous.

Once in town, turning onto a side street, I reached Gina’s home. There were several cars in front of the back entrance of the building fronted by a well-groomed garden. I entered the chapel, which can be reached directly from the

external door. Gina arrived a few minutes later. She is a small woman, in her fifties. I was struck by her dark, lively eyes and her sprightly, girlish expression. Our “lady of the angels” began her explanation, as she always does when new visitors come to the chapel. She then asked each of the people present their first names and named each one’s angel of the moment.² Since the public is diverse, Gina speaks in simple words that everybody can understand. She explains that it is the angel’s voice, not her own, they are listening to. Whenever people talk with Gina, she always invites them to watch for angelical and divine signs which are not extraordinary phenomena for an elected few but part and parcel of our everyday life.³ Now she goes to the other room, where she prepares to receive each of us one by one. This is a typical day for Gina when she is not teaching in school. She gathers the faithful at her place, receiving them in the small chapel on the ground floor and answers all of her phone calls, which keep coming. This angelical gift, which she perceives as a voice speaking inside her, came to her gradually and spontaneously at the climax of a praying practice that she has kept up all her life. She tells people that, during a pilgrimage to the Madonna dello Scoglio to see Fratel Cosimo, a renowned Calabrian mystic, she felt a strange tingling sensation in her arm, “like an electric current”. Shortly thereafter, her angel manifested herself. The

-
2. “Angels do not have a name but it is Man’s nature to give a name to every object. The Eternal Father has given the name of saints to the angels. The angel-saint who is assigned to us is not our protector, but in our spiritual life we need to draw inspiration from that saint and hence be familiar with the saint’s biography. We thus discover points of contact between ourselves and the saint or angel that was assigned to us when we were conceived. The angels enter deeply into our life. They are psychopomps. They are our shadow. Angels are not soothsayers. They say things as they are. I cannot invent anything. These are big responsibilities. It is up to you to understand the message. The angel merely dictates it to me and, in some cases, says things in such a way that only the person concerned can understand them.”
 3. “The angel gives signs. For example butterflies, at the symbolic level, are signs of angelical presence. But this is not magic. When you see a white butterfly it is the angel. When it is darker it is the souls of the deceased. You can see this butterfly too, even in the winter, but you have to have your antennas out. Another sign is when you come here and you find your rosary knotted. It is the Lord saying to you: ‘Daughter, I’m here.’ When the knot is untied, grace has been received.”
A woman asks what it means when the rosary breaks. Gina replies: “That’s the devil interfering.”

angel said her name was Patrizia, like the Neapolitan saint. Thus began their relationship. The angel communicates with Gina through an inner voice that she can hear distinctly, or through automatically written messages in an initially uncertain handwriting that becomes increasingly clear.

In Calabria, angelical figures are the object of a cult that sometimes manifests itself through practices inspired by the stories of much loved mystics. An important example is the story of Natuzza Evolo⁴ and how she related to people through angels. This mystic from Paravati has enabled her, ever since her teenage years, to see people's guardian angels or images of deceased persons approaching her interlocutors. In times of need the faithful are in the habit of asking Natuzza to intercede for them so that their wishes will be granted. To do so, they "send the angel". During field work I gathered several testimonies of people who, in difficult moments, "sent the angel" to Natuzza. The faithful recite a prayer to their own guardian angel and another to Natuzza's.⁵ Then they address the woman directly, certain that the angels will carry their message for them. While in some cases the answer is immediate and in others slower to come, one always gets some sign of the mystic's presence and of her help. Some dream about her, after angelical contact has occurred. Others report that they first found their rosary tied up in a knot, and later, when their wish had been granted, found the knot untied. Natuzza is believed capable of communicating through such signs. The story of Padre Pio, a saint who today is worshiped by immense masses, and whom I will be discussing shortly, also features his guardian angel, with whom he dialogued constantly. Through his guardian angel, Padre Pio gained knowledge about faraway people. Many sources about his life and many witnesses report that he himself advised his friends and spiritual children to address him in times of need by sending their guardian angel to him (Siena 1976).

-
4. Fortunata Evolo, born in Paravati, in the province of Vibo Valentia, is possibly the best known contemporary Calabrian mystic. Prayer circles in her name have sprung up all over the world, and she has drawn a lot of attention from both the media and scholars. For her story, I refer the reader to several specific studies: Lombardi & Meligrana 1982; Marinelli 1985; Mesiano 1974; Boggi & Lombardi 2006.
 5. "Angel of God, you who are her guardian, shine on, protect, support and guide Natuzza who was entrusted to you by heavenly mercy. Amen."

UNIVERSAL GUARDIANS

Guardian angel cults are widespread in Calabria as the result of informal inculturation. This explains why people are attracted to angelical mystical experiences like those of Natuzza, Gina of Verzino, and others. These cults graft syncretic elements onto a traditional corpus of beliefs; a process of cultural osmosis that is accelerated by the spread of mass media. In the autobiographical notes accompanying his ethnographic reports, Vito Teti often refers to the oral transmission of prayers evoking the angel cult: “My grandmother made me get up with the angels and go to bed with the angels. In my home village, good-death prayers connected to angels are handed down”.

In Calabrian communities, guardian angels are perceived as disincarnate entities, but also as benign deceased souls, often of a family member. Here as elsewhere, angels provide the most solid link between the cult of the dead and churchly religious practices.

Angels belong to the invisible world that surrounds us. The human condition shares with this world connections and experiences that are beyond rational explanation and that inspired scriptures are believed to be capable of documenting. Ever since Jacob’s dream (*Genesis* 28:16; reprised in *John* 1:50-51), people owe their knowledge of the angelical world to mystic experiences and experiences of spiritual ascension that already existed in the Hebrew and Judaic-Christian prophetic tradition. This tradition –centered on three main texts: the Book of Isaiah, the Books of Enoch, and the Book of the Hermas Shepherd – specifies the characteristics of the different angelical entities. “Spirits” (in Hebrew: *ruah*) are at once angelical entities and divine attributes (Bonnet 2004: 17).

Man attains knowledge of the angelical dimension through ascension to the Seven Abodes, where the gates are guarded by angels. This mystical seven-stage progression evokes images that do not belong exclusively to the Jewish tradition: the Apocalypses, like the one attributed to John, where the number seven holds sway; the hierarchies of Dionysius and Proculus; the Gnostic vision of “plerome”. Also, the prophet Mohammed ascending through the seven skies above Jerusalem; Meister Eckhart and Ruysbroeck; and Teresa of Avila and the seven abodes of the palace of the soul (Tristan 2004: 44-45).

Beings mediating between the human and the divine sphere with iconographic characteristics reminiscent of those of angels in the Christian religion are known from remote times –the winged beings of Babylonian civilization– and in other contemporary monotheistic religions, notably Islam, with its various traditions about the presence, role and functions of angels. In the Islamic religion, angels are human beings’ every-day guides and inspire “healthy dreams” (Lory 2004: 159).

As field research on different cultures has shown, angels are perceived as gates and spokesmen of the divine and, at the same time, as a living presence with which one can enter into a relationship of reciprocity and familiarity. In the Christian religion, belief in guardian angels is founded especially on two passages in the Scriptures. In *Matthew* 18:10, Jesus tells the Apostles: “Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven”. In *the Acts of the Apostles* (12:15), when Peter is freed from prison and knocks at the door of Christians who are lying low during Herod’s persecution, they are frightened to hear his voice, because they believe him to be still in prison and hence think it is *his angel* they are hearing (Moreau 1999: 36).

Angels are an important element in Man’s relationship with the divine. Communication with angels, in various forms, occurs in many contemporary and past mystical experiences. They are sometimes fully accepted by the Church, sometimes merely tolerated. Hagiography has illustrious examples of saints, mystics, and bearers of stigmata conversing with the angels, and an impressive number of religious visions are angelical in character.⁶

ANGELS IN ADVERTISING

One can approach the angelical world from different, even opposite points of view, as one traces its manifestations at various times, as well as in the history of theological thinking. Changing perspectives have given rise to com-

6. I refer the reader to a very ample literature, including works for specialists and for the general public. In the last category, see especially P. Jovanovic 1993; the book, translated into several languages, provides an overview of saints, mystics, stigmata-bearers, and visionaries’ connections with the angels.

pletely different approaches to this theme, at once fascinating and, by its very nature, impalpable. In the 20th century, especially the last decades thereof, the growing interest in angelical figures turned into an intense spiritual quest and became a subject for debate. Angelical figures have also attracted practitioners of those forms of spirituality and rites that fall under the generic heading of “New Age”.⁷ The late twentieth century witnessed a boom in the sales of books and articles on angels, so much that some Christian churches cautioned the faithful against angelical cults, regarding them as dangerous forms of polytheism. Marketing operators have been quick to take advantage of the renewed interest in angels, who are presently featured in films, advertising, and merchandising, with conceptual associations with all aspects of existence. Sweet winged children are stamped on baby accessories, as well as on jeans and T-shirts for all ages. Small wings of various materials hang from necklaces and bracelets, and are pictured on rings. There is possibly no house utensil, clothes item, or accessory that has not been once associated with the new fad for angels, which has also made its mark in the sphere of food and cooking.

-
7. Cf. Manevy 2005: 13-36. As to the New Age movement, it is a nebula of which I cannot trace the contours here. This spiritualist movement, originally from California, swarmed from there to the whole world. It is somehow inspired by “Flower Power,” the hippy movement of the Sixties. The New Age movement draws elements from all ideologies and practices, from ecology to Oriental asceticism, including traditional shamanism, cybernetics, and other philosophical practices (Dufoulon 1996: 231). Terrin speaks of a “fragmenting of the religious world” to refer to this plurality of symbolic worlds, and provides an overview of these new cults, which include Orientalizing trends and syncretic ones, the Baha’i al Mahikari movement, Transcendental Meditation of Indian origin, movements defined as “transversal” such as the New Age, *metaphysic centers*, therapeutic methods on the border between traditional medicine and the religious sphere, Yoga in its various forms, movements preaching the need for moral rigor in view of the approaching end of the world, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Mormons, the Unification Church, American electronic churches, and other forms of religion such as Scientology, not to mention exoteric religions. The author also gives an overview of the vast specific literature on the subject (Terrin 1998: 244). Social anthropology of the 1970s was already dealing with what I. M. Lewis calls “an age of marginal mystical recrudescence,” referring to the flourishing of new cults that “strive to fill the gap left by the decline of established religion and to reassert the primacy of mystical experience in the face of the dreary progress of secularism.” (Lewis 1971)

ANGELICAL COOKING

The notion of “angelical cooking” is not a recent marketing ploy. For example, a vanilla-flavored baking powder called *Pane degli angeli* (Bread of the Angels) was marketed in 1932, by the founder of the Italian company Panangeli. Today, this company produces basic ingredients for the preparation of both sweet and unsweetened cakes (baking powder, flavorings, powder sugar, etc.). The logo shows two white angels lifted in flight against the blue and green background of the packing. The specification “of the angels” was once used to signify therapeutic properties, as in the case of *angelica*, also called “herb of the angels” or “herb of the Holy Ghost.” According to some legends, it was the Archangel Raphael who donated *angelica* to men. It was used as a remedy for many ailments, from fevers to the plague. Hildegard of Bingen stresses its power to cure various kinds of fever, and prescribes a wine made from an infusion of its roots. The prodigious Umbellifera is still much used today in the cosmetic and pharmaceutical industries in salves against skin irritation, muscular inflammation, and other conditions (Bingen 1996). In another sense, the adjective “angelical” is employed in the cuisine lexicon of various countries to refer to the taste or softness of food, especially sweets: “angel food cake,” *papos de anjo* and *pane degli angeli*, to mention just a few. One only needs to surf the Internet for a few minutes to be flooded with recipes with names referring to angels. Especially elaborate dishes sometimes have angel names, for example the Italian *angeli in carrozza* (angels in a carriage), which are shish kebabs of oysters wrapped in bacon slices and grilled. The *vino degli angeli* (wine of the angels) is a liquor made from an infusion of peach leaves and black pepper grains in dry white wine. “Angel” recipes are also exchanged in various blogs, not necessarily focused on cooking; many are electronic diaries with an emphasis on spiritual themes. Another interesting facet of this imagery can be observed in cookbooks. Sister Germana’s *Quando cucinano gli angeli* (“When Angels Cook”) (2004), very popular in Italy, teaches “to cook with love.” Here the reference to angels does not merely allude to the deliciousness of the dishes, but it implies that such deliciousness can only derive from the cook’s own good heart. All sorts of variations on the theme of angels can be found in cooking literature, including René Simmen’s ironic *La cucina dei diavoli e la cucina degli angeli* (1983), contrasting the

devil's spicy, aphrodisiac recipes, with "angelical" ones.⁸ Finally, the Internet and tour guides list countless restaurants with angels in their names. Here are some Italian examples: "La cucina degli angeli," "La grotta degli angeli," "Orto degli angeli," "Ai quattro angeli," "La buchina degli angeli."

NUTRITIONIST ANGELS

Since, as we have seen, the phrase "angelical cooking" has many facets, we need to specify what we are talking about when we use it. To return to our "Gina of the Angels", she is perceived as a safe haven for people in need. An endless series of telephone calls punctuated our every encounter, even outside of her "consulting hours". For many faithful, not just from Calabria, angelical consulting is a refuge in emergencies. Those who I interviewed in person or by phone tell me that Gina reassures them and cheers them up, that she makes them want to love life, that her messages free them from the burden of everyday cares and anxiety, and helps them to look at everything with a smile. Her cheerfulness reminds one of those angels pictured in art as children with luminous eyes. I spontaneously liken her in my mind with a sort of medieval encyclopedia of knowledge and remedies, but one that is accessible to all and always ready to come to the rescue. Through the angel's messages, Gina spreads prayers and cults of otherwise little known saints, and gives out advice about medicine, legal problems, family quarrels, doubts or anxieties about one's job, whether to buy a new car or house, as well as sentimental problems. Many call to seek comfort after the death of a family member, during an illness, or in other situations of distress. When someone speaks to Gina on the phone they get the angel's message directly from her voice. Those who visit her are given a white sheet of paper bearing the current date on the upper left and on the right what Gina herself calls "the PIN code", that is, the phrase "Long live Jesus and Mary". At the top of the sheet, in the middle, is the full name of the person and beside it the name of the angel-saint from whose biography inspiration is to be sought. Before beginning the consultation, Gina prays. She invokes

8. On the semantic connection between the spicy, the aphrodisiac, and the diabolical, see Teti, 2007.

the descent of the Holy Ghost, then addresses her own guardian angel and St. Michael the Archangel. This angelical writing is a sacred code but the messages are delivered in a spontaneous and informal way. Gina does not assume a hieratic attitude or wear specific clothes. The angelical consultation does not have the characteristics of a codified performance and does not represent itself as a moment of passage to another world. It occurs in a normal state of awareness, as in the everyday-life experience of prayer. The only difference is Gina's inner voice dictating a written response. Everybody brings the message home to read it several times. Some keep the sheets, accumulating them over time. A woman told me she keeps a diary where she copies all the messages sent by the angel over the years, both for her and for her family members. This woman traced for me her family's history through their acting on the angel's advice. Telephonic consultation is even more a part of Gina's everyday routine. Sometimes she will be speaking on the phone, giving Patrizia's answers, as she stirs the sauce in the pan or sets the table.

The most interesting aspect for our purposes is the many testimonies of the angel's role in support of official medicine and pharmacopoeia, and, of course, in the sphere of nutrition. Sometimes it is the doctors themselves who turn to Gina if they suspect that their patients' problems are not wholly due to natural causes. A doctor will turn to Gina for help and she in her turn will refer him to a priest who performs a blessing and provides sacramental ingredients to prepare everyday food with. Holy water, oil, and salt protect from demoniac and evil influences. In some cases, the dialogue between Gina and the requester takes on the character of a true medical consultation, which increasingly often focuses on dietetics.⁹ These

9. For example, a woman told me: "When my daughter got married, many pastries were left over, and since I am especially fond of sweets I ate many in the following days. Eventually I started itching, while I was at school, where I teach. I called Ginetta, who didn't know about the pastries, nor did I think of the pastries. I've got a little notebook where I write everything that involves her. The message said 'F.'s itch is due to a slight alimentary intoxication. F. did not realize it, but she ate some sweets that provoked an intoxication of her whole organism. For two or three days she should eat cooked vegetables with no savory sauces.' In a week it all went away. Another message, from the period before my menopause, said: "F. had these whites because she is about to enter her menopause. It is advisable to undergo gyne-

phone conversations show how deep in detail these consultations with the angel sometimes go.¹⁰

FREE US FROM EVIL

In many cases, those who turn to Gina will request a written or telephonic message for themselves or a family member in a generic form such as “What does the angel have to say to me?” and the angel, of her own accord, speaks of issues relating to the person’s health, current illnesses, or illnesses the person may be prone to. The angel also provides specific advice about correct nutrition, discouraging the consumption of certain foods and recommending others, and sometimes also giving advice about how to prepare them. At the Cappella della Divina Misericordia, diet as a key element for people’s health is an angelical matter. Through these telephonic consultations I have often been a witness to what one can perceive as the rise of new alimentary and, more in general, social behaviors. These phone calls also reveal old and new fears engendering a request for comfort. These requests, while they now often concern very different needs from those Annabella Rossi recorded among the “poor” at the time of her investigation (Rossi 1986), can still be regarded as a translation of discomfort to a spiritual plane.

colological control to check the thickness of the womb. The metrorrhagia is due to hormonal causes and to the reduction and transformation of the womb”.

10. A woman calls complaining of a burning sensation. She has an infection, the specialist says it is her hypertension pills. Gina answers: “It’s true, *signora*, thanks to your prayers and the angel’s prayers the doctor has solved the problem. Call me in two months”. The woman then asks her if the cure the doctor has given her is the right one and whether her burning sensation will diminish.

G.: “The angel tells me you have found the right cure.” S. replies, “I take [name of medicine] for nervousness, I take 15-15-15. Can I move on to 20 drops at a time?”

G. answers, “You have to consult your doctor about this.” S. says, “I have a paper where the doctor wrote 20-20-20.” G. responds, “Sure. The angel says it’s ok.” Then S. says, “Good, so will I get well? It is now a week since I switched pills. I’ll call you again later.” G. says, “We’ll solve your problem. Which saint did you pray to?” S. answers, “I pray to all of them, I have many at home.” G. asks, “Which one did the angel say?” S. answers, “Don Orione.” Then G. says, “On 19 May, he will be made a saint, it is don Orione who healed you. He is the saint of Divine Providence, he loved the Madonna so much.”

Anxiety for one's future is not merely associated with backwardness. It is manifested at different historical times, in every social or economic milieu, and at all levels of education. Even today, neither science nor technology, or the official church, seem able to offer a *pharmakon* when that cold and insidious sense of precariousness and helplessness creeps upon people. The present is narrated in real time in all its unpredictability and irrationality. Mutilated bodies and warm blood are served daily on the media's immense table. The fury of history gives names and a voice to an incendiary Middle East that but yesterday was still indistinct, and is now the shadow of every healthy Western conscience. The fury of a nature that swallows up whole cities, and thunderously spews forth oceans and storm-clouds. Another fury, arising from an unbearable lack of answers. In the past, Calabrian communities handed down from one generation to the other their modes of resistance to dissolution. The fear of apocalypses –defined by Ernesto De Martino as a crisis of individual presence, or a cultural apocalypse when it is a whole society that is threatened with lapsing into utter dismay– goes hand in hand with the belief that every crisis can be kept in check, that entropy can be stopped, by “de-historicizing” it. Salvation comes from other contiguous worlds, the cosmos of benevolent souls and the sacred sphere, where the turbulence of historical processes can be ritually controlled. Visions of the dead that prevent danger, conversations with the dead or the angels about everyday troubles, statues that weep at Lent; all these phenomena appear to point to a heritage based not so much on objects, but rather on words and images that comfort, heal, and give a meaning to tomorrow.

When one is in the field and in direct touch with the narrators, during interviews, in sanctuaries where pilgrims gather, or in places where prodigious events occur, one gains a different perspective. When confronted with people's voices and faces, with their silent grief, with the telling of intimate and distressing experiences, all judgment must be suspended if one wants to understand. The researcher's gaze must then be respectful and aware of the mystery of the Other, who in this case is Man himself, with his present ever-increasing anguish and insecurity. In Calabria, social distress and desperation has reached such a peak, mistrust in the ruling classes is so deeply-rooted, disillusion so widespread, that we need to ponder on this increasing trend to seek comfort in forces beyond this world.

Thus, angels become doctors, dieticians, and nutritionists. They are confronted with new fears, such as the wish to comply with aesthetic models different from the peasant one, something that is achieved through control over one's eating habits, through a *diet* in the sense of a weight-losing regime, whose purpose today is no longer well-being, but a slimness that traditional societies abhor. This new aesthetic model has become a categorical imperative today, with all the consequent psychological, relational, and social implications.¹¹ In the past, entities acting as go-betweens with the supernatural were addressed, instead, for problems such as the sudden loss of weight or physical decline of a person, or of important animals for the domestic economy, such as goats, pigs, or oxen. If the problem persisted in spite of the remedies tried out, or got worse, then the cause was attributed to a curse and came under the heading of witchcraft.¹² Today the requests have changed, but supernatural, in our case angelical, help, continues to determine, symbolically or through direct recommendations, food and cooking practices. Of course, this is only a component of a vast horizon of beliefs and symbolic relations that translate into ritual practices also including the selection, preparation, and consumption of food. Here we have looked at an important aspect, that of intermediation with other worlds as a source of nutritional guidance. In my field of investigation, however, one can find many examples of other forms of the symbolical dimension of food as a mediator between worlds.

Padre Pio's cake

Contemporary angelical beliefs are rooted in a cultural context in which food has important symbolical implications. These implications, today as in the past, also involve the saints and the dead. During the days preceding the festival of the dead, in many Calabrian villages it is still customary to offer one's neighbors food "for the souls of the deceased". In past times, this food con-

11. On changes in the aesthetic and alimentary models in the Mediterranean region, see Teti 2002 and 1999; Macbeth 1998.

12. Testimonies of this are numerous and there is a vast literature referring to different geographic contexts: Romano 1987; Scafoglio & De Luna 2002; Piniés 1983; Lisón 1987.

sisted of pasta with chickpeas (a symbolical link with life) and cakes that were only made at this time of the year. Today all sorts of food are offered, including cakes, candy, and pizza. This tradition, like others, has been exported by immigrants. In Glen Clove (NY), in November, some women of Calabrian origin bring plates of pasta, sweets, or other dishes to their neighbors.

A practice that has become widespread in Calabria over the last three or four years is the preparation of a ritual dish called *dolce di Padre Pio* (Padre Pio's cake). Born Francesco Forgione in Pietralcina, Padre Pio has become the media saint par excellence. His beatification process has received constant media coverage. The yearly gatherings of pilgrims at San Giovanni Rotondo for the vigil on the night between 22 and 23 September, on the anniversary of his death are increasingly taking on the spectacular character of some of the most popular TV events. There may be no place, and not just in southern Italy, where Padre Pio has not had a church or, at least, a votive aedicule built in his name. It seems reasonable to believe that there is a pre-media and post-media sanctity. The coming to the fore of mass media hence marks a watershed in the process of construction and social recognition of sanctity. Today the media actually orient collective behavior on the occasion of public events somehow connected to the sacred sphere.¹³

The figure of Padre Pio is also associated with a specific recipe, whose preparation is described as follows:

13. In *Il sopravvissuto* (2005), Antonio Scurati has drawn a literary picture as insightful as an ethnographic report of the increasingly widespread habit of applauding at funerals when the coffin goes by. This practice was taken over from the media, which tend to produce continuous oscillations in meaning from the sacred to the scenic and vice versa. Such an oscillation was observed, for example, at the funeral of a young man in Campania in 2006. His friends carried the bier through the alleys and streets of the neighborhood along the same processional route followed for the statues of saints and divine figures. This is a case of semantic superimposition of tragic death and the sacred sphere. The deceased was a young robber killed in a shootout with the police. Thus, the act translated into a symbolical form derived from religious tradition, as the opposition of some social classes against what is perceived as an absentee State, employing models which the media spread in various deteriorated social contexts. One can also speak of mediatic exportation of collective behaviors in the case of the burning of the Parisian *banlieues* in 2007, which was imitated in other geographic contexts, including Campania as a protest against inefficient urban waste disposal.

They give you [a recipe for] a cake. Make ten photocopies of the recipe, and you must give them to believers. The recipe must be prepared in ten days. If you prepare this cake you have to believe in what you're doing; you've got to believe in the rite, as well as the recipe. Give the ten chosen persons a small glass of the leavened dough, which does not have a good taste, not even when you bake it.¹⁴ It's a chain scheme, like Saint Anthony's chain, but if you believe in Padre Pio it will produce its effect. One prepares the cake as an act of faith, not to ask for grace, although many prepare it to ask for grace to Padre Pio. I think it all started with a vow, as when one prepares the vows for the Madonna della Scala.¹⁵ Many people prepared it here in town. There was a period when half the town was involved in this. While I already had the leavened dough and was preparing it, many women wanted to give it to me, but the chain broke with me, because there were too many in circulation, so I didn't give mine to anybody. This practice spread among us around 2005. It is a cake, but it does not taste good because of the way it is prepared. The dough must be kept outside of the refrigerator, in a bowl, but not a terracotta one, so it will not be contaminated. And for ten days, every day, you do something different, you add an ingredient; eggs, for example. On one day you must simply stir it a certain number of times. Only at the end, after following the instructions to the letter, can you bake it and eat it, but it doesn't taste very good. Recently a plant called "plant of Padre Pio" has also become popular. Flower stores sell them. Its peculiarity is that it does not wither even if you don't water it, it always stays green. (*Interview with C.C., housewife in a town in the Crotona area.*)

In this chain-rite, among other things, we can recognize circularity without exchange. One offers a little bit of the dough of one's cake in a container, often a plastic glass, and this spreads exponentially, multiplying by ten at every stage. It is a pyramid scheme, as in the notorious Saint Anthony's chain, used as a ploy by unscrupulous operators who pass it off as a multilevel marketing system, whereas it is only advantageous for the vertex of the pyramid formed of its exponential branching out. But, in the case of the Padre Pio cake, the system lives in osmosis between the practices of global culture and local tra-

-
14. In this case we can say, paraphrasing Marvin Harris, that it is literally a food that is better to think about than to eat!
 15. The cult of the Madonna della Scala, which is widespread in the Crotona area, also features the offering to the Virgin, for grace received, of *vuti* ("vows"), glazed egg and flour cakes, usually anthropomorphic, or showing healed limbs (Bellio 2007).

ditions. The sharing of food was one of the forms in which traditional conviviality was expressed in Calabria. In his studies on cultural complexity, Ulf Hannerz (1992) notes that in every society major institutions, subcultures, and everyday-life practices interact in producing culture. Arjun Appadurai (1996) stresses the “creative receptiveness” of cultures regarded as marginal in the dynamic process of acquiring dominant cultural forms.

The hidden motivation for preparing Padre Pio’s cake is often a request for grace, for example by seriously ill people. Padre Pio’s cult contributed to a revival of angelical belief. Here, however, we are looking at a contemporary, postmodern, and most certainly syncretic symbolic alimentary practice, where heterogeneous cultural elements are superimposed and intertwined (Mary). In this practice, expressing a religiosity that is distant from Church dogma, the cake is a medium whereby one connects with the divine. At the same time, it participates in the sacredness of leavened dough, which characterized many practices of the Mediterranean area.¹⁶ The sharing of the dough provides a model for circular sociality that is itself a fundamental condition for the success of the cake and of the request it carries, if any. The cake must be passed on to others who will share it in their turn.

Now I want to conclude my series of examples of women cooking “with angels” (and with contemporary Calabrian saints) with two more cases,

16. “Bread [...] has a central role as a magical apotropaic talisman, a vital substance [...], the symbol of solar light, a fecundating instrument that impregnates Earth-Woman, which is magically contaminated by its male ‘semen,’ an analog of the vegetable seed that makes the earth fecund and fertile in the grandest sexual metaphor ever invented, expressing the extraordinary ‘copulation’ of light and shade, sky and earth. Likewise bread, a miniaturized sun, rises and swells (in synchrony with the rising of the sun), and is ‘made pregnant’ in the flaming oven, which is at once womb and vagina, heat and light. It is an image of fecundity, a symbol of childbirth and of new lives that will replace those that were ‘reaped’ (even metaphors in the language of death are based on the vocabulary of the harvest) by its opposite power (which does not necessarily mean its enemy), death” (Camporesi 1980: 33). “The salt/sweet polarity found in bread dough its optimum medium. By adding sugar to it (and sometimes salt as well), one obtained a vast array of culinary products capable of filling many gaps in the alimentary spectrum” (*Ibidem* 51). The connection between physiological aspects and mythical elements in the relationship that different cultures have with sugar and salt is an important subject for ethnological analysis (Gariné 1988: 5-14).

one with a strongly commercial character, the other relating to holy bodies as a relic and therapeutic food.

NATUZZA'S CAKES

During my fieldwork I observed that intermediation with the supernatural spheres is transformed from the moment it is placed under ecclesiastical control, or institutionalized in any other way; in other words, whenever a hero saint gains public recognition as a fulcrum of collective identity (Centlivres, Fabre & Zonabend 1998). Natuzza is presently drawing a lot attention both from the media and from scholars. She is not merely a Calabrian phenomenon but a global one. Prayer cenacles in her name have sprung up all over the world. The gatherings of pilgrims at Paravati have lately attained oceanic proportions. They are covered by television and feature shows organized to raise funds for the building of a church to be dedicated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Refuge of Souls (*Cuore Immacolato di Maria Rifugio delle Anime*). As in the case of Padre Pio and others, a flourishing commerce has grown around Natuzza, based on the selling of rosaries, blessed prayer books, and biographies. Such commercialization sometimes spawns peculiar attempts to reinvent tradition. Years ago an informer told me that a pastry shop had tried to produce and sell "Natuzza's cakes." These were tea cakes resembling those that a devotee had once allegedly prepared for the mystic, and which she had much appreciated. Whatever the outcome of this enterprise, what is important for us, once again, is the connection of food and religion, here observable in a contemporary, mercantile variant: for the industry, the pilgrim who visits a sanctuary or a soothsayer remains a tourist and, hence, a potential consumer, to be offered souvenirs –suited, of course, to the specific character of religious tourism– and typical local products. Natuzza's cakes thus fall within the same category as other commercial products, such as the "rose cakes" sold by food stores and pastry stores in Cascia, whose packaging assures that they are prepared by the nuns of Santa Rita. All over the Italian peninsula, there is a tradition of preparing ritual pastries or breads for specific holidays, and this tradition is being increasingly intercepted by the food industry.

SAINTS AND “MAGICAL FOOD RELICS”

A further example of the multiplicity of forms in which a domesticity of the supernatural is expressed through symbolic food practices is offered to us by prophet, healer, and soothsayer saints whose bodies were used after death to obtain relics. Even in contemporary societies, relics are a means of fabricating and incarnating the sacred. The modes of conservation of human remains are an indicator found in every religious system (Sbardella 2007). At Rogliano, for example, a town in the Cosenza area in Calabria, there is a popular cult of Fra ‘Ntoni da Panettieri (Falbo 2003), a friar who is remembered for his thaumaturgical powers as well as his knowledge of natural remedies. When he was still living, people turned to him for all sorts of problems. For example, he advised putting a salted sardine on a conscript’s shoulder to cause an ulcerous sore and thereby dodge the draft. Fra ‘Ntoni was also asked to tell the future. He is said to have appeared to many people in their dreams after his death, continuing to work miracles, and has been a candidate for beatification several times.

Before Fra ‘Ntoni’s funeral, his beard and hair were cut, and the faithful divided it among themselves. The reason for this was the spread of a belief in the effectiveness of Fra ‘Ntoni’s *piulillu* (small hair). Women who were having an especially difficult labor were fed a dried fig containing a hair of the beard of the man they all regarded as a saint. This guaranteed a happy outcome for the mother and the newborn child. The *piulillu* was a relic, a thaumaturgical relic-food, a corporeal substance offered as a healing food. There is a clear analogy here with the mystery of the Eucharist, but here it is interpreted in a magical and syncretic key. The fact that this particular form of relic as a food that heals was still found in recent times among Calabrian peasant communities is an example of the inseparable connection of magic and religion in folk culture, still observable in contemporary food practices, such as the making of “Padre Pio’s cakes”.

This quick overview of examples from my field experience is merely intended to point out possible ways and routes to an analysis of food behavior in contemporary Calabria, where the symbolical belongs within the sphere of contact with supernatural worlds, which is strongly characterized by the role of female know-how and practices inherited by peasant civilization through informal inculturation, and, at the same time, has incorporated global cultural elements

from various sources. Calabrian “angelical cuisine” thus appears as a local manifestation, rooted in tradition in many ways, of a postmodern global paradigm.

Translated by F. Poole

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Appadurai, Arjun

1996 *Modernity at Large. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.*

Bellio, Alfonsina

2003 “Le Sorelle, Il Brigante, La Veggente. Itinerario Mitico-Simbolico Lungo Le Acque del Neto”, in Vito Teti (ed.) *Storia dell’acqua. Mondi materiali e universi simbolici*. Roma: Donzelli. 83-98.

2005 *Veggenti e Sibille. Prospettive Etnografiche e Riferimenti Letterari. Tesi di Dottorato in Scienze Letterarie, Università degli Studi della Calabria, A.A. 2004/2005.*

2006 “Les Femmes Qui Vont Avec Les Morts en Calabre”, in J. Bonnet (ed.) *Malemorts, Revenants et Ampires en Europe*. Paris: L’Harmattan. 145-166.

2007 “A Festa da Aldeia na Cábria: O Caso de Belvedere Spinello”, in José Da Silva Lima (ed.) *A Festa da Aldeia: Património Festivo Europeo*. Braga: Alcala/Universidade Católica Portuguesa. 125-140.

Boggio, Maricia & Luigi M. Lombardi Satriani

2006 *Natuzza Evolo. Il Dolore e La Parola*. Roma: Armando.

Bonnet, Jacques

2004 “Les Anges Dans La Tradition Prophétique Hébraïque Et Judéo-Chrétienne,” in *Connaissance des Religions*, 71-72 (janv-juin 2004: *Anges Et Esprits Médiateurs*). Paris: Dervy. 37-46.

Boyer, Régis

1992 *Approccio Antropologico Al Sacro*. Milano: Jaca Book.

- Camporesi, Piero
1980 *Alimentazione, Folclore, Società*. Parma: Pratiche.
- Cavalcanti, Ottavio
1995 *Cibo Dei Vivi, Cibo Dei Morti, Cibo di Dio*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino.
- Centlivres, Pierre, Daniel Fabre & Françoise Zonabend (eds.)
1988 *La Fabrique Des Héros*. Paris: La Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.
- Dufoulon, Serge
1996 *Femmes De Parole. Une Ethnologie De La Voyance*. Paris: Métailié.
- Falbo, Leonardo
2003 *Un Santo Per Il Popolo. Vita, Prodigii E Profezie Di Fra 'Ntoni da Panettieri*. Cosenza: Progetto 2000.
- Garine, Igor de
1988 "Le Sucre Et Le Sel," in *JATBA. Journal d'Agriculture Traditionnelle et de Botanique Appliquée*, xxxv. 5-14.
- Giorgi, Rosa di
2005 *Dizionari Dell'Arte, Angeli e Demoni*. Milano: Mondadori Electa. 104.
- Hamayon, Roberte
1990 *La Chasse à l'âme. Esquisse d'une Théorie du Chamanisme Sibérie*. Nanterre: Société d'Ethnologie.
- Hannerz, Ulf
1992 *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Harris, Marvin
1998 *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture*. Long Grove: Waveland Press.

- Ildegarda di Bingen
1996 *Il Libro dei Rimedi Per l'Anima e Per il Corpo*. Milano: Gribaudi (ed. Roberta Bellinzaghi).
- Jovanovic, Pierre
1993 *Enquête Sur l'Existence Des Anges Gardiens*. Paris: Filipacchi.
- Lewis, Ioan M.
1971 *Estatic Religion. An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism*. Hammondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Lisón Tolosana, Carmelo
1987 *Brujeria, Estructura Social y Simbolismo en Galicia*. Madrid: Akal.
- Lory, Pierre
2004 "Les Anges Dans l'Islam", in *Connaissance des Religions*, 71-72 (janv.-juin 2004: *Anges et esprits médiateurs*). Paris: Dervy. 167-172.
- Macbeth, Helen M.
1998 "Concepts of 'The Mediterranean Diet' in U.K. and Australia compared to food intake studies on the Catalan coast of the Mediterranean", in M Cresta & Vito Teti (eds.) *The Road of Food Habits in the Mediterranean Area Between Biology and Culture*. Roma: Università La Sapienza (Supplement of *Rivista di Antropologia*, 76). 307-313.
- Manevy, Anne
2005 "Tes Anges ne Sont Pas les Miens! De l'Ange Gardien à l'Ange Haziélien," *Archives Des Sciences Sociales des Religions*, 130 (avril-juin 2005). 13-36.
- Marinelli, Valerio
1985 *Natuzza di Paravati, Umile Serva del Signore*. Vibo Valentia: Mapograf.

Mary, André

1999 *Le Défi du Syncretisme: Le Travail Symbolique de la Religion d'Eboga*. Paris: École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales.

2000 *Le Bricolage Africain des Héros Chrétiens*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf.

Mesiano, Francesco

1974 *I Fenomeni Paranormali di Natuzza Evolo*. Roma: Medite-
rranee.

Moreau, Roland

1999 *Les Saints Anges*. Montsûrs: Résiac.

Müller, Klaus E.

2003 *Nektar und Ambrosia. Kleine Ethnologie des Essens und
Trinkens*. München: Beck.

Piniés, Jean-Pierre

1983 *Figures de la Sorcellerie Languedocienne. Brèish, Endevinaire,
Armièr*. Paris: CNRS.

Romano, Franca

1987 *Guaritrici, Veggenti, Esorcisti*. Reggio Calabria: Gangemi.

Rossi, Anabella

1986 *Le Feste dei Poveri*. Palermo: Sellerio.

Sbardella, Francesca

2007 *Antropologia Delle Reliquie. Un Caso Storico*. Brescia: Mor-
celliana.

Scafoglio, Domenico & Simona de Luna

2002 *La Possessione Diabolica. Storie Avvincenti di Indemoniati e
di Esorcismi Raccolte in una Intensa Ricerca Sul Campo*. Cava
de' Tirreni: Avigliano.

Scurati, Antonio

2005 *Il Sopravvissuto*. Milano: Bompiani.

- Siena, Giovanni
1976 *Padre Pio: Questa è l'Ora Degli Angeli*. San Giovanni Rotondo: L'Arcangelo.
- Simmen, René
1983 *La Cucina dei Diavoli e la Cucina Degli Angeli*. Bari: Dedalo.
- Suor Germana
2004 *Quando Cucinano Gli Angeli*. Milano: Piemme.
- Terrin, Aldo N.
1998 *Introduzione allo Studio Comparato Delle Religioni*. Brescia: Morcelliana.
- Teti, Vito
1999 *Il Colore del Cibo. Geografia, Mito e Realtà dell'Alimentazione Mediterranea*. Roma: Meltemi.
2007 *Storia del Peperoncino. Un Protagonista Delle Culture Mediterranee*. Roma: Donzelli.
- Teti, Vito (ed.)
2002 *Mangiare Meridiano. Culture Alimentari del Mediterraneo*. Catanzaro: Abramo.
- Tristan, Frédéric
2004 "L'Ange Gardien des Portes et les Sept Dimeures", in *Connaissance des Religions*, 71-72, (janv.-juin 2004: *Anges et Esprits Médiateurs*). Paris: Dervy. 47-61.

