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# The Sacred Oath of a Secret Ritual: Performing Authority and Submission in the Mafia Initiation Ceremony

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*This article draws on socio-anthropological theories of ritual and performance to analyse the initiation ceremony of the Sicilian mafia in relation to questions of power, authority and submission. In particular, it looks at the oath of loyalty sworn during the ceremony as a highly symbolic ritual practice which contributes to maintaining and strengthening the social structure of the group and its collective identity.*

*You might smile at it as if it was an archaic ceremony, or you might think of it as a real joke.*

*It is instead an extremely serious thing that affects him for the rest of his life.*

*Entering the mafia is like converting to a religion.*

*One never stops being a priest.*

*Nor a mafioso. (Falcone 97)*

## Introduction

Throughout its history, the Sicilian mafia has demonstrated its ability to survive internecine wars and arrests at the top echelons by moulding its structure, business activities and network of relations to key economic and political sectors of society according to changing external circumstances. However, the confessions of mafiosi who turned state evidence (*pentiti*), show that specific components of the mafia system and of the rules that govern its internal behaviour have remained unvaried. The ritual of initiation represents the most prominent example of such a constant in mafia history.

This article adopts an interdisciplinary approach chiefly based on theories of ritual and performance to examine the initiation rite of the Sicilian mafia in relation to questions of power, authority and submission. In particular, it looks at the oath of loyalty sworn during this highly symbolic ceremony to analyse the impact on the identities and roles of the participants, and on the social structure of the group as a whole. Examining one of the ritual dynamics through which mafiosi construct and present their roles may help explain the ability of mafia bosses to acquire the complete obedience of affiliates at lower levels. Above all, as it is precisely from the total allegiance of its members that the mafia derives its major strength, this analysis may ultimately contribute to a better understanding of the enduring ability of the Sicilian mafia to adapt to changing times whilst maintaining consistent values and ritual practices. The data for analysis are sourced from judicial papers, newspaper articles and relevant literature on the subject.

### **Interpretative Paradigms, Myths and the *pentiti*: the Mafia Ritual of Initiation Exposed**

The mafia initiation ceremony known as “the pricking” (“la punciuta”; *my translation*, RM) was not officially recognised as the formal entrance point into the united, hierarchical organisation called Cosa Nostra until the mid-1980s. Prior to that, the mafia had been understood predominantly as neither an organisation nor a secret society of men bound by an oath of allegiance, but as a “method” and an “attitude” of loosely connected criminal groups sharing a common subculture (Arlacchi *Mafia Peasants* 6; Hess 132). This culturalist paradigm was influenced by the interpretation of the mafia that Sicily’s ruling class (the so-called *sicilianisti*) had promoted in the aftermath of Italian Unification (1861) to oppose what was perceived as the indiscriminate criminalisation of all Sicilians by the Italian law enforcement system. *Sicilianisti* developed and spread the idea of the mafia as the cultural product of a fierce and courageous reaction to foreign powers (Pitrè 287-292), thereby making the defence of “mafia spirit” the early mafia’s most evident and enduring legacy in Sicilian ideology. The myth of mafiosi as “men of honour” and “men of respect” who proudly defended the weak against injustices would be upheld both inside and outside the organisation. It was through rituals of initiation, in particular, that mafia members would carefully safeguard this myth and faithfully pass it on from one generation to another. The testimony of mafia defector Tommaso Buscetta in 1984 provides evidence of this:

They told me that it [Cosa Nostra] was born to defend the weak from the injustices of the powerful, to sustain values of friendship and respect for one’s word, the word of honour. Cosa Nostra dictated the law on the island because we Sicilians always felt neglected and abandoned by foreign governments and by the government in Rome. (Arlacchi 15-16)

Furthermore, by implying a general correspondence between mafiosi and Sicilians, this interpretative paradigm contributed to shaping and spreading an image of the mafia as a phenomenon with vague outlines, so deeply rooted in Sicilian culture as to make any effective action of identification and opposition impossible to implement.

Following the so-called Second Mafia War (1980-1983), one of the bloodiest internal conflicts in mafia history, mafiosi on the losing side decided to collaborate with the Italian judicial system in return for reduced sentences and protection against the extermination carried out by the winning faction. Tommaso Buscetta’s testimony in 1984, followed by those of other defectors, provided the investigating magistrates not only with valuable insights into Cosa Nostra, but also with sufficient evidence to build a maxi-trial against the mafia (1986-1987), which ended with the unprecedented, simultaneous conviction of several hundred mafiosi. More importantly, the trial sentence acknowledged for the first time the structural and corporative dimension of a secret organisation known to its members as Cosa Nostra and accessible only through formal ritual of affiliation.

Buscetta described this ritual in detail. He explained how a novice was taken to a secluded location, in the presence of three or more other “men of honour” – the term with which mafiosi refer

to themselves.<sup>1</sup> The oldest would inform him that the goal of “This Thing” (“Questa Cosa”, namely Cosa Nostra) was to protect the weak and eradicate abuse. After the family boss had read the fundamental rules of the society, the candidate’s finger was pierced and the blood dropped over the sacred image of a saint, usually Our Lady of the Annunciation. As Buscetta revealed:

The image is placed in the hand of the novice and set on fire. At this point, the novice, who must endure the burning by passing the sacred picture from one hand to another until it burns out completely, swears his loyalty to the principles of Cosa Nostra. He repeats in a solemn way: ‘May my flesh be burned like this sacred picture if I betray the oath’.... After the oath is taken, and only at that point, the man of honour is introduced to the boss of the Family. Before that, he is not supposed to know who the boss is, nor is he supposed to know of the existence of Cosa Nostra as such.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that descriptions of rituals like these had been made available to police and judicial authorities more than one century earlier, at a time in which, as previously mentioned, the mafia was perceived largely as a unique Sicilian set of attitudes. Indeed, a similar ritual proceeding, with items such as a holy picture, fire and blood recur in the ceremony described by members of the fraternal organisation from Monreale known as “Fuse burners” (*Stuppaghieri*) during a trial held at the Palermo Assize Court in 1877 (*Giornale di Sicilia*, 21 August 1877).<sup>3</sup>

The first account of the oath’s wording dates back instead to 1884 and refers to the ritual of the fraternal organisation of Girgenti (today’s Agrigento). The solemn ceremony of the oath was held in the presence of three members, one of whom, having tied a thread around the new member’s index finger, pierced it and let a few drops of blood fall onto a sacred image, which was then burned and its ashes scattered to the wind. At that point the novice was asked to repeat: “I swear on my honour to be faithful to the Brotherhood just as the Brotherhood is faithful to me, and as this saint and these drops of my blood burn, so I will shed all my blood for the Brotherhood, and as this ash and this blood cannot return to their [original] state, so I cannot leave the Brotherhood” (Cutrera 125).

A similar description recurs in the dossier published on 23 January 1962 by journalist Mauro de Mauro in the Sicilian newspaper *L’Ora*, in which he reported the initiation ritual of medical doctor Melchiorre Allegra. Allegra accurately described how one day in 1916 three “friendly men of respect” approached him and explained that their society was known to outsiders as “mafia” but was understood by most people only in a very vague way because only members could really be sure of its existence. The oath of loyalty that Allegra swore in the presence of these men was the following: “I swear to be loyal to my brothers, never to betray them, to help them under any circumstances, and, should I fail to do so, may I burn and my ashes be scattered like the ashes of this holy image.”<sup>4</sup>

Strong evidence suggests that following the maxi-trial against the mafia in the mid-1980s and the growing phenomenon of *pentitismo*, the practice of initiation has been drastically reduced to carefully select only trusted affiliates (Dino 243). However, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 2007 Italian police

seized a typewritten document from the hideout of mafia boss Salvatore Lo Piccolo. This document delineates the different roles within the hierarchy of the organisation, the “Decalogue” of rules of Cosa Nostra, the procedures for selecting the candidates for affiliation, and the exact wording of the oath of loyalty: “I swear to be loyal to Cosa Nostra. May my flesh burn like this holy picture if I betray Cosa Nostra.”<sup>5</sup> Above all, it suggests that the ritual of initiation, while it may have diminished somewhat following the Second Mafia War, has not been completely discontinued, thus representing an important line of continuity between today’s mafia, the Cosa Nostra of the 1970s and 1980s described by Tommaso Buscetta, and the nineteenth century brotherhoods from which the mafia is thought to have originated. As the 2007 sentence of the Judges for Preliminary Enquiries section of the Court of Palermo highlights, “this statute is one face of the double organisational model of Cosa Nostra in the area of Palermo. One face remains consistent through time. The other face changes expression according to the moment.”<sup>6</sup>

Acknowledging the existence of a unifying thread in mafia history is fundamental for several reasons. It is necessary not only to comprehend the subtle ways in which the organisation has adapted to changing times, but also to identify the function of those ritual components that appear to have remained unvaried through time.

### ***La punciuta: a Symbolic Ritual Performance of Authority and Submission***

Through the lens of socio-anthropological theories of ritual and performance, the mafia initiation ceremony can be seen as an example of cultural performance and as a marked event of heightened awareness where “self-conscious and symbolic acts are presented and communicated within a circumscribed space” (Madison and Hamera xvii). In particular, it can be interpreted as a highly symbolic ritual that represents the idea of the “death” of the neophyte as a common man and his “resurrection” as a “made” man of honour. Each stage of the ceremony presents ritual activities that symbolise the different phases of a rite of passage during which the initiate is separated, transformed and re-incorporated into society with a new identity modelled on the values of his newly acquired affiliation.<sup>7</sup>

The symbolism utilised within this ritual complex is largely derived from the Catholic tradition, a cultural patrimony which Cosa Nostra shares with external society. These symbols are more than cognitive classifications or mere projections of the society to which the mafia belongs, and presents the distinguishing traits of what Victor Turner defined “symbols in action;” they serve as “a set of evocative devices for rousing, channelling, and domesticating powerful emotions” (42-43) that deeply affect the candidates for affiliation. For instance, the picture of Our Lady of the Annunciation, one of the most prominent figures of Catholic religion, can be interpreted as a bipolar symbol having reference to the sensory experience of holding the burning card and, at the same time, to the supposed “moral” dimension of Cosa Nostra. The fire that burns the holy picture is the multivocal symbol of purification and destruction of the mafia affiliates’ previous identities, while the blood smeared on the picture can be seen as a “dominant ritual symbol” (Turner 30-32), which condenses in one referent the meanings of sacrifice, rebirth and death in case of betrayal.<sup>8</sup>

Sicilian myths and traditions are also part of this solid cultural framework that the mafia shares with external society, and which consistently recur in rituals of initiation. As previously mentioned, it is during the ceremony of affiliation that the mafia leader reveals the mythical origins of the organisation to new members as well as a series of norms that define the identity of the “ideal” man of honour. The history of every group, as perpetuated inside it, serves to justify a claim to power through ancient knowledge (La Fontaine 41). Through reference to myths belonging to the Sicilian cultural patrimony and manipulation of symbols derived from the Catholic creed, mafiosi construct the identity of Cosa Nostra upon an ideological foundation that is already familiar to, and held sacred by, the candidates undergoing affiliation.

Indeed, the use of crucial symbols and of a shared cultural repertoire allows mafia bosses to add sacredness to the event, affect the initiates at an emotional level, and legitimise their authority and the existence of the organisation in the eyes of new affiliates (Merlino 42–43). Viewed from a Durkheimian perspective, one can infer how the ritual of initiation offers mafia members regular occasions to gather and collectively celebrate the existence of the organisation, its values and its scope. Using symbolic language that refers to the mafia’s “moral” dimension, the initiation rite becomes an important source of “collective conscience” (Durkheim 168). It establishes among the mafia members a sort of religious communion that ultimately generates enduring emotions, obligations of conduct, and mutual solidarity. Mafia defector Antonino Calderone, for example, remembered his initiation as a particularly intense ceremony and claimed that it left a profound imprint on him at a deeply emotional level:

That night everything seemed beautiful, out of ordinary. I was entering into a new world, full of exceptional people ready to risk their lives to help other men of honour, to vindicate them. It was powerful beyond imagination. (Arlacchi 57)

This potential to actualise a transformation and strengthen the bonds between individuals - as well as between individuals and the symbolic content of the ritual itself - has important implications for the authority and power of the leaders conducting the ceremony. The more social actors are able to “bind” the audience to themselves, the more prestige and authority they will gain over it: prestige for effectively displaying their competence; authority and control for holding the flow of the interaction in their hands. When performers assert control in this way, they have the potential to transform relations, statuses and roles that make up the social structure of the community to which they belong (Bauman 43–44).

Specifically, social actors have the possibility of enhancing their performance in order to gain control and authority over their audience and “to interpret both traditions and social settings, actively transforming both in the course of their performances” (Briggs 7). As anthropologist Richard Bauman argues in his *Verbal Art as Performance*:

there is [...] a distinctive potential in performance by its very nature which has implications for the creation of social structure in performance. It is part of the

essence of performance that it offers to the participants a special enhancement of experience, bringing with it a heightened intensity of communicative interaction which binds the audience to the performer in a way that is specific to performance as a mode of communication. (43)

In other words, it is argued that social structure “emerges” and can be transformed through the performative act. The emergent quality depends on the actors’ competence and the social display they make of it, on the enhancement of the act and on the goals of the participants (Bauman 38).

Within this context, the Sicilian mafia is a community with a social structure in action. The hierarchically structured social relationships of Cosa Nostra emerge during the rite of initiation, where the allocation of roles in the performance, and the identity of those conducting it, is modelled on the structure of the society itself. Leaders conducting and performing the ritual of initiation have the “potential” to let social structure emerge and, crucially, to transform it during the ritual actions. By means of symbolic behaviour and language, bosses ratify their belief in a set of values and traditions that provides unity and continuity to the “morality” of the mafia social order. At the same time, they confer sacred and authoritative value to their general-order conceptions, thereby acquiring legitimisation, and power over, new affiliates.

On the other hand, the candidate undergoing initiation plays a passive and submissive role, which reflects the position within the mafia hierarchy he will occupy after entering the organisation. For example, during the liminal stage of transition of this highly symbolic rite of passage, the chosen candidate is constantly reminded that, until he goes through the official ritual for affiliation, he is a “nobody” or “nothing mixed with nil” (“a nuddu miscatu cu nenti”) (Dickie 12). In Victor Turner’s words this would translate with being “betwixt and between” (95). Initiates in the mafia have left their previous state as common men, but have not yet acquired the new status of man of honour. Anthropological theories of ritual have also shown how, in liminality, individuals are often confronted with physical and psychological tests symbolising the actual passing through a “threshold” (Turner 94) that marks the boundary between those two states. In this anti-structural, liminal stage, initiates generally occupy a marginal and inferior position (Turner 128). Correspondingly, in mafia initiation the candidates are separated or isolated before undergoing the actual ritual. As mafia defector Antonino Calderone described to magistrate Giovanni Falcone in 1988:

When the time is right, the candidates are taken to a secluded place in the presence of the Family representative and other members of the same faction. In Catania, the custom for the men of honour was to stand on one side of the room, with the candidates for affiliation standing on the opposite side. In other areas of Sicily the custom was to lock the candidates for hours in a dark room before taking them out one by one.<sup>9</sup>

The whole mafia Family attends the ceremonial event, although it is usually the eldest member, or the Family boss, who explains the rules, reveals the secret knowledge and myths about the organisation,

and conducts the entire ceremony. The new affiliate, because of the ritual, loses his previous status to assume a new reified, collective identity. Simultaneously, by showing and revealing the identity, roles and statuses of mafia members attending the initiation, mafia leaders partially mobilise the social structure of the organisation in order to accommodate new members whilst consolidating its inner order and the hierarchy of roles.

The ritual of initiation into Cosa Nostra emphasises the idea of solidarity and inclusion between its members, while defining the internal hierarchy and roles. In fact, the ceremony has two main, opposite purposes. From one perspective, it creates an egalitarian bond of solidarity and a spirit of unity. From another, it marks hierarchical boundaries within the structure of the organisation and horizontal boundaries with external society. Buscetta emphasised this point in his testimony:

Belonging to Cosa Nostra implied being men of honour: this was at the heart of everything. One could then invent hierarchies, positions, commissions, but within each Family you breathed an air of equality because we all felt that we belonged to a very special elite. (Arlacchi 69-70)

As sociologist Letizia Paoli observed, the ties of solidarity deriving from initiation rituals invariably lead to the exploitation of mafia affiliates by their bosses (83). In other words, while the principle of generalised reciprocity obliges mafia leaders to behave altruistically toward the lower ranks, it also enables them to exploit their subordinates in order to achieve their own goals. Bound by these ties, as *pentiti* have revealed, mafia “soldiers” have no choice other than to comply with the orders of their superiors.

### **The Oath of *omertà*: the Secret Pact of a Sacred Allegiance**

In light of previous considerations, a ritual performance shows its potential to be effected with the strategic aim of maintaining and constructing identity categories whilst rendering “social laws explicit” (Butler 17). The oath that is sworn, for example, rich in symbolic content, is the key phase of the ritual of initiation. It represents an example of what philosopher Judith Butler has defined a “performative” act: a form of authoritative speech, which, by means of citations, performs a certain action (e.g. the initiation) and exercises a binding power on the action performed (17). However, Butler suggests that it is only when referring to the social laws or accepted norms, which are cited or repeated (and thus “performed”), that a performative becomes effective. As she phrases it, “there is no power as such, constructed as a subject, that acts, but only...a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence” (17).

In the case of the mafia initiation rite, it is by means of reiterated references to commonly held cultural norms and to the myth of the mafia as an association of men of honour born to defend the weak against the abuse of the powerful that the speech act of the oath pronounced solemnly by the mafia leader derives its binding power and authority. Moreover, it is important to stress how the wording of the oath of loyalty utilises a language which is effective by virtue of its high degree of

formality and symbolic force. The language used by mafia leaders during the ritual of initiation is a reflection of the authority with which mafia bosses are invested and which is deferentially recognised by the other mafia members; an authority built by means of performance upon a series of specific characteristics: access to secret knowledge (the mythical origins of the association), legitimacy to appropriate and comment upon texts or narratives (the statute of rules), and competence, for instance, the knowledge and ability to speak appropriately in front of an audience. Profound deference towards his leaders is evident in the testimony of mafia defector Gaspare Mutolo:

In my imagination, those men characterised by their wisdom and by being the persons to whom people turned when in need of help fascinated me. When I became a member, it was for me a new life, with new rules. For me only Cosa Nostra existed. There were precise rules and what they said was right and true, because it was based on the idea of mutual respect and assistance. I was fascinated by that world. (CPM 1993)<sup>10</sup>

The oath in the mafia ceremony, to be sworn whilst holding the burning holy picture, represents also the point that tests the candidate's acceptance of the leader's authority over him. De facto, by repeating the words that are said to him, the initiate shows obedience and acceptance of the authority of his direct "godfather" and the rest of the mafia faction, as well as his personal commitment to the organisation. Mafia defector Giovanni Brusca, for example, recalls how he was initiated. In his case, it is evident how Totò Riina, the Family boss leading the ceremony, established his authority over the candidate for affiliation by means of symbolic gestures and performative language:

They took my finger and pricked it with a needle. They let some blood drop over the holy picture of a saint. It was then that Riina set it alight. And he made me hold it in my hands while he kept his hands over mine. I wanted to throw the burning paper away but he did not allow me to. And in the meantime he said: 'If you betray Cosa Nostra, your flesh will burn like this holy picture'. (Lodato, 33)

As this example demonstrates, the initiate performs his submission by repeating the words of the oath after the leader and by showing his ability to endure the physical pain and observe orders from his superiors. Therefore, by swearing his allegiance to the organization, not only will he commit himself entirely to Cosa Nostra, its values and aims, he will also help strengthening and maintaining its social structure.

## **Conclusions**

The Sicilian mafia is a unique criminal organisation, able to combine in its structure the all-encompassing features of a state, business and a secret society. However, a well-organised management structure, an enforceable system of rules and solid connections with political and economic sectors would not alone be sufficient for Cosa Nostra to survive changing times, internal wars and arrests at the higher echelons. The ability to achieve internal cohesion and total allegiance of

its members is also a fundamental component of mafia activity that must not be underestimated. The rituals of initiation appear to play an essential role not only in creating the identities of new mafia affiliates, but also in strengthening internal cohesion and maintaining the mafia social structure.

The mafia ceremony of initiation can be described in socio-anthropological terms as a specific ritual performance and a symbolic rite of passage through which candidates are endowed with a powerful collective identity to be assumed in return for unconditional loyalty. This sense of identity appears to be essential for maintaining solidarity between affiliates and allegiance to their leaders, and for making Cosa Nostra an integrated, secret society. At the same time, this rite represents an important mechanism for mafia bosses to exercise unconditional claims upon their subordinates while establishing indissoluble ties amongst them. By referring to mythical traditions and manipulating crucial symbols that are shared with wider society, mafia leaders legitimise their authority and the existence of the organisation in the eyes of new affiliates. In this process, pre-existing ties between members are strengthened and new bonds are forged as a result. This article has focused, in particular, on the oath of loyalty which mafiosi swear during the ceremony in the presence of other members of mafia faction. The ritual oath can be analysed in terms of a performance which is able to temporarily mobilise the social structure, exercising a binding action over the participants. Mafia leaders perform their authority by asking the initiates to repeat the oath after them, while testing their ability to endure physical pain and obey orders. The symbolism and formality of the language they use contribute to endowing their figures with a power and authority which are also derived from the mythical repertoire they draw on during the ritual. On the other hand, the initiates perform their submission by repeating the oath after the mafia boss, and by enduring the burning of the holy picture which has both a strong emotional and physical impact.

Thus, the ritual of initiation becomes one of the main occasions for the organisation to re-affirm itself periodically and for mafia leaders to assert their authority. In this way, it becomes a means for creating solidarity among its members and for reinforcing social statuses, norms, and values.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Contrary to what is generally believed, Buscetta was not the first mafioso to break the code of omertà in the course of the history of the Sicilian mafia, but the first one to be attentively heeded.

<sup>2</sup> Tribunal of Palermo, sentence n. 3162/89, n. 1165/89 R.G.U.I., in the penal proceeding against Michele Greco + 18, 1198–1199.

<sup>3</sup> In Sicilian prison jargon the expression ‘avi stuppa’ refers to a man who does not confess or speak to police.

<sup>4</sup> Mauro de Mauro, ‘abstract from the minutes of Melchiorre Allegra’s court hearing’, *L’Ora*, 22–23 January 1962.

<sup>5</sup> Tribunal of Palermo, Section of the Judges for the Preliminary Enquires, (GIP), Sentence of Summary Judgement n.1579/07 Reg. Not. Reato, n.800165/07 Reg. GIP, against Adamo Andrea + 56 (Sentenza Gotha).

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Belgian ethnographer Arnold van Gennep used the expression rites de passage (2004 [1909]) to describe rituals that ‘accompany every change of place, state, social position and age’.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the role of religious symbolism within the mafia initiation ceremony see Alessandra Dino, *La mafia devota*, 44–77 and Rossella Merlino, *From a man to a man of honour*, 59–70.

<sup>9</sup> Tribunal of Palermo, court hearing of Antonino Calderone, 7 January 1988, 813718.

<sup>10</sup> Parliamentary Commission of Enquiry on the Mafia Phenomenon and Similar Criminal Associations, *Report on the Relationship between Mafia and Politics*, 1993.

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