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Topics on vernacular idioms of space and community in rural culture[1]

1. <u>On Italian mountain</u> there are shared and particular idioms enabling rural villages' inhabitants to participate in a common way of saying the tale of time, the organisation of places, the settlement of relationships animating them, and the access to local resources.

Are different kinds of idioms: they give life into a **sounding** landscape; they regulate **abitative**, productive and ritual spaces; they are bound to the myths of community's origins, to the calendar of events and the anecdotic creation; they express names and taxonomies to tell and fix community and environment; anyhow implying an identitarian link, or a way in which people can recognize themselves in a common history, territory and social framework.

These talks do emerge out of the dialogue with people, from the experience of places and through the interpretation of documents.[2] To these, it is necessary an extremely caution: because telling about a community, privileging already done documents in its inside, or to the contrary, those outside produced, can contribute to generate faraway stories, sometimes contradicting, independently of teller's capabilities and rhetoric choices.[3]

2. <u>About sources</u>

Some examples must be stated in advance to understand the difficulty of such a research, in fact, it is necessary to resort to a plurality of sources, often not homogeneous, such as direct observation, and geographic sources, just to underline only a few examples, to the studying of rural areas. To our investigation, it is of primarily importance, oral witnesses and family scripts, in the sense, those meant exclusively to the family reading (Angelini 1994).

In the case of written sources, it is mainly remarkable to observe if, authors and addressees make (are) part of the studied community itself (this very observation might be spread with as much strength to oral sources). In fact, it exists huge differences between an inner way to

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[1] I owe very much to numerous conversations held with Rossana Monti (Genova), during 2001. Some of these topics were discussed with Ivan Illich in Ronco Scrivia (Genova) on July 4th, 2001.

[2] The samples are pick up from my researches on genoese mountain, in NW-Italy.

[3] Differences mattering between a essentially inner way of perceiving and describing the community – such as that one saying about family's scripts – or outer way – saying about documents made by public administration or its peripheral issuing – are deep. Within the community it is shared a known way to state people and things, often imperceptible from the outside

perceive and describe the community itself – such as that one informing about historical documents run by the main public administration or outlying districts. Who communicates within the community, takes part, in a broadly shared way, to dealing with persons and things all around imperceptible: suffice it to say to the family mapping, often not existing on maps or gossip's nets.

Telling about a community, favouring already done documents inward produced or, to the contrary, those outward produced, helps to do far away texts, with no links, in spite of teller's rhetorical choices.

It is a matter of no granted results, considering difficulties of thinking, before finding community's domestic sources able to give back specifically local perspectives.

Once more we wish to underline the very high value we give (given-awarded) to local experiences' peculiarity: this very case is neither a declination of a wider paradigm, nor exception to a more common rule; to the contrary, it contributes to shape (create-mould) a story that in particular cases is not a common denominator, rather than a sum.

3. Some examples of vernacular idioms of space and community

a. Bells and resonant landscape

It exists – but it is more correct to state that it "existed" – a sounding vocabulary produced by the parish church's bells, which wideness describes precise belonging limits to the local church (Murray Schafer 1985: 82).

The bell states perceptive environmental spaces and a common shared sensorial territory, but overall it scans community's time and its rituals, declares its hierarchies, it recalls, or to the contrary, rules a apotropaica function; as media today do, talks to all at the same time using a localized language. It states the belonging to a particular parish church, on whose side responding its own claim, or in a wider identifiable sphere, on whose side defining its lexicon.[4] And, in general, the answers to the sound of the bells marks the belonging to a community

Crossing oral sources, parish registers and micro-toponimies, is possible to show local declinations on the following points.

- the form of the precinct covered by parish church bells' sounds; in which manner sounds are added and intersected with those heard out of neighbouring churches;

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[4] It is worth to investigate what happened within the communitarian perception of time, as bells were electrified, and to the scanning of the daytime ruled by movements of the sun, due to the replacement of the mechanic one ruled by clock's time. The importance of measuring time within rural facts, due to clocks' lack, caused the focusing of empirical solutions based on the reading shadows on the ground: landscape's elements together with sun's position up to the horizon formed a so-called sun-clock; we can find something talking about that even in micro-maps.

- the difference – if ever exists – between the precinct covered by parish church bell's sounds and the administrative definition of church' borders;

- the talk of bells, different from a community to another one, its recall's function, that is, informative, ritual, apotropaica (Anzani 1993); bells measure the day, community's time (holiday season), man's time (baptism, marriage, agony, funeral, and burial), they announce disasters (fires, diseases), make us informed about wind's direction, and sometimes about administrative expiry dates.

- as the sound of the bell defines church's lived time, impossibility to hearing its sound can easily legitimate requests of leaving, and hopes of separation

- what happened, within time's common perception, when bells became electrified, and time's flowing governed by the movement of the sun suddenly changed into a clock's run daytime [see even Illich 1990]. Measuring time's importance within rural facts, due to clocks' lack, caused the focusing of empirical solutions based on the reading shadows on the ground territory: landscape's elements together with sun's position to horizon formed a so-called sun clock; we can find something talking about that even in micro-maps.

Making a temporary synthesis, we might state that bells' sound outlines the place of a perceptive space (Fileni 1978) lived by inhabitants like a truly sensorial territory to be picked up through the sense of hearing, submitting to precise phenomenon, and recognized calls by all territorial members, and contributes to define a sounding territory.

b. THE DIVISION OF SEATS IN THE CHURCH.

We are going to start from a working conditions' hypothesis: arrangements of people within the sacred and common rituals shows as hierarchies as social orders (conflicts and alliances); particularly, the disposition of seats in the church tells us the right way how divisions and balances animating the community are shared and taken place.

Contrary to the habits willing men and females strictly separated in well defined rows (females on the left, men on the right), we sometimes figure out locally strange and different situations still resisting, such as social fossils, to reasons which caused them.

The search started about Valgraveglia churches (inland Chiavari) thereafter enlarged on genoese Apennines, shows as very first results a great variety of disposition, from time to time said by such differences as neighbourhoods, villages, relationships or their fragments, and brotherhoods.

We are aiming to grasp the right target describing such a variety of patterns verifying the work-hypothesis assumed; we are even pinpointing to undergo to a verification Paul H. Stahl's adopted claiming during an investigation gone in Transylvania. According to him it exists a strict connection between an individual's "honoured position within the

civil society" and the right to take place close to sacred place (Stahl 1989). Moreover, it takes me to weigh up how such a kind of behaviour represent a medium-long period stay, and could be assumed as a local telling source, rather than be easily shaped onto timely changes within community's facet.

It is a matter of searching, firstly founded about oral seen sources, to whom therefore it can offer useful evidence domestic writings, be unpublished, such as the case of Valgraveglia Garibaldi's family scripts (Angelini 1994), or published (for a comparison: Gough 1981). With regard to sources, we state the evidence of almost two points of criticism: the first one connected to difficulties in finding local inhabitants of some standing being well/disposed to let us know all elements needed to rebuilt a proper framework; second standing, traditional order of seats in the church comes to be less following the progressive depopulation from hinterland, and at the same time, to the lack of local society and their structures due collective behaviours.

c. FAMILY'S NICKNAMES

The local way to organize a society through parental groups, domestic or enlarged ones, describes a vernacular registry office, in some manner, so different from bureaucratic official acts, telling us about a horizontal division of local changeable, not strict society (inner fragmentations to relationship). Community, read through its parental shapes, shows a progressive process of crowning – relationships including segments, and these, sub segments; it seams that, recognizing each other within a relationship or part of it, passes, through the participation toward rights and common estates, being even material or symbolic ones.

In an other contrbution (Angelini 1997), it is placed in relation to formation and standing of family surname with relationship's segments, where connected, identifying in the existence of common places and rights , the main coagulating parental factor.

The theme, known to anthropologists, for what regarding at least the system of naming familiar over nomination, has been exemplified within the local historical ethnographic production,(4) where, on the other hand, researchers' care has gone toward its description rather than its own analysis.

Instead, what it does result more widely treated in some writings dedicated to Val Bormida and bribasque area (Balbis s.d.; Massajoli 1989) is the process which modified family's nickname status as soon as it enters to making part of the official personal data, in the form of the second, or in some cases, the third name. Thus we witness to a passing and by between two thoughts – the so called vernaculate and bureaucratic – that usually don't rely each other and are reciprocally unshakable.

Inner local sources let to respond to some, so far, unsolved demands: how, and why relationship's segmentation process features; how do

economic, assets and liabilities, home stationing, imply; if disappearance, transformation of a family's nickname, or if, through a mechanism of inertia or habit's fixation, can survive to it. Even more the investigation aims at defining, more completely, about what been done so far, the identifying connection which has been assumed between the pertinence to the relationship and its segmentations, and the right to the access or participation to common economical resources (for example: community of lands (goods), water outlets, advantages left by inheritance, and symbolic ones (for example: juspatronage, admittance to common tombs, site in the church or along processions).

d. NOTORIETY AND LOCAL TAXONOMIES

Unlike the ways to inform the actual scientific classification criteria, in local communities there are particular different inner manners to order and say the reality not less rigorous. In fact, it is not less rigorous to divide animals – according to the binary system of Linneo – in "mammals", "reptiles", or "fishes", rather than to divide them in "walking animals", "flying animals", "jumping animals", or covered with "fur", "feathers", "scales". In fact, categories such as (flying mammals covered with scales) do not live in nature, they are in our thoughts and our acquired history. Choosing a system rather than another one is not a concern of adaptability to what we perceive but from its capability to describe it in a coherent way, and if possible, with no ambiguities.

These remarks upon the conventional side of hierarchies can be expanded nearly to any classification system: not only naturalistic, even geographic and of personal data (locally we have seen that people do not recognize themselves by name and surname, but through a changeable complex mixture of personal collective nicknames). It seems to us that the classification systems are based on a notoriety criteria, widely shared knowledge within a vast isolated core, a village, a parish church or a valley. Notoriety represents a level of perception and knowledge bound to public rumours, common shared know how, under which there is no evidence for any other creed. A good example to illustrate this criteria can be offered by certain "gender Boletus" mushrooms (porcini) that mychological literature subdivides in about sixty species rejoined, amongst people, sometimes to three or ten species, without any further distinction within them. During the on ground search it did result that echo types and several distinguished varieties have been recognized just as a single variety; as, on the other hand, tubers as morphological diverse, but of the cultivar, have been considered belonging to different varieties.

The theme of vernacular taxonomies has already been an object of a short editorial dedicated to the different way of naming water streams resulting from the comparison between cartography ordered by central authorities and people's usual way of acting, as stated by investigations on oral sources, or like in the past, as it has been allowed to rebuilt family Garibaldi's in Valgraveglia manuscripts, made between the end of

XVIII century and the beginnings of the following one (Angelini 1998). Where cartography mainly recognize a precise hierarchy about water streams (waterways) and registers a unique name, from the very source to any other outlet, might be a bigger water flow or a mouth, Valgraveglia' people (since the end of XVIII century up to nowadays) segments rivers using lots of names, from time to time got within the crossed lands and farms.

In the vernacular way of telling things and naming space it doesn't exist abstract and general knowledge, but material and specific: evidences collected so far do not pay us back a general abstract knowledge of the territory, but a specific material one: it is of little effectiveness and comprehension to ask for the name of a river or a whole mountain (on the contrary allowed to the cartographer) because nobody might fall down or fish along the river in its wholeness, nor pasture on the whole mountain; in fact the answers become sure only when we refer to precise distances of that water stream and precise areas of that mountain.

e. PRODUCTS OF THE TERRITORY AND LOCAL IDENTITY

The identifying relationship within the living space, actual ways to define borders, the form of local community, and diverse talks that, from the inside, drive public communication, becomes exhaustive even upon new, in some way, hitherto unknown fields of investigation. One of these imply the new way how territory's productions contribute to shape places and communities up to state, in case of disappearance, a radical transformation, if not the complete degradation.

There are goods having a foreground step in local diet and economy, to influence community's imagination, making known landscape's perception, study of toponomastica , anecdotic, narrative. The persistence of such cultivations and products, their strengthening or disappearance have got deep repercussions about the moral survival of a community, to the point that, in certain cases, it is legitimate to believe that to the end of a cultivation may correspond tout-court the end of a culture.

3. First considerations

The so far touched basic themes represent just a few starting points – here referred to a limited rural environment – about a wider story of the common sites. These starting points must be investigated with the main aim to put in the due light the particular perception that a community shares in its inside.

We think it might be possible to define and deepen an interpretative model to state that the shape of a rural community, the ways by which it goes through the time and built the space round itself, and the dynamics of relationships living with, are suitable for the writing of many stories, amongst them different to the choice of sources, for the criteria sustaining their reading and the choosing of the relevance, for their interpretation and return. Particularly, the description of resonant horizon told by bells' sound, leads to a consideration about a local production's timing cosmological conception. The cyclic recurrence scanning and organizing life's very moments, the eternal return becoming iteractive existence, are fixed by community's rituals: those tied to the daily are scanned by hours cycle, seasoning and religious ones through the calendar cycle.

The framework of lived space by the community becomes a signs' depot leading back to identity collective negotiations and the co-presence within the time of visible and invisible realities. All that contributes to mould the community.

At last we wish to underline how much can be of importance the specific value about local experiences: the particular cases are not declinations of a general paradigm, nor exceptions compared to a common rule; on the contrary, they contribute to compose a complex articulated story that in some cases it is not a common denominator, but the less, sum. This is a sufficient reason not to neglect the study of any village or local experiences without the doubt to have lost something on the way on.

(1) Knowledge of genoese Mountain generically send us back to inner areas of Genoa's province and just surrounding territorial bands, relatively homogeneous to such areas due to the environment and culture.
(2) About the use of "vernacular" to define relationships within domestic ambit, cfr. Illich 1984: 51.
(3) When men of Prato di Pontori (interiors of Chiavari) in 1680 ask for the detachment from S. Biagio di Chiesanuova parish church, amongst diverse reasons, they declare "because of being too far from their church they never hear the ringing of bells". Notary Antonio Podestà, June 16th,1680, Notary's Archives of Chiavari: E.73.1.
(4) For the ligurian case, also see: Calvini 1981: 48; Plomteux 1981: 45; Massajoli 1984.
(5) About the subject even look at Giorgio Marrapodi's observations, within a task dedicated to the confrontation between the popular way and the official one to nominate water courses and mountains relief (Marrapodi 2000).

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